

# Forty years of doctoral public relations research in Spain: A quantitative study of dissertation contribution to theory development

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## Abstract

In this article, doctoral dissertations on public relations written at Spanish universities (1965–2004) are examined in order to gain an understanding of the level of theory development within the discipline. The following subjects are studied: growth over time, universities where they were written, use of language, gender and the topics of doctoral dissertations. Although still in its early development, public relations doctoral research in Spain is a well-established and burgeoning field in terms of the total of theses examined (62). The conclusion, however, is that their contribution to theory building in public relations has been negligible, with the practical or operational side of public relations standing out more than the conceptual and theoretical side.

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## 1. Background and regulation

For the almost four decades of Franco's rule (1939–1975), studies and research into communication in Spain were characterized by a clear lack of theory, explicit ideological and political censorship and the primacy of the state "machine" (Jones, 1997). In actual fact, these characteristics could be applied to any discipline, but, as can be readily imagined, the same control that was exercised over the communications industry (press, radio, cinema and television, in particular) was also applied to the incipient theoretical study of this social phenomenon, due mainly to the regime's need to perpetuate itself in the doctrinal and ideological field.

Because of this censorship and primacy, with the exception of some cases in the field, Spanish research while Franco was in power, specifically into advertising and public relations, was characterized by a lack of scientific and academic rigor and "reduced to simple publications of conferences, seminars or speeches of a doctrinal nature" (Jones, 1997, p. 104).

Public relations research in Spain has on the whole been carried out in the academic sphere, which was only possible once the discipline was classed as a university subject. In 1971, an executive order of the government came

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into force allowing universities to request the formation of their own Information Science Faculties and to offer degrees in Journalism and other social communications media. These institutions would be able to teach “subjects corresponding to Journalism, Cinematography, Television, Broadcasting and Advertising”, grouping them into three sections or branches—Journalism, Audiovisual Sciences and Advertising.

At a later date and on the basis of this new legislation, the Complutense University of Madrid and the Autonomous University of Barcelona requested and were granted Information Science Faculties under the order of Spanish minister of education (September 17, 1971). The Complutense University of Madrid received authorization for the branches of Journalism, Audiovisual Sciences and Advertising, while the Autonomous University of Barcelona was only initially authorized to teach the branch of Journalism. This branch was expanded in 1972 by a new order which allowed the inclusion of Advertising. Subsequently, in 1974 the government provisionally approved the syllabus for the degree in Advertising and Public Relations, extending the former degree in Advertising.

One of the parameters for analyzing the research carried out in Spain was to review all doctoral dissertations on public relations that have been written at public and private universities within the criteria laid down by the regulatory guidelines on doctoral degrees, described as the initiation of specialized research in a specific scientific, technical or artistic field. That is, such theses should be the first step in academic research that contributes to theory development in public relations.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Data collection

All doctoral dissertations on public relations submitted at public and private universities in Spain from 1965 (date of the first thesis presented in the field) to 2004 (inclusive) were selected and analyzed. All theses containing the term *public relations* in both the title and the abstract were included in this study. We also selected those dissertations that make express reference to historical, theoretical, structural, instrumental, strategic, technical and tactical aspects of public relations, even when the name *public relations* is not explicitly used in the title.

The theses were consulted on two types of online database. Firstly, we chose the TESEO database. Among other functions, the Spanish Department of Education and Science is responsible for compiling a file of doctoral dissertations and publishing an annual record of those that have been awarded a pass grade (Royal Decree 1504/2003 of December 6). To this end, in 1976 the University Coordination Board created the TESEO database (<http://www.mcu.es/TESEO/teseo.html>) which collects and allows the retrieval of information on doctoral dissertations that have been read and awarded a pass grade at Spanish universities since 1976.

In addition to the name of the relevant author and examining board, the TESEO files contain a detailed summary of the thesis content and the fundamental concepts it addresses. This was used to consult all university library databases in order to locate all theses that received a pass mark before 1976.

### 2.2. Content analysis

The first stage of the analysis was to draw up a list of topics and categories in order to classify each of the theses studied. Doctoral research must contribute to theory development in the field in question and therefore has a theoretical edge over Masters theses undertaken by professionals studying to become public relations managers (Heath & Coombs, 2006, p. 434). The Commission on Public Relations Education (1999) reported: “A doctoral degree in public relations is a theory and research degree” (p. 26). The same Commission also states that doctoral degrees will ideally prepare the student to develop and contribute to the body of knowledge through research and develop the ability to disseminate that information to the academic and practitioner communities through conferences and professional publications, and to develop paradigms of public relations based on metatheoretical and philosophical foundations in response to the maturation of the field (p. 30). This statement suggests that doctoral dissertations should be a first indicator of the status of the body of knowledge concerning public relations, as well as forming a basis for future articles in public relations academic journals.

Underpinned by this theory building dimension of doctoral research, a coding sheet consisting of three categorical and 38 subcategorical variables was drawn up based on the work of Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, and Jones (2003) which uses content analysis to categorize the public relations body of knowledge, at the same time based on Ferguson

(1984) research about the status of theory building by public relations scholars. This study has been used in other major content analysis research of public relations body of knowledge (e.g. [Molleda & Laskin, 2005](#)).

According to the categorization of [Sallot et al. \(2003\)](#), the three categorical variables were: dissertations that were introspective, dissertations that involved practice or application of public relations and dissertations related to theory development in public relations.<sup>1</sup>

Having codified the theses and removed the subcategorical variables that were not filled in, the introspective dissertation type included the following subcategories: pedagogy/education, ethics and social responsibility, history, the profession and international practice. The type of dissertation described as practice or application contained the following subcategories: management/decision-making/problem-solving, implementing programs and campaigns, organizational communication, social issues and issue management, new communication technology, legal issues, crisis response/communication and image/reputation/impression management. Finally, theory development dissertations were also classified into various subgroups: excellence theory/symmetrical communication/Grunig's models, and fundraising.

Other units of analysis were the title, the abstract (in those theses included in the TESEO database) and the table of contents. The names of all thesis authors, the universities where they were written and the year of submission were recorded.

All dissertations were coded by two independent coders to determine intercoder reliability. Intercoder agreement was 95.16% (59 dissertations) for the dissertation topic. This process resulted in a Scott's  $P_i$  of .894, the reliability coefficient that takes chance agreement into account ([Scott, 1955](#)). This falls within the acceptable range of .75 or above ([Wimmer & Dominick, 2000](#)). A reliability check for the other variables was unnecessary because the coding required only careful transcription of each dissertation. In two dissertations coders were divided across class categorizations; in the other, they agreed on class but disagreed on subcategories.

### 3. Findings and discussion

The data gathered during this research was used to perform a systematic bibliometric analysis from which it is possible to extract initial quantitative findings on the periods in which most theses were written, the most productive universities, the language used in the theses and the authors' gender.

This study reveals that the period when most research was submitted was 1995–2004, with 59.68% ( $n = 37$ ) of the total number of theses. This indicates the considerable increase in research into public relations and organizational communication over recent years, in proportion with the increase in the number of universities offering degrees in Advertising and Public Relations. The period with the second highest number of theses is 1985–1994, with 32.26% ( $n = 20$ ) of the total. During this period the Spanish government reformed the structure of Communications Studies, creating three independent degree subjects: Journalism, Advertising and Public Relations and Visual Communication. This represented the formal specialization of these degree subjects, leading to greater specialization in doctoral research in the communication disciplines. It also explains why, in contrast, the period 1965–1974 accounts for 3.22% ( $n = 2$ ) of theses read and 1975–1984 for 4.84% ( $n = 3$ ) of theses.

The rapid rise in the number of Advertising and Public Relations courses offered by various universities, which went from 19 in 2000 ([Tilson & Pérez, 2003](#)) to 32 in 2004 ([Huertas & Cavia, 2006](#)), is a further indicator of graduates' rising interest in undertaking doctoral dissertations in public relations. This statistic is corroborated by the 33 doctoral dissertations currently being researched at differing universities to be defended between 2006 and 2008, according to information provided by Spanish universities at the III *Interuniversity Forum of Public Relations Lecturers* (April 2005). Nevertheless, the lack of specific Ph.D. programs in the field of public relations – as has been mentioned, a doctorate in Public Relations can at present only be studied at the University of Malaga – continues to be a factor that limits students' interest and motivation, especially when compared with the field of Journalism, where over 500 theses were completed between 1954 and 1996 in the region of Catalonia alone ([Jones & Baró, 1997](#)).

This data suggest that Spain is comparable to other countries in this regard. Although the rise seen in recent years and the outlook are positive in the professional ([Tilson & Pérez, 2003](#)) and academic fields, to our minds [Botan and Hazleton \(2006\)](#) are right to bemoan the fact that the lack of doctoral degrees specializing in Public Relations affects

<sup>1</sup> A complete list of the dissertations sorted by category and subcategory is available upon request.

the theory development of this subject. As a result, it is also true to say that in Spain this shortage of qualified Ph.D. programs leads to “Spotty Development in Public Relations Teaching, Theory And Research” (Botan & Hazleton, 2006, p. 3).

Complutense University of Madrid is by far the most predominant location for the submission of theses with 50% of the doctoral dissertations ( $n = 31$ ) coming from this university. Lagging some way behind is the Autonomous University of Barcelona, making up 14.52% ( $n = 9$ ) of the dissertations written, followed by the University of Navarre (8.06%;  $n = 5$ ). These three universities were the first to offer Communications Studies in Spain and the number of theses written is therefore coherent with the length of time these degrees have been available. The proportion between the number of lecturers, students and doctoral theses submitted is clearly observed in the case of Madrid and Barcelona. Complutense University of Madrid and Autonomous University of Barcelona are the universities with the highest number of teaching staff and students in communications.

The fourth position is occupied by the University of Malaga which first offered a degree in Advertising and Public Relations in 1992 and where 6.45% ( $n = 4$ ) of dissertations were written. It should be pointed out here that this university is the only one to offer a specific doctoral program in Public Relations. Furthermore, these findings suggest unequal development of doctoral research across geographical areas, similar to industry development (Huertas & Cavia, 2006; Tilson & Pérez, 2003).

Spain is characterized by being a multilingual nation. It has four languages: Castilian, Catalan, Galician and Basque. Castilian has always been the official language throughout Spain but at the end of Franco’s dictatorship, during which Castilian was obligatory in the academic domain, a new Constitution was passed which also gave Catalan, Galician and Basque official status in the autonomous communities of Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country, respectively. Although the university community is highly sensitive to linguistic and cultural diversity, this has not been reflected in the language used for theses as of 1978 when the Constitution came into force. Despite a slight increase in the number of theses written in the regional official languages, the results suggest that Franco’s linguistic protectionism still has considerable sway: 90.32% ( $n = 56$ ) of theses were written in Castilian, 6.45% ( $n = 4$ ) in Catalan and 1.61% ( $n = 1$ ) in both Galician and Basque.

The study reveals that Ph.D. programs in Spain are dominated by men, who account for 59.68% ( $n = 37$ ) of theses written compared to 40.32% ( $n = 25$ ) of women. However, if we look at the last decade (1995–2004) it transpires that the reverse is true: 56.76% ( $n = 21$ ) of theses were written by women and 43.24% ( $n = 16$ ) by men. This change coincides with a progressive increase of women taking social science degrees since the 1980s, particularly in Communication Sciences. The data also suggest that the gradual feminization of Ph.D. courses is a trend that corresponds to the same trend in the professional field as, by 2004, 66.8% of staff in Spanish PR companies were women (ADECEC, 2005).

With regard to the content analysis for the topic categorization of the theses, the vast majority dealt with issues relating to the practice and application of public relations (69.35%;  $n = 43$ ), far outweighing those codified as introspective (22.6%;  $n = 14$ ) and even more so the theory building dissertations (3.22%;  $n = 2$ ). There is therefore a clear preference for theses on applied public relations and an apparent lack of interest among Spanish Ph.D. students in the theory development of public relations (see Table 1).

A more detailed analysis of titles and abstracts of theses included in *Practical Application of Public Relations* demonstrates the considerable number of dissertations on the role of public relations in public institutions—80% (4/5) in the *Management in PR/Decision-Making/Problem-Solving* subcategory and 40% (6/15) in *Implementing Programs and Campaigns*. This information is evidence of the interest raised among researchers by public organizations’ adaptation to the new democratic system brought about by the end of Franco’s dictatorship. Indeed, as Tilson and Pérez (2003) demonstrated, the impressive transition towards democracy, firstly, and the country’s subsequent economic and social growth paved the way for the appearance of new models of communications management, which the government took on quickly and effectively. In this context, it is no surprise that the main area of applied research was that of public relations in the public sector (20.97% of all dissertations;  $n = 13$ ).<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the influence of the political/administrative context can be clearly seen in the first theses to be submitted. The very first, entitled “Public Relations in Administration” (1965) was written in a country with an administration that had yet to be fully formed and which was greatly influenced in ideological terms by the Franco regime. The second, focusing on the business arena and entitled “Public Relations in Private US Companies” (1966), was fruit of the interest

<sup>2</sup> Twelve were written between 1985 and 2004.

Table 1  
 Doctoral dissertations sorted by classes and subcategories

Categories	Number of Ph.D. dissertations	Percentage of Ph.D. dissertations
Introspective		
Pedagogy/education in public relations	2	3.23
Ethics and social responsibility	2	3.23
The history of public relations	2	3.23
The profession of public relations	6	9.68
International PR practice	2	3.23
Total	14	22.6
Practice/application of public relations		
Management in PR/decision-making/problem-solving	5	8.06
Implementing programs and campaigns	15	24.19
Organizational communication	7	11.29
Social issues and issues management in PR	2	3.23
New communication technologies	5	8.06
Legal issues	1	1.61
Crisis response/communication	2	3.23
Image/reputation/impression management	6	9.68
Total	43	69.35
Theory development in public relations		
Theory/symmetrical communication/Grunig's models	1	1.61
Fundraising	1	1.61
Total	2	3.22
Not categorized (coder disagreements)	3	4.84
Total	62	100.01 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Rounding error.

held in this emerging subject matter in the country. The scarcity of public relations in Spanish companies, which was a direct consequence of the lack of an adequate body of knowledge, meant that the American model was used in the first doctoral research on public relations as the management function of companies. These two doctoral theses were presented at the Faculty of Political, Economic and Commercial Sciences at the old University of Madrid, in an age when communications studies did not exist in Spanish universities.

The new democratic panorama in Spain has also had an impact on the recent surge in research into the role of public relations in political communication (five dissertations, four of which are subcategorized as *Implementing Programs and Campaigns*). The peculiar political system of a state made up of autonomous communities (similar to federalism) entailed structuring the various public administrations on multiple levels, with political leaders being voted into office by means of electoral processes: government, autonomous communities and town councils. Thus, scope for the application of public relations and, especially, press relations has broadened considerably. As Barranco (2003) pointed out, in Spain, the communication departments of the political parties have an essential responsibility: relations with the mass media.

From this standpoint, the data also suggest the importance of media relations in doctoral research. Of the 15 theses subcategorized as *Implementing Programs and Campaigns*, 8 refer directly or indirectly to media relations. The same results can be seen in the subcategory *The Profession of Public Relations* in the *Introspective* category, where of the six theses codified as such, four refer to media relations. Of the five theses classed as *New Communication Technologies*, three deal with online media relations. In other words, of all the theses analyzed in this study, almost a quarter (24.19%;  $n = 15$ ) concern media relations.

Thus, these outcomes provide evidence of the existing confusion in Spain with regard to the distinction between public relations and media relations, a vision which is all too common worldwide. According to the ADECEC (2005) report, 100% of PR companies working in Spain believe media relations to be one of their key functions, a result that is not echoed in other programs such as internal communications (50%), governmental relations (46.7%), investor

relations (40%) or fundraising (6.7%). Zoch and Molleda (2006) pointed out that media (or press) relations is an area of public relations “that many nonpractitioners see as the only function of public relations” (p. 279). In this case Spain is no different, according to the numerous doctoral research studies addressing press campaigns, media relations tactics and the structure of media relations firms. This has been further influenced by the evolution of Spanish politics and the appearance of liberties that were restricted under the Franco regime. The most significant of these were citizens’ freedom of expression and the right to information. In this new democratic panorama the press became free, providing public relations with its greatest professional outlet, a development which would also be of interest to future Ph.D. students at Spanish universities.

Another of the reasons for interest in media relations lies in the fact that it allows for a dual approach from both a journalistic and a public relations angle. This corresponds with the coexistence of Journalism and Public Relations degrees in most Information Sciences Faculties, on which 45% of the compulsory modules are the same.

Regarding the lack of theory building research in public relations, further reason for the scarcity of research compared to that carried out in other fields is the instrumental perception that many academics still have of the discipline. The analysis of the theses that come under the *Practice/Application of Public Relations* category is highly revealing: 15 of the 43 doctoral dissertations classed in this group deal with public relations through a prior analysis of marketing strategy, of which 10 have to do with setting up programs/campaigns and 5 come under the remaining subcategories. The same occurs with two of the six theses in the subcategory *The Profession of Public Relations* and with one of the uncategorized theses.

Furthermore, the data above suggest that this lack of theoretical approach to public relations is related with the arguments used by authors in other countries. Indeed, as Botan and Taylor (2004) argued, “Because public relations scholarship has not been made widely available to communication/mass communication scholars, public relations is often understood only as a technical area . . . . Therefore, Public Relations Faculty are screened for technical skills but are often not expected to be researchers and theorists” (p. 646).

Despite this instrumental approach to public relations, none of the theses were placed in the *Integrated Marketing Communications* subcategory. This is evidence of both an approach to public relations as a marketing tool and of unfamiliarity with the integrated marketing communications phenomenon as an all-inclusive and nonabsorbing approach. Another indicator of this technical perception and of Botan and Taylor (2004) statement being applicable to Spain is that of the 62 theses analyzed, less than a third (32.26%) use the term “public relations” in the title. This aspect has had its effect on the dearth of public relations theory and its approach from a structural perspective, as the lack of academic and *verbal recognition* for this discipline has meant infrequent description of its academic and scientific domain (Hutton, 1999).

As suggested above, this has a significant effect on theory building in doctoral dissertations on public relations. Of all of the theses examined, only 10 (16.13%) contextualize research with the evolution of public relations theory, of which no more than 2 attempt to conceptualize and reconceptualize public relations and to assess the usefulness of a particular theory. None develops a new perspective that helps explain, understand, or predict the practice of public relations. It is therefore hardly surprising that despite the predominance of applied PR in doctoral research, this is not reflected in the profession, since in 2004, only 5.3% of employees in Spanish public relations companies and departments had a postgraduate qualification (ADECEC, 2005). This would seem to confirm the scant interest in research among the profession, in addition to a disjunction between the industry and the academic world which is not at all conducive to the development of new theory building approaches related to practice.

This lack of contributions to theory development in public relations can also be seen in the absence of theses in some of the subcategories that Sallot et al. (2003) included in the category *Theory Development in Public Relations*. Concretely, no doctoral research has been undertaken in Spain on such important issues for theory building in public relation as role theory and models, rhetorical approach to public relations, situational theory, ethics and social responsibility, public relationships, contingency theory or social issues and issues management, among others.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article shows the significant rise of doctoral dissertations on public relations in Spanish universities in recent years. Such a change cannot be disassociated from the effects of Franco’s dictatorship before 1975 and the transition to democracy which began that year.

However, this growth has not contributed to theory development in public relations, which is often still seen as a set of tools to be used in other fields of communications and management. Evidence of this can be found in the categorization of the theses based on a content analysis of their titles, abstracts, and table of contents. Among dissertations analyzed in this article, theory development is least current. Introspective dissertations are present to some extent, mostly focusing on the issue of profession. Practice and application dissertations are rather well-developed with a dominant focus on implementing specific programs and campaigns and a predominantly technical approach to public relations.

Although degree courses in Public Relations are offered by 32 Spanish universities, only one offers a doctoral program in this field. In their study of the implementation of public relations in Spain, Huertas and Cavia (2006) concluded that “Universities must help their Advertising and Public Relations graduates to obtain the position they deserve in the labor market”. This study broadens the scope of this statement: universities must also help to train future scholars who will contribute to developing concepts and theories in public relations. Until this is the case, the general void in public relations theory development will continue: “some ‘professors’ of public relations with zero academics training in the subject area” (Botan & Hazleton, 2006, p. 3). While the considerable number of Spanish universities offering Public Relations degrees is a good “port of entry”, once inside these expectations soon begin to fade away.

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