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Female leadership in communication management in Spain: making a difference in a sexist culture

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore the position of women in the communication management sector in Spain from their own experiences. The study examines female communication and leadership styles, emphasising the cost of leadership in which they are leaders or led.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used a qualitative methodology based on in-depth interviews with 22 women actively working in top companies and agencies: female communication directors, female employees with a female leader and female employees with a male leader. Data were analysed through thematic analysis.

Findings – Results show mixed communication and leadership styles. In addition, the high level of self-demand of female communication managers stands out, making it challenging to achieve a work-life balance and the implementation of successful role models.

Social implications – Exploring the factors of female leadership remains necessary to understand and make their situation in various industries and positions visible. It also helps remove barriers to leadership, guide organisations in addressing gender discrimination issues and develop mechanisms for the internal promotion of female professionals.

Originality/value – To the best of authors' knowledge, this is the first study exploring the leadership and communication styles of women in the Spanish Public Relations (PR) and communication management industries. It also highlights the aspects influencing the cost of leadership.

Keywords Gender, Leadership, Organisational culture, Communication management, Workplace

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Women in the Public Relations (PR) and communication management industries are not a new field of study. Women began to attract the attention of PR academics in the mid-1980s

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(Topić *et al.*, 2019), but recent studies still show that women in the PR industry face constant barriers and challenges (e.g. Polić and Holy, 2021; Triantafillidou and Yannas, 2021).

Theoretical and empirical research have faithfully reflected the growth of women working in communication management and public relations (Aldoory and Toth, 2002; Dubrowski *et al.*, 2019; Topić, 2021a). However, the third wave of feminism highlighted the unfavourable position of women concerning men due to patriarchy and gender-related social, political and economic inequalities in organisations and society (Pompper, 2007).

The presence of women in organisations is becoming increasingly frequent thanks to the many cultural, social and legal changes that have taken place in most countries in recent decades. An explanatory study by Keohane (2020) describes the developments that facilitated women's access to organisations – opening up higher education for women, achieving universal suffrage and increasing savings. Nevertheless, organisational cultures continue to perpetuate the status quo, with deep-rooted dynamics and power coalitions that prevent women's career development, equal pay and leadership.

Recent studies on female employment revealed that discrimination at work, pay gap, stereotypes, discrediting and a glass ceiling that hinders women's visibility in managerial positions are still being reported, just as they were in the 80s (Topić *et al.*, 2019). These studies are based on the Theory of Gendered Organisations (Acker, 1990), which lays the foundations of knowledge about the non-neutral organisation structure regarding gender. According to the authors, the logic of organisational structure is composed of a series of material and non-material forms that directly or indirectly involve all its female members. It is built on the conjunction between responsibility, job complexity and hierarchical position. From the material point of view, there are work rules, labour contracts and job evaluation systems. All these documents contain symbolic structure indicators. Within the non-material elements, the hierarchy stands out. It is an element that generates abstract differences between the organisation's members.

Following this theoretical construct, Aldoory and Toth (2002) proposed a new theory highlighting and explaining the paradox of women in public relations: why are there still gender differences in a field with many women? This paradox emerges in the middle of a work environment where workers are mainly women (Dubrowski *et al.*, 2019), but they are underrepresented at the top of the organisations (Place and Vardeman-Winter, 2018).

Aldoory and Toth (2002) claim that sexism, gender discrimination and other related factors like biological determinism and male socialisation are to blame for the belief that the public relations profession will suffer (in terms of salary levels, reputation and respect) if it becomes exclusively female. Efforts such as this drive the profession towards a preference for men in terms of pay, promotion and benefits.

As stated by Topić (2021b), the public relations profession is primarily prevalent in the capitalist context, where there are still entrenched male social structures that negatively impact female professionals. Although recruitment in the field of public relations has long ceased to be a gendered issue, factors linked to salary barriers generated favouritism for men and limited promotions (Aldoory and Toth, 2021).

A pronounced gender gap in the labour market is especially striking in Spain and has increased because of Covid-19 (Peralta Huiracocha, 2021). The GENDERCOM study (Moreno *et al.*, 2018) was a pioneering study by the Association of Communication Directors (DIRCOM) to uncover gender inequality in communication management in Spain. GENDERCOM revealed with empirical data treated statistically that, despite being a profession mainly represented by women, or precisely because of the effects of feminisation, the salary gap, the glass ceiling and the career progression of women that was strongly conditioned by the conflict of family reconciliation, especially after motherhood, were still perpetuated.

Thus, this paper aims to explore the position of women in this industry from their own experiences and examine female communication and leadership styles, emphasising the cost of leadership.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Female leadership: advantages and barriers in organisations

"Leadership directly or indirectly determines structures, culture, power distribution and communication at different levels of the organisation" (Tench *et al.*, 2017b, p. 78).

Research in leadership has been developed from a conception based on the "traits" of the leader to more sophisticated approaches that focus on behaviours and styles of leadership, skills, group work and management, situational approaches, and contingency models (Tench *et al.*, 2017a).

Several studies sustain that the ability to have and display empathy is an important attribute of effective leadership. Empathy enables leaders to show individualised levels of consideration to followers and to recognise emotion in others (Zerfass *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, empathic communication enables leaders to connect with and respond to stakeholders (Dolamore, 2021).

Communication has also been related to leadership because leaders in organisations need communication knowledge and expertise if they want to succeed (Berger and Meng, 2014). Many scientific studies correlate the differences between men and women when addressing communication styles, focusing on how men's language expresses independence and competitiveness and reinforces their status. Language and oral and gestural expression abilities protect substantial differences between men and women. For instance, some studies agree that women tend to be more emotionally expressive than men, have a greater understanding of emotions and show more remarkable skill in specific interpersonal competencies (Sánchez Núñez *et al.*, 2008). Women are better at recognising emotions in others and are more perceptive and empathetic.

Christopher Jolly (2008) also points out that rules of relational etiquette are different in both genders, which have diverse interpersonal styles in their communication patterns. The psychologist states that women focus on details and explanations while men often synthesise information. In contrast, women's language allows for connection and intimacy (Tannen, 1990). Tannen has long studied the sociolinguistic relationship of language and gender in different social contexts by identifying gender patterns in conversational interaction (Tannen, 1990, 2021). Through the concept of framing based on Goffman, Tannen (1999) demonstrates that in the workplace interlocutors simultaneously balance the dimensions of status (hierarchy/equality) and connectedness (distance/closeness). That is, both dimensions interrelate during the interaction. Nevertheless, women in positions of authority avoid appearing "bossy" and promote an understanding and empathetic attitude to build the trust of subordinates (Kendall and Tannen, 1997).

Additionally, some authors state a female advantage in leadership. Females showed better attitude and leadership skills (Offermann and Foley, 2020) authenticity, adaptation, power-orientation, perseverance, force, balanced personality (Esser *et al.*, 2018) or higher emotional intelligence skills (Kaifi and Noori, 2010) than male executives. Females are also more suitable for effective and transformational leadership, especially when it comes to giving support and encouragement to subordinates (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018).

Chin (2016) suggested that when an egalitarian organisation fails, female managers present more leaders' competence, status dominance and interpersonal skills than their male counterparts. However, when there is an on-going crisis, women – who succeed men in the leadership position – are seen as the best prepared for management and leadership (Rigolini *et al.*, 2021) because they reduce their risk. Moreover, their role is even more effective in removing gender discrimination lawsuits within the company (Dadanlar and Abebe, 2020). This complex phenomenon, the so-called "female leadership" advantage logic, has its limits in the investor figure, becoming one of the many challenges female executives still face (Gupta *et al.*, 2018). Investors are more likely to leave female Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) under threat than their male counterparts.

Along these lines, a set of research points to the barriers to female leadership based on The Role Congruity Theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002), widely used in the study of female leadership. This theory argues that the main reason for gender differences in leadership is based on the traditional construction of male attributes, which leaves women as less congruent professionals with such management and executive roles. Economic structures, rules of relational etiquette, access to technology, social norms and culture create gender roles that reach positions of responsibility in companies. In this way, while women are seen as the most vulnerable gender – with a management style that avoids conflict – males are associated with more individualistic and competitive behaviour, less affluent and more aggressive.

The conflict appears when a female leader performs a more competitive or aggressive strategy, acting unnaturally according to stereotyped roles. The behaviour is attributed to gender, believing it is natural and desirable for each sex. This behaviour traditionally associated with men is related to an ideal of a leader constructed in a socio-cultural way. Thus, the leadership position is connected to a series of behaviours traditionally associated with the male gender (Billing and Alvesson, 2000; Noguer-Juncà, Crespi-Vallbona and Sole, 2020). Beckwith *et al.* (2016) take up the problem and point out the existence of barriers that, whether perceived or actual, slow the promotion or maintenance of women in positions of high responsibility within companies. According to the authors, the main barrier continues to be the glass ceiling, a phenomenon that becomes a "cement ceiling" when, in addition to the gender difference, there is an ethnic difference (Beckwith *et al.*, 2016).

The work environment can become a favourable climate – which stimulates the projection of workers – or a hostile environment – which blocks the person's capacity for promotion and the development of their skills – (Goleman, 2015). According to several authors (Cuadrado and Morales, 2007; Esser *et al.*, 2018; Dadanlar and Abebe, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2022), women in leadership positions entail costs associated fundamentally with work overload job discrimination and work-family balance. For example, as Cuadrado and Morales (2007, p. 187) point out when women in positions of responsibility adopt collective behaviours and attach importance to values related to collectivist interests, they are victims of devaluation, personal disapproval and social sanctions. Consequently, in some cases, this leads them to avoid promotion because of the individual costs this may entail.

Discrimination in the workplace is linked to elements such as the glass ceiling, the wage gap or professional barriers and, consequently, the access to leadership positions (Tench *et al.*, 2017b).

Although most research on women in leadership has been produced in the United States (US), barriers are faced daily by women around the world and in a wide variety of industries (Bae and Skaggs, 2019; Ramohai, 2019; Topić *et al.*, 2019; Davies *et al.*, 2020; Kaladze *et al.*, 2020; Miliopoulou and Kapareliotis, 2021; Triantafillidou and Yannas, 2021). These situations have also been evidenced in the communication management industry (Vardeman-Winter and Place, 2017).

2.2 Studies of female leadership in public relations

Research about female leadership in the communication management industry has been carried out mainly in the US (i.e. Aldoory, 1998, 2007; Place and Vardeman-Winter, 2018; Dzubinski *et al.*, 2019; Dadanlar and Abebe, 2020). However, in Europe, it is still incipient (Tench *et al.*, 2017b; Kaladze *et al.*, 2020; Polić and Holy, 2021; Triantafillidou and Yannas, 2021).

Linda Aldoory is one of the first scholars to examine the meaning of women's leadership in public relations and mass communication in the US. Her underline contribution to the topic (Aldoory, 1998, 2007; Aldoory and Toth, 2021) found that social, discursive and even institutional practices affect women's leadership. According to Dzubinski *et al.* (2019), women are pressured to conform to the executive leadership culture of organisations, ranging from

strongly masculinised contexts (where they must exercise strong gender self-containment to break the glass ceiling) to gender-diverse contexts (where they must act with greater or lesser gender self-containment depending on whether or not internalised gender scripts exist). Despite this, the study of Dadanlar and Abebe (2020) found that female CEOs play a key role in diversity, as they can be particularly effective in reducing such lawsuits in companies with a higher frequency of diversity misconduct.

In this regard, Kaladze *et al.* (2020) examined the attitudes of women employed in the field of public relations toward career development and success opportunities concerning their gender. Although the interviews revealed stigmatised gender differences due to the socialisation process, women do not see public relations as a male profession. Females do not feel uncompetitive compared to men, particularly on gender grounds. Polić and Holy (2021), for their part, studied the attitudes of women working in the Croatian PR industry regarding office culture (networking, banter, dress codes, etc.). The authors found the prevalence of entrenched "male patterns", even though the PR industry is dominated by women in the country. Finally, Triantafillidou and Yannas (2021) conducted a comparative study on the position of women in the Greek public relations sector based on three axes (life experiences, office culture and leadership). Almost half of the women surveyed indicated they have equal and better opportunities for career advancement in the PR industry. In addition, these women see a positive change in how male colleagues interact with them. Even though the authors shed light on the position of women in Greece's PR industry, old stereotypes persist (i.e. glass ceiling, work-life balance, workplace culture).

Three leadership styles have been identified in the PR industry in US (Werder and Holtzhausen, 2009) and Europe (Zerfass *et al.*, 2011): transactional, transformational and inclusive. The inclusive style identifies challenges and involves followers in shared decision-making and stimulates them to participate in the process. Recent studies have also identified the servant role of leadership related to high levels of empathic leadership in Europe (Zerfass *et al.*, 2022). In the PR industry in the US there were also identified two models: authoritarian and hierarchical, related to male communication style, and democratic and inclusive, associated with female leadership (Aldoory, 2005; Hopkins and O'Neil, 2015). However, Place and Vardeman-Winter (2018) state that there are no significant differences in leadership ability between women and men in PR. The authors' secondary study of gender and leadership in PR found a lack of a roadmap for improving the presence of women in leadership roles. In the same way in Europe, Tench *et al.* (2017a) findings didn't show different communication styles between men and women and counter-argue studies that primarily associate women with intimacy and relationship building.

Although there are no conclusive results regarding gender differences in leadership and communication styles linked to the female advantage, many studies have confirmed the female leadership barriers. Women communication professionals find it challenging to access and remain in managerial positions for socio-cultural, reasons that associate women with a leadership style undervalued and stereotyped as unfavourable compared to men (Topić, 2020).

Focusing on the causes of the lack of promotion of communication leaders in organisations, Dubrowski *et al.* (2019) discovered a lack of mentoring and training programs when accessing management positions. Moreover, Tench and Topić (2017) underlined gender inequality in access to mentoring. Introducing senior and other women into executive positions proved a consensual solution to promote other women to the same places (Sealy and Singh, 2010). But the most important keys that attack the root of the problem remain eliminating barriers such as sexism, discrimination, the pay gap or the glass ceiling. Likewise, the attempt to develop common leadership styles to eliminate the generic association of these styles to stereotyped genders through a review of the company's policies and an organisational change (Dubrowski *et al.*, 2019). Terjesen and Sealy (2016) go a step

further and analyse the changes that need to be made in the quota laws. This call for egalitarian change by employees and company leaders is based on a conclusion evidenced in the research's findings on the subject. Only in gender-diverse-normed contexts with lessened gendered self-restraint can leader women act being themselves (Dzubinski *et al.*, 2019).

In summary, if recent literature does not conclude significant gender differences in leadership and communication styles, the barriers to female leadership – rooted in the Role Congruency Theory-have been confirmed in diverse contexts. This study aims to explore the position of female practitioners in the gendered communication industry in Spain and to examine female communication and leadership styles, emphasising the barriers of the organisational context.

3. Materials and methods

This study collected experiences of women communication managers and employees in the communication management industry in Spain through a qualitative methodology. The choice of a qualitative method responds to the fact that it is considered the most appropriate for addressing gender and feminist issues with the people involved (Finch, 2004). Therefore, the in-depth interview is the most appropriate technique for this type of research. The in-depth interview is defined as a "face-to-face dialogue, direct and spontaneous, of a certain concentration and intensity with a logical and affective discourse" (Ortí, 2010, p. 272).

This research has been oriented around three research questions (RQ):

RQ1. Is the direct communication style associated with men still used by female communication managers to show their hierarchy?

RQ2. Is there a consensus among female employees and communication managers that the empathetic leadership style is the most effective communication style?

RQ3. Does the cost of leadership for women communication managers still represent a work overload?

3.1 Population and sample

The research considered three professional profiles: women communication managers, female employees with a female boss and male employees with a male boss in communication management. Thus, the script was modified according to the interviewee's profile, resulting in a hand for female communication managers and another for female employees. The script's structure was similar in both cases; only a specific block on the female employees' view of their superiors was introduced.

The sample was recruited by the Engagement Committee of the DIRCOM in Spain. The process was based on a previous selection by the commitment committee of communication leaders in top companies and communication consultancies in Spain. Researchers sent participants an informative document to explain the project, request a signed informed agreement and set an appointment for the interview via Skype, Zoom and Microsoft Teams due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. All the interviews were audio-recorded with their explicit consent.

The final sample was 22 women: 12 female communication managers (54.5%) and 10 female communication employees of which 3 of them were employees with a male boss (13.6%) and 7 employees with a female boss (31.9%). The socio-demographic profile of the interviewees responds to a different-year-old range: 40; 49 (59.2%), 30–39 (31.8%), 18; 29 (4.5%) and 50; 59 (4.5%). Concerning academic training, 72.7% have a master's degree and 27.3% have a bachelor's degree. It should be noted that 68.2% of the women interviewed have

dependents (i.e. children, eldest) in their care. And regarding the professional environment, 63.6% work in private companies listed on the stock exchange, 18.2% belong to private companies not listed on the stock exchange and 18,2% work in communication agencies. Also, 54.5% have >15 years of experience in the communications sector, 27.4% have between 11; 15 years, 13.6% have between 6; 10 years and 4.5% have <5 years (See Appendix).

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The interviews were conducted between June and October 2020 and ranged from 17 to 42 min. To guarantee anonymity in data processing, the labels used include the job title (Manager or Employee) and age.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the observation notes and other primary documents. Then, they were categorised or codified as memos (Valles, 2015). For data analysis, Atlas.ti version 9 software was used, and the steps described by Muhr (1997) were followed (Townsend, 2003). To avoid erroneous results, coding was performed by the research team composed of experts in the subject matter described in the interviews.

To answer the RQs, a semi-structured script was designed considering the following thematic categories in line with what the thematic analysis requires (Polić and Holy, 2021): communication styles, leadership styles and cost of female leadership, following all the literature identified in the previous research phase and which guided the analysis of the data.

Thematic analysis is used in qualitative methodology and is an analytical level of discourse analysis (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2008), as it is a systematic approach that involves the identification of themes or patterns of cultural meaning; the coding and classification of data as well as the interpretation of the resulting thematic structures by searching for commonalities, relationships, general patterns, theoretical constructs (Lapadat *et al.*, 2010).

First, open coding was used, for which the data was analysed line by line, detecting the incidents of each of the sentences. After this step, the categories emerged. For open coding, the concept-indicator model was followed (Glaser, 1978), i.e. incident to incident, incident to concept and concept to concept were compared until the theoretical saturation of the categories was obtained. As (Carrero *et al.*, 2012) point out, the concept-indicator model facilitates the researcher's work in selective coding. Once open coding was completed after theoretical saturation, selective coding followed. As a result of selective coding, the number of categories was reduced to 68. Subsequently, the categories were grouped into families, which are associations of categories "that are related to each other, either by theme, process, time, degree of relationship, causes, consequences etc." (Carrero *et al.*, 2012, p. 42). Thus, 68 codes were grouped into 12 code families and 22 memos.

Once the coding, data was compared code by code, code by family and family by family to detect the research results by making the data speak (Trinidad Requena *et al.*, 2006). In this way, the tools and knowledge deposited in the interviews are detected to answer the RQs planted in the interview (Campbell *et al.*, 2013). In addition, the double coding of the interviews reduced subjectivity in the interpretation of the results (Robles, 2011).

The data analysis was conducted by feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA). FCDA considers the asymmetries of power in modern societies, which have become increasingly subtle. These institutionalised power asymmetries between groups of women and men are complexly intertwined with other social identities and are variable across cultures; and they are evident in discursive praxis (Lazar, 2014). This technique observes in a more systematised way the relationships with other elements of analysis and allows certain concepts related to inter-sectionality to appear (Platero, 2014).

Based on the coding of the interviews and their structuring into families of codes, fragments of the interviews were analysed and discussed with all the interviewees' answers. In this way, the hegemonic discourses were identified due to their reiteration among

the interviews, which were powerful and loaded with social importance and culture, following the principles of the FCDA (Zhou, 2021). This was guided by the thematic analysis previously defined.

4. Findings

Following the data analysis, three broad themes were defined: communication styles, leadership styles and costs of leadership. The key factors of female leadership in communication management emerge from this research, providing insight into female leadership in Spain. First, female communication managers practice mixed communication styles: direct and clear communication and empathetic and considerate. Second, they prefer inclusive and democratic leadership styles. And third, they achieve and maintain their leadership positions by making great "sacrifices" on the personal and family level. Females are extremely demanding due to external questioning and the constant need to justify their leadership (Figure 1).

The results obtained in the three sections will be examined in more detail below.

4.1 Communication styles

According to Tannen (1990), women's language allows for connection and intimacy. Women's discourse is committed to networking, seeking approval and solidarity; on the contrary, men's communication style is focused on exposing their skills and seeking hierarchy (Tannen, 1990). This study is focused on the difference approach, closely linked to difference feminism (Bell *et al.*, 2019), which assumes that men and women have different communication styles because they have been socialised differently (Sánchez Núñez *et al.*, 2008). This difference is exemplified in the use of "I" and "we"; men would emphasise "I" to anchor their achievements; while women would use "we" to anchor group membership:

> Iron hand silk glove' right? That's how I feel a little bit. (Interviewee 12: Manager, 46 years old).

Results are close to a mixed communication style, that is, a direct, clear and transparent communication typical of the direct style attributed to the masculine communication style; and, at the same time, empathetic and close to the receiver, which are qualities of the style considered related to the feminine communication style. Kaladze *et al.* (2020) identified similar results. They demonstrated that women leaders in the communication sector have an

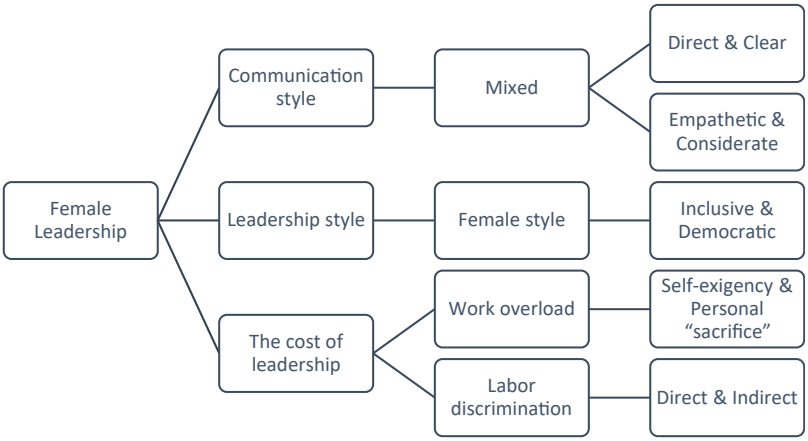

Figure 1. Female leadership factors in communication management

empathetic communication style and that it is easy for female employees to communicate with them because they are attentive and look out for details.

> Well, I try to be both. I am direct but being considerate, that is, I think you can be direct, but using the right words and also being very empathetic (Interviewee 3: Manager, 49 years old).

In the analysis of communication styles, the category of direct communication style emerges, especially among younger professionals and/or with fewer years of experience in the sector. It is related to an idea implanted in public relations professionals: to show seriousness as a symbol to reinforce their authority, especially when young. Thus, a direct communication style is part of this need to be taken seriously. The need to show seriousness emerges in the interviews when participants point out that their dress style is intentionally sober with the use of suits, high heels and dark tones. In communication, as well as in politics, dress style continues to play a relevant role mainly in young women who try to show more age through dress to be taken seriously (Gómez de Travesedo Rojas and Gil Ramírez, 2019).

> I am quite direct in terms of answers and in terms of also addressing communication strategies in general (Interviewee 19: Manager, 36 years old).

This is supported by communication managers, who report changes in communication style over time from more direct to mixed styles. Differences in communication style between men and women are called "genderlect" and would be defined as a gender dialect (Tench *et al.*, 2017b). Given the fact that different communication styles are due to how men and women socialise, interact and therefore communicate. Despite this, research on women in public relations in North America by Clayton *et al.* (2021) concludes that gender not only affects communication style but is an obstacle for women in their work.

4.2 Leadership styles

Hopkins and O'Neil (2015) hold that women tend toward collaboration and relationships regarding female leadership styles. This paper support previous literature, the female communication managers attribute democratic and inclusive leadership styles such as empathy, team cohesion, delegating responsibilities to the team, making the team shine, active listening, flexibility, team empowerment, understanding and the importance of communication.

> I really like people on my team to feel recognised, to know what they want, and to acknowledge it to them. I like them to feel empowered, to know a bit about their interests, and give them space. I don't like hierarchies. I am zero hierarchical. I am very open, very expansive, and I am very open downwards and upwards when they allow me to be. A very communicative leadership style, listening to people and giving strategic guidance (Interviewee 4: Manager, 46 years old).

Most of them show a rejection of the authoritarian and hierarchical leadership styles. For female directors, this style is not adequate, and, in their own experience, it does not show good results, especially in the long term; as interviewee 14 (Manager, 47 years old) explained: "Experience shows you that it is better to have people by your side, to win them over and keep them happy than to use an authoritarian, unilateral and hierarchical leadership style, it is clear to me . . .".

Also, some communication directors directly identify empathetic leadership as a proper and exclusive style, attributing authoritarian style to men. This result is consistent with similar research in Greece (Miliopoulou and Kapareliotis, 2021; Triantafillidou and Yannas, 2021) and Georgia (Kaladze *et al.*, 2020), where women in the public relations and communication sector identify leadership with men in the communication sector.

> My leadership is quite empathetic leadership; that is, I am not authoritarian at all. I consider myself a leader, I do not say charismatic, but I do play more with charisma than with authority, and perhaps

> because I have moved in that world of men, I could not be authoritarian; I had to look for other qualities (Interviewee 8: Manager, 49 years old).

Tench *et al.* (2017a) affirm that communication professionals perceive effective leadership when communication is open and transparent. This research shows a relationship between the communication style and the leadership style of Spanish female communication directors, framed within both prototypical female models. These results are consistent with other empirical research in different countries (Kaladze *et al.*, 2020; Topić, 2020; Polić and Holy, 2021; Triantafillidou and Yannas, 2021).

> It is essential to be a good communicator, but especially for managing a team, managing a project. If you communicate and explain well, people understand. You also monitor that they are understanding you well, and it is complicated (Interviewee 12: Manager, 46 years old).

The communication directors also value mixed work teams but feel more comfortable when most members are women. In contrast, some female employees state that they prefer male bosses. The reason lies in female communication managers' demands, which also stem from the demands imposed on them. It is worth noting that most female managers reiterate the importance of forming diverse teams in age, gender and race. Diversity in teams enriches the ability to tackle tasks and generate positive business impact (Oesch and DuVernet, 2020). However, diversity, especially racial diversity, is one of the central claims in the public relations field (Clayton *et al.*, 2021).

> I prefer to work with men; I think we can do ourselves a lot of harm, honestly. (Interviewee 22: Employee, 40 years old).

The communication managers believe she can be a role model for their employees. Even so, a proportion of those interviewed expects not to have her as a role model. The reasons revolve around the fact that factors such as the job demands, the long hours, the ups and downs of the career, and the sacrifices made to get to that position are not ideal.

> I don't want to be anyone's boss, you know? And if I tell you that I'm working 12 or 13 hours a day . . . I don't want to be anyone's boss. (Interviewee 3: Manager, 49 years old).

Furthermore, most communication directors express gender equality in the setting up of working teams. Although they are used to working with women, they value mixed groups. In some cases, they prefer working with teams composed mainly of women, where they emphasise their ability to work and their efficiency in performing their tasks.

> Women! Yes, without hesitation, come on. There are always exceptions, but women are super hard-working, efficient, concrete, creative, you name it! Creative, whatever you want. To roll up their sleeves? Just enough. To sell themselves? Just enough, we should do this [selling ourselves] more (Interviewee 4: Manager, 46 years old).

Analysing the socio-demographic profiles of the respondents, there is a trend governed by the period in which the participants were educated (Luengo Rodríguez and Román Sánchez, 2006). Thus, having been born later in life, they have been educated – at home and in schools – in more democratic models. When asked about their upbringing, parental style and previous experience, most interviewees stated that these factors have substantially influenced their leadership style. This is especially clear when referring to their professional training, which some of them compared to a "rucksack".

> Totally, that's the fruit of it. Of course, my character, my way of being is like that. I am the same at home as I am at work; that is my profile. I am empathetic, I am close, but I am authoritarian, and I am the same at home. And then all my trajectory has made me become this type of leadership that I transmit. (Interviewee 8: Manager, 49 years old).

4.3 The cost of leadership

Female communication managers maintain their leadership positions by making great personal "sacrifices". They have had to work harder because of being women about work overload. This variable is related to the level of self-demand and the number of daily hours they confess to working. Interviewees also define themselves as very demanding of themselves or as very hard-working and responsible:

> I am very demanding, I am very, very demanding, but very demanding first with myself. I do n't eat dinner anymore, I don't stop . . . if I always get an opportunity, luck catches you working. (Interviewee 2: Manager, 41 years old).

External questioning and the constant need to justify their leadership make communication managers define themselves as demanding, responsible, hard-working and committed at the work level. These traits are traditionally attributed to women under the (self-) conviction, who have broken the glass ceiling due to their complete and persistent dedication over time to the workplace (Cuadrado and Morales, 2007). Self-demand is linked to female leadership because it is necessary to reaffirm their leadership position in an organisation (Dadanlar and Abebe, 2020).

It is not surprising that some authors prefer the concept of a cement ceiling to the glass ceiling because of its difficulty in breaking itself (Beckwith *et al.*, 2016). As is the case with the number of daily working hours, which in addition to being related to the qualifier of "being hard workers", is imbricated in the external – and internal-projection that family life is not taking them away from their management responsibilities (Esser *et al.*, 2018). Overseeing dependents also affects work-based promotion and forces women to focus on their professional careers or family (Purcell and Baldwin, 2003). Thus, the relationship between care responsibilities on dependents and promotion at work seems to be closely related to the glass ceiling and pay gap (Moreno *et al.*, 2021).

Participants point out they average work 10–12 h a day. In addition to the number of hours in the office, they are still connected via email or telephone: "But in communication, in addition, you never disconnect, that is, digital disconnection is very complicated" (Interviewee 20: Manager, 49 years old).

The reconciliation of family and professional life continues to be one of the main problems reported by communication professionals. Long working hours and the lack of disconnection outside the work environment – increased even more by teleworking during the pandemic situation – as well as self-demand and the absence, in some cases, of a natural and effective sharing of household and care tasks, lead women to state that the balance between both spheres is "complicated" or that it is "unbalanced" towards the work sphere.

> I say that it is an imbalance because, in the end, I dedicate much more time to work than to my family. I am aware of it, but it is very, very complex because there is no escape valve . . . and then you want to progress . . . well, things get very complicated (Interviewee 10: Manager, 53 years old).

On the other hand, direct and indirect bias is identified regarding labour discrimination. Direct discrimination becomes visible when many communication directors confirm they have been questioned about how they have held positions of responsibility, have felt treated differently because of being women and have been excluded from important decisions.

> I've been given to understand, as in . . . "And where are you going to leave your child when you travel?" I mean, they are telling you that you can't because you have a child and you are a woman, and then I answer, "hey, have you asked the other directors who also have children what they are going to do with them? Why are you asking me?" I mean, all the directors have children; why are you asking me what I am going to do with my son? Don't worry about my son; I'll take care of him. These types of comments or questions are asked to a woman, not to a man, to see if you can do this type of job or project, and that is clear gender discrimination (Interviewee 8: Manager, 49 years old).

They also comment that they have indirectly felt disqualification by their co-workers. It is an example of benevolent machismo, referred to earlier (González Rivera and Díaz Loving, 2018).

> So like that . . . to me directly no. Yes, they have told me things more related to my way of being, but not directly to being a woman; yes, they have told me, "I do not think you are able to sell a million euros because you smile too much", yes (Interviewee 11: employee, 36 years old).

Tench *et al.* (2017a) seek to explain the glass ceiling related to leadership competencies. Still, they do not find consistent reasons for their existence today like other authors (Place and Vardeman-Winter, 2018). According to Place (2011), those myths and stereotypes block women's access to senior positions and allow discrimination to continue. Female communication managers in Spain acknowledged and identified direct and indirect bias of labour discrimination in organisations.

5. Conclusions and future research

The transformations experienced in the last years underline the need to continue exploring gender issues in organisations and female leadership. Thus, this study examines women's position in the communication management industry in Spain through their own experiences.

About the RQ1, female characteristics are more effective in leadership (Kaifi and Noori, 2010; Chin, 2016; Esser *et al.*, 2018). The results show a preference for the mixed communication style. It implies that women not only use direct, clear and transparent communication (masculine style) but also develop communication that is empathetic and close to the receiver (feminine style). Skills such as authenticity, adaptability, perseverance, balanced personality and emotional intelligence are more prevalent in women in positions of responsibility in communication than in men, confirming different styles and approaches in organisations (Tannen, 1997). These characteristics are essential for effective leadership (Offermann and Foley, 2020).

Concerning RQ2, female communication managers in Spain state that their leadership style is democratic and inclusive, with a very high presence of empathy and understanding towards their team. It could be related to the fact that women show in diverse studies a greater capacity for emotional expression and understanding than men (Sánchez Núñez *et al.*, 2008). Despite this, female employees still prefer male bosses, perceiving female managers as more demanding. In the interviewees' voices, it is due to the high level of self-demandingness of female communication managers in the work environment.

Thus, RQ3 confirms that female leadership represent a work overload. The work overload not only responds to women's constant need to justify their value in organisations – which makes them self-demanding – but also to the need to demonstrate their leadership in an environment where discrimination is still perpetuated in the work environment. These aspects are typical of the cost of leadership for women in Spain, which often forces them to choose between their professional development and family life (Moreno *et al.*, 2021).

Previous literature demonstrated that communication management and public relations in Spain is a feminised industry in which gender inequalities persist, such as the wage gap, the glass ceiling and obstacles to reconciling personal and work-life (Moreno *et al.*, 2018). The findings of this study are along these lines and are also supported by other studies applied in other countries in Europe (Kaladze *et al.*, 2020; Polić and Holy, 2021; Triantafillidou and Yannas, 2021).

A recent study by Aldoory and Toth (2021) addresses the current situation of women in public relations from a socio-ecological model. They underline the so-called "feminist fallacy", which refers to the practitioners' perspective that there are no more problems for women in public relations. Feminism can be co-opted and designed to be against women. Thus, as one of the participants in the authors' study says: "it is important to maintain, to be researching

feminism still, because we have not achieved what we wanted to achieve" (p. 171). Moreover, it is even more critical when there is "academic resistance to anti-racist and feminist scholarship" (p. 193).

Therefore, to explore the factors that define the style of female leadership in organisations continue to be necessary to understand and make visible the situation of women in diverse national contexts, industries and positions, remove barriers to leadership and guide organisations in addressing gender discrimination issues and developing mechanisms for the internal advancement of female practitioners. This is a prevalent challenge for the PR and communication industries in their advocacy for diversity, equality and inclusion.

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Appendix

No	Position	Age	Type of organization	Experience	Academic training	Dependents
1	Manager	40; 49	private companies listed on the stock exchange	11; 15 years	master's degree	Yes
2	Employee	40; 49	private companies listed on the stock exchange	>15 years	bachelor's degree	Yes
3	Manager	40; 49	private companies not listed on the stock exchange	11; 15 years	bachelor's degree	Yes
4	Manager	40; 49	private companies listed on the stock exchange	>15 years	master's degree	Yes
5	Employee	30–39	private companies not listed on the stock exchange	6; 10 years	master's degree	No
6	Manager	40; 49	private companies listed on the stock exchange	>15 years	master's degree	Yes
7	Employee	40; 49	private companies listed on the stock exchange	>15 years	master's degree	Yes
8	Manager	40; 49	communication agencies	>15 years	master's degree	Yes
9	Employee	30; 39	private companies listed on the stock exchange	6; 10 years	master's degree	No
10	Employee	50–59	private companies listed on the stock exchange	>15 years	master's degree	Yes
11	Employee	30; 39	communication agencies	11; 15 years	master's degree	Yes
12	Manager	40; 49	private companies listed on the stock exchange	>15 years	master's degree	Yes
13	Employee	30; 39	private companies listed on the stock exchange	6; 10 years	master's degree	No
14	Manager	40; 49	communication agencies	>15 years	master's degree	Yes
15	Manager	40; 49	private companies not listed on the stock exchange	>15 years	master's degree	No
16	Employee	18; 29	private companies listed on the stock exchange	<5 years	master's degree	No
17	Manager	40; 49	private companies listed on the stock exchange	>15 years	bachelor's degree	Yes
18	Manager	30; 39	communication agencies	11; 15 years	master's degree	Yes
19	Manager	30; 39	private companies listed on the stock exchange	11; 15 years	bachelor's degree	No
20	Manager	40; 49	private companies listed on the stock exchange	>15 years	master's degree	Yes
21	Employee	30; 39	private companies not listed on the stock exchange	6; 10 years	bachelor's degree	No
22	Employee	40; 49	private companies listed on the stock exchange	>15 years	bachelor's degree	No

Table A1. Interviewee's demographics

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