Forms and strategies of personal influence in "public" relations practices: evidence from Italy

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Abstract

Purpose – Personal influence is one of the most powerful strategies to influence publics' behaviours. Yet, there is scant attention on how personal influence is leveraged for different public relations purposes in different cultural contexts. This study empirically investigates the presence and use of personal influence among Italian public relations professionals.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey was conducted through a self-administrated, web-based questionnaire and was developed from earlier studies investigating personal influence in public relations literature. Survey participants included public relations professionals across public, non-profit and private sectors.

Findings – The findings empirically show the presence and regular use of personal influence by professionals from all sectors to cultivate interpersonal relationships. Personal influence is considered a personal resource and used to leverage own influencing power. The findings also document four major manifestations of personal influence, which were named: relational closeness strategy, engagement strategy, expertise strategy and added value strategy.

Practical implications – This study enhances our understanding of personal influence in a specific cultural context and offers strategic insights for international professionals seeking to leverage influence in the socio-political environment of Italy. It also offers elements to improve public relations education and training.

Originality/value – The study offers some preliminary understandings of how Italian professionals leverage their personal influence in their daily public relations activities contributing with empirical evidence to the body of knowledge in public relations.

Keywords Italy, Survey, Interpersonal relations, Public relations, Personal influence

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

> The most critical success factor for leaders is their ability to influence the right people, at the right time, about the right thing– Daren Martin

> . . . all foreign policy is, is a logical extension of personal relationships. – US President Joe Biden

Public relations has traditionally been associated with influencing public opinions and behaviours. Yet, the ability to leverage personal influence has become increasingly important for achieving personal, organizational and professional goals (Sriramesh and Fisher, 2021). Personal influence relies on strong interpersonal relationships, as it involves individuals obtaining something through their connections with others. Leadership, as Meng and Neill (2022) describe, is a process that encompasses influence, with both leaders and managers engaged in influencing people to accomplish goals. Curiously, public relations professionals

possess the skills to become influencers themselves (Kent, 2023), yet they often delegate this role on behalf of the organization. And when they use it, it is sometimes done discreetly due to international ethical codes discouraging certain related practices (Tsetsura and Valentini, 2016). Sriramesh and Fisher (2021) contended that personal influence, as a form of social influence exercised directly by public relations professionals on others, is not a new practice, but it has faced stigma, especially in earlier studies conducted in Asian cultures (Chen and Chen, 2004; Chow and Ng, 2004; Hung, 2004; Sriramesh, 1988, 1992; Huang, 1990). However, research in Western societies has revealed the presence of personal influence within organizational settings (e.g. Berger and Reber, 2006; Gallicano, 2009; Meng and Neill, 2022; Valentini, 2009; White et al., 2010), though the full extent and forms of this practice among professionals remain unclear.

This study investigates the presence and use of personal influence and its manifestations in Italian public relations practice. The field of public relations is continually evolving, and personal influence has become increasingly important for achieving communication and relationship management goals. Understanding how personal influence is employed is essential to stay current with industry trends. Italy was chosen as the context due to its cultural emphasis on interpersonal relationships, strong family ties and friendships (Valentini, 2010), which are also prevalent in many Asian cultures (García, 2023). This makes Italy an interesting setting to explore personal influence practices. Following an "inside-out" or "culture-centricity" approach advocating for a more culturally sensitive and contextually grounded analysis of communication and media practices, and recognizing the significance of local culture in shaping these dynamics (see for, e.g. Chang, 2007; Servaes, 2016; Wang, 2011), this study seeks to contribute to our understanding of personal influence use in public relations with insights from Italy, a Western country with peculiar cultural features that may resemble those of many Asian cultures.

Literature review

The importance of personal influence has received greater recognition across communication disciplines and more recently in public relations (García, 2023). Historical reviews (Wakefield, 2013; García, 2023) contend that public relations is much more than a rational and deliberative process; it often implies an exchange of favours and can support social capital development (Marschlich and Ingenhoff, 2021). Public relations is connaturally a profession about persuasion, and persuasion is often elicited through personal influence as a part of the relationship-building effort undertaken by public relations professionals (Sriramesh and Fisher, 2021). To be effective, personal influence depends on the status, trustworthiness and credibility of individuals in a reciprocal relationship (Toth, 2000). Mutual and beneficial relationships with stakeholders build trust and credibility and "both of which are necessary when trying to persuade, in a non-normative sense, various stakeholders to take an action, attitude, or stance" (Sriramesh and Fisher, 2021, p. 338).

As different scholars (e.g. García, 2013; Marschlich and Ingenhoff, 2021) have noted, the presence of power asymmetries in societies favours the development and use of personal influence as a relationship management strategy. Cultural elements, social norms and practices shape the importance of personal relationships for organizations to cultivate their publics (García, 2023). The studies that first identified personal influence in public relations activities took place in countries that show strong power asymmetries. Sriramesh's (1988, 1989) seminal studies in India identifying personal influence were designed to explore and validate the presence of the four models of public relations proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984). Huang's (1990) study in Taiwan also discovered personal influence and related it to the concept of *gao guanxi*. Huang (2000) linked personal influence in Taiwan to Confucianism and societal harmony. More recently, personal influence has been identified as a central element in African public relations practices (Anani-Bossman, 2022; Anani-Bossman and Tandoh, 2023), in Kuwait

(Al-Abdullah, 2021) and in both the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Abdelhay, 2014). These are regions of the world where power asymmetries are high and where interpersonal relationships are extremely important. Cultural elements, such as *ubuntu,* a collectivist worldview widespread in African cultures identified by Anani-Bossman (2022), point to the conclusion that personal influence is not only widely used in specific cultural settings, but is legitimized by local cultural norms. As Tsetsura and Valentini (2016) noted, practices are heavily influenced, albeit unevenly, by organizational, societal and professional cultures, as well as the underlying values.

Even within the US context, often used as a reference point in public relations theory, personal influence has historically been practiced (Wakefield, 2013). Studies by Berger and Reber (2006), O'Neil (2003) White *et al.* (2010), and more recently Meng and Neill (2022) demonstrate the presence and relevance of personal influence within organizations. In these studies, influence is understood as the "ability to impact the strategic planning of a company" (Berger and Reber, 2006, p. 18), and personal influence is viewed as a form of individual and relational power (O'Neil, 2003), which supports professionals in influencing senior corporate committees (Neill, 2015). It is also seen as an ethical practice (Meng and Neill, 2022) when leaders proactively influence followers through ethical conduct and consideration (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Personal influence, as a dimension of relationship management, serves as a strong indicator of successful public relations (Toth, 2000) and can lead to positive organizational outcomes (Gallicano, 2009; Marschlich and Ingenhoff, 2021), such as enhancing information satisfaction and fostering pro-organizational advocacy behaviours among employees (White *et al.*, 2010), as well as facilitating career advancement for professionals (Valentini, 2009).

In the context of external stakeholders, personal influence is heavily used in media relations across different countries. For instance, Taylor (2004) noted the presence of personal influence in public relations-journalist relationships in Croatia. Tsetsura (2005, 2009, 2011) and associates (Klyueva and Tsetsura, 2011; Tsetsura and Grynko, 2009) identified some forms of influence in media relations activities related to gift-giving in Russia, Ukraine and Poland, which seem similar to the manifestations of the concept in Asian countries. In the Italian context, only one study has been conducted so far on the use of personal influence for career advancement logic (Valentini, 2010). As empirical evidence in Italy on this topic is limited, and not much is known about public relations professionals' perception of its value for achieving public relations goals in the country, we identified the following two research questions as a prelude to gathering empirical data on this topic:

RQ1. To what extent are interpersonal relationships considered important to leverage personal influence by Italian public relations practitioners?

RQ2. To what extent do Italian public relations practitioners think it is appropriate to use personal influence with internal and external stakeholders?

Tactics and strategies for leveraging personal influence
In public relations scholarship, personal influence strategies and tactics are often found indirectly when studying how public relations professionals cultivate relationships with key stakeholders. For instance, at the basic level establishing knowledge management tools can help organizations identify and make use of employees' personal relationships with stakeholders (Johnson, 2008). Gallicano (2009) identified five main strategies, including direct engagement, task sharing, constitutive rhetoric, peer linking and hat-in-your-hand, which are linked to interpersonal influence in USA advocacy organizations' relationship cultivation with key stakeholders. Chow and Ng (2004) found that individuals in Hong Kong utilized interpersonal relationships with family, friends, club members and school friends to develop

guanxi, a form of personal influence, among workers. Personal influence strategies identified were based on *renqing* (favour) and *mianzi* (face), and these were used to expand individuals' relational networks and to obtain resources from others. Su *et al.* (2007) explored guanxi from a public perspective, offering a classification to distinguish different forms based on the stakeholders involved. The authors also offered different types of guanxi strategies such as core, major and peripheral guanxi, adding additional insights into how personal influence manifests in South Korea.

Anani-Bossman and Tandoh (2023) highlight the concept of *ubuntu* in Africa, emphasizing the importance of people-oriented philosophy and continuous dialogue in personal influence practices. At the corporate level, Hung (2004) investigated the relationship building strategies of multinational corporations in China and found that face, favour, relational harmony, relational fatalism, and relational determination are important tactics for leveraging personal influence through personal networking. Shin and Cameron (2003) identified various practices used for building personal influence in South Korea, including social activities like drinking with journalists, golfing, and giving free tickets for concerts. Jo and Kim (2004) analysed the relationship practices between journalists and public relations practitioners in South Korea, revealing deliberate gender-based appointments for media relations activities to build personal influence, as male practitioners were perceived as being able to engage in activities like drinking with journalists.

Overall, the bulk of studies on personal influence strategies points towards favour-giving tactics such as giving gifts, organizing invitations, providing key stakeholders with food or drinks, and showing hospitality to establish close relationships for leveraging subsequent personal influence (Sriramesh *et al.*, 1999). As tactics for personal influence are heavily influenced by culture and societal values and norms, public relations activities for building and cultivating interpersonal relationships in different countries may be different. We decided to study:

RQ3. Which strategies and tactics do Italian public relations practitioners use to cultivate their interpersonal relationships?

The use and acceptance of personal influence for public relations purposes may also differ depending on the sector for which public relations professionals work. Studies on Grunig and Hunt's (1984) public relations models have shown differences in how public relations is practiced, its function and communication objectives across sectors (Grunig *et al.*, 1995), thus suggesting that we may expect some differences in the practice of personal influence across different sectors too. But according to Sriramesh *et al.* (1999) and Anani-Bossman's, (2022) studies, personal influence is likewise practiced in public sector organizations, as government regulators have been found to bend the rules to help their favourite organizations. Similarly, non-profit organizations were found to use personal influence for instance to whittle journalists' publishing agendas. To understand if personal influence is mostly a practice for corporate public relations or rather a general one, in this study we also intend to find out:

RQ4. Is there any difference among the three main sectors (private, non-profit and public) in their use of interpersonal relationships for leveraging personal influence?

Personal influence and Italian society
Anecdotal evidence suggests that leveraging personal influence to gain something has been dominant in Italy (Muzi Falconi, 2009). Italy as well as other Southern European countries have been compared to Asian culture for their widespread use of personal influence (García, 2016). Italian sociologist Donati (2011) presents the case of Italy as an example of a *relational society*. In these societies the economic, political, social and cultural systems revolve around people. Thus, building and mantaining relationships are a way to engage in business, politics,

and even private lives. The author further explained that relational societies do not "have or include social relations, but consist of social relations" (Donati, 2011, p. 98). In relational societies, behaviours and rules of conduct in business as well as in private life are centred on cultivating relationships (Valentini, 2009). The importance of social relations in Italian society is perhaps most widely known in the work by Putman *et al.* (1993) on social capital and modern Italy. These scholars sharply noted the important role of interpersonal relations among members of local communities and the role of trust, reciprocity and habits of cooperation in local governance in Italy.

Valentini (2010) studied Italian public relations practitioners and underscored the role of personalized networks of influence as one of the most important personal resources for Italian public relations practitioners' careers in organizations. Similarly, Italian small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) rely heavily on interpersonal relationships for doing business, as this type of organizations, more than the larger ones, counts on their networks of suppliers, customers and consumers (Coppa and Sriramesh, 2013; Orrù, 1991). Yet, relational societies may be more inclined to suffer from shortcomings. Muzi Falconi (2009) considered Italy a dysfunctional relational society since relations are often used to promote nepotism, favouritism and corruption. Specifically, favouritism is frequently directed towards family members even of the second and third generation and friends. While it appears that counting on interpersonal relations is important in Italy, to date no study has investigated the extent to which Italian public relations practitioners across private, public and non-profit sectors use personal influence in their interpersonal relations to achieve public relations' goals nor there are studies investigating how personal influence manifest in the Italian culture. Our last question thus asks:

RQ5. How is personal influence manifested in Italian public relations?

Methodology
To investigate our research questions, we surveyed public relations practitioners across all three sectors in Italy. We opted for a survey research approach as it enables the collection of data on unobservable phenomena like attitudes toward interpersonal relationships and personal influence (Babbie, 2008). Data was collected through a self-administered web-based questionnaire. This study and the related protocol were approved by the Research Ethics Committee of one of the authors' institutions. All respondents were informed on their rights and data management practices, and data were anonymised and stored in an encrypted system.

The questionnaire was developed using scales derived from previous studies on personal influence practices (Huang, 2000, 2001, 2004; Jo and Kim, 2004; Sriramesh, 1992; Sriramesh and Grunig, 1988; Sriramesh *et al.*, 1996, 1999). In addition to gathering socio-demographic data on respondents (age, gender, years of work experience, education level, degree and professional sector), the questionnaire included questions related to three main aspects: (1) the perceived role and importance of interpersonal relationships in public relations activities, (2) the perceived appropriateness of using personal influence for public relations goals and (3) the utilization of specific personal influence strategies and tactics.

To measure the importance of interpersonal relationships, we used five items adapted from Sriramesh's study (1992), including questions such as "In my work, it is very important to have good interpersonal relationships with all people within my organization" and ". . . to have good interpersonal relationships with key publics and opinion leaders". To appraise perceived appropriateness, we employed three items drawn from studies by Huang (1990), Lyra (1991), Sriramesh (1992) and Sriramesh and Enxi (2004). These items focused on perceived embarrassment, appropriateness for personal use and appropriateness for organizational purposes regarding one's relationship network.

To investigate strategies and tactics, we employed six items adapted from Shin and Cameron (2003) and Huang (2004). For parsimony reasons, we chose six items based on the input we received from two external Italian public relations professionals who helped us identify the most relevant strategies and tactics for the specific context of our study. The six items were centred around the three pillars of Italian culture: hospitality, friendship and close relationships. The 14-item scale included items such as "We organize and offer media junkets to maximize journalists' participation . . ." (hospitality), "To have good relationships, to influence opinions and obtain favours, it is useful to offer some benefits . . ." (friendship), "I try to maximize my relationship network through knowledge management tools such as databases and other data analytics software" (close relationship) (M = x, SD = x, α = 0.922). All items were measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). To address our fifth research question, we included an open-ended question to explore whether respondents employed any additional strategies or tactics to enhance their personal influence with key stakeholders.

The survey was created in English and later translated to Italian by one of the researchers to ensure a higher rate of responses among the survey's participants, most of whom are Italian speaking. The translation was reviewed for consistency by a third party who was proficient in both languages and not involved in the initial drafting or translation. Answers to the open question were later translated from Italian to English and double-checked for consistency of meaning by a third person.

Survey participants
We invited public relations practitioners from various sectors in Italy to respond to our survey. This included in-house and agency/consultancy practitioners in the private sector. To estimate the population, we referred to previous studies on the profession in Italy (Valentini, 2013; Valentini and Sriramesh, 2014), which were based on samples of 300–400 responses. We used email to reach out for participation, collaborating with prominent Italian professional associations like *FERPI*, the *Italian Public Communication Association* and *Assocomunicatori*. Respondents were encouraged to share the survey with relevant colleagues and professionals. We collected over 500 surveys, with 396 complete responses after excluding incomplete ones.

Except for the public sector, most respondents were male, with more than 11 years of work experience (58.6%) (see Table 1). The majority (65.6%) held a master's or MBA degree. They specialized in different communication disciplines such as communication science (17.4%), public relations (14.1%), political science (10%), and business and economics (7.2%). Political science degree (17%) is the second most common degree, after communication science (23%), among respondents working for the Italian public sector, whereas public relations degree is the most common degree in private (in-house) (26%) and second most common in the private (agency) (16%) and the non-for-profit (19%).

Data analysis
To identify patterns in attitudes regarding the use of interpersonal relationships for personal influence, we conducted descriptive analyses on all statements. We also performed multiple one-way ANOVA tests with Turkey post hoc tests to compare sector-based differences. For the open-ended questions, we adopted an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) following five steps: data cleaning, close reading, category creation, addressing overlapping codes and uncoded text, and revisions. This approach allowed us to gain fresh insights into interpersonal relationship practices, unconstrained by structured methodologies (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). Our analysis primarily focused on identifying tactics and strategies for leveraging personal influence. We achieved this by conducting multiple readings and

Socio-demographic variables		Private in-house %	Professional sector Private agency %	Not profit %	Public %
Gender	Male	66	53	51	66
	Female	34	47	49	34
Age	20–30	32	21	28	14
	31–40	38	36	32	23
	41–50	26	22	22	35
	More than 50	4	21	18	28
Education	High school degree	11	20	26	20
	Bachelor degree	18	7	22	12
	Master degree	47	44	35	46
	MBA/professional courses in communication and PR	21	27	15	17
	Doctoral degree	3	2	2	5
Degree (only for those with a university title)	Public relations	26	16	19	8
	Communication sciences	16	21	23	23
	Political sciences	6	12	12	17
	Business and economics	12	7	9	7
	Foreign languages and literature	10	5	2	7
	Modern/Ancient languages and literature	3	8	2	5
	Philosophy	6	6	5	3
	Sociology	0	2	2	8
	Law	6	7	10	6
	Other	15	16	16	16
Years of work experience	1–5	30	23	29	18
	6–10	22	21	15	12
	11–20	29	28	32	24
	21–30	16	12	12	30
	More than 30	3	16	12	16

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 1.
Respondents'
demographics

interpretations of the raw data. We created category labels, descriptions and links to illustrate relationships between concepts and ideas (Thomas, 2006). Initially, one researcher categorized the qualitative data, and then a second researcher created a separate set of categories based on the analysis objectives and translated open responses. Any discrepancies between these two sets of categories were resolved through discussion and adjustments, guided by existing literature on personal influence.

Results
RQ1: To what extent are interpersonal relationships considered important to leverage personal influence by Italian public relations practitioners?
Across all three sectors (see Table 2), respondents agreed that personal influence is important both within the organization they work for (ranging from M = 4.41, SD = 0.808 for the private agency to M = 3.75, SD = 0.947 for the non-for-profit) and outside the organization, with external stakeholders and opinion leaders (ranging from M = 4.39, SD = 0.909 for the private-agency to M = 3.65, SD = 0.927 for the non-for-profit). Most of the respondents confirmed that they use some form of personal influence in their contacts with opinion leaders outside the organization – in particular people working in agencies and in the not-for-profit sector (private-agency, M = 3.84, SD = 1.163; public sector, M = 3.06, SD = 1.252).

Indicators	Sectors	N	Mean*	SD
In my work, it is very important to have good interpersonal relationships with all people within my organization	Private	76	4.26	1.012
	Private-Agencies	162	4.41	0.808
	Public	103	4.27	0.962
	Non-profit	55	3.75	0.947
In my work, it is very important to have good interpersonal relationships with key publics and opinion leaders	Private	76	4.26	1.025
	Private-Agencies	161	4.39	0.909
	Public	103	4.11	0.938
	Non-profit	55	3.65	0.927
In my job, one of the most important factors for success is to have a contact book full of names of important and famous people whom I can approach when needed	Private	74	2.96	1.103
	Private-Agencies	161	3.17	1.070
	Public	99	2.99	1.102
	Non-profit	55	3.04	0.838
In my job, one of the most important activities is networking and socializing outside my working hours (e.g. alumni)	Private	76	3.37	0.964
	Private-Agencies	161	3.58	1.076
	Public	97	3.20	1.169
	Non-profit	55	3.13	0.924
I have contacts with opinion leaders (e.g. analysts, economists, industry experts, and government officials) outside the organization	Private	76	3.45	1.159
	Private-Agencies	159	3.84	1.163
	Public	99	3.06	1.252
	Non-profit	54	3.43	1.002

Table 2.
Means and standard deviations of Italian public relations practitioners' perceived importance of interpersonal relationships by sectors and indicators

Note(s): *Likert type scale 1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree
Source(s): Table by authors

Respondents also recognized networking and socializing outside their work hours as an important element before leveraging personal influence (ranging from M = 3.58, SD = 1.076 for the private agency to M = 3.13, SD = 0.924 for the not-for-profit sector). Yet, when asked whether to be successful professionals needed a contact book full of names of important and famous people whom they can approach and ask for favours, respondents working for corporations (M = 2.96, SD = 1.103) and public sector (M = 2.99, SD = 1.102) mildly disagreed, whereas practitioners in agencies and consultancies and the non-for-profit sector had more neutral stance in this idea (ranging from M = 3.17, SD = 1.070 for the private-agency to M = 3.04, SD = 0.838 for the non-for-profit). This is an interesting result, as we expected corporate public relations professionals more inclined to use personal influence with specific people to gain business influence. However, this finding may be a result of social desirability, as corporate public relations professionals would like to believe their professional success is the result of their skills and expertise rather than who they know. Admitting the latter may mean admitting their career and current position are not merit-based.

RQ2: To what extent do Italian public relations practitioners think it is appropriate to use personal influence with internal and external stakeholders?
Our respondents across all sectors found it appropriate to use personal influence with internal and external stakeholders for professional purposes (see Table 3) supporting early indications that the Italian society relies on social relations in professional contexts too (Donati, 2011). Specifically, when asked to reflect on how they feel about using personal influence in their relationship network, most of the respondents did not feel embarrassed in making the most of their relationship network as a source of competitive advantage nor did they feel that by doing so their professionalism was diminished. Disagreement with the statement related to embarrassment ranged from M = 2.26, SD = 1.180 for private agencies to M = 2.77, SD = 0.899 for the not-for-profit sector. Most respondents also stated that their

interpersonal relationships are constantly placed at the disposal of their organization (ranging from M = 4.11, SD = 0.955 for private agencies to M = 3.41, SD = 1.283 for the public sector) and not kept for their personal use, except for corporate professionals (M = 4.26, SD = 1.025) who seem to be more inclined to use it for own career advancement. The fact that the majority of Italian professionals across sectors find not embarrassing of using interpersonal relationships for their leveraging influence in their activities confirms early work carried out in India, Japan and South Korea on the use and relevance of the personal influence model in public relations activities (Sriramesh *et al.*, 1999). They also seem to resonate with early public relations studies conducted in Italy underlining the strong relational nature of Italian society (Muzi Falconi, 2009; Muzi Falconi and Ventoruzzo, 2015; Valentini, 2010; Coppa and Sriramesh, 2013).

RQ3: Which strategies and tactics do Italian public relations practitioners use to cultivate their interpersonal relationships?
Respondents were asked to reflect upon some common tactics related to building and maintaining friendships, close relationships and hospitality. When asked whether they used personal influence for making people try products/services to be able to influence their attitudes and perceptions, our respondents replied mildly in the negative (ranging from M = 2.51, SD = 1.143 for public to M = 2.78, SD = 1.101 for non-for-profit). Similarly, many claimed that they did not offer benefits such as dinners and gifts to have good relationships with key stakeholders (see Table 4). The level of agreement for offering benefits ranged from M = 2.46, SD = 1.173 for the public sector to M = 2.81, SD = 1.106 for private-in-house departments, which is slightly below the neutral stance. Yet, high standard deviations point out that there is a great dispersion of opinions on whether or not it is acceptable to offer benefits, indicating there are different levels of acceptability of this practice among the sample. Likewise, the use of knowledge management tools such as databases and other data analytics software to maximize own relationship network is not so common (ranging from M = 3.00, SD = 1.237 for the private agencies to M = 2.71, SD = 1.193 for the public sector).

For media stakeholders, most respondents (except, public relations professionals of private-in-house departments who had a more neutral stance) reported that they did not use media junkets to capitalize on journalists' participation in one of their events (level of agreement ranges from M = 3.20, SD = 0.971 for the private-in house, to M = 2.40, SD = 1.125

Indicators	Sectors	N	Mean*	SD
My relationship network, developed over many years, is constantly placed at the disposal of my organization to maximize its value, and facilitate the achievement of objectives	Private	74	3.73	1.174
	Private-Agencies	159	4.11	0.955
	Public	98	3.41	1.283
	Non-for-profit	53	3.43	0.910
My relationship network, developed over many years, is my personal resource that has helped me succeed in my career	Private	71	4.26	1.025
	Private-Agencies	144	2.88	1.389
	Public	98	2.88	1.262
	Non-for-profit	54	2.78	0.965
I have a certain embarrassment in making the most of my relationship network as a source of competitive advantage since this diminishes my professionalism	Private	64	2.42	1.193
	Private-Agencies	141	2.26	1.180
	Public	92	2.57	1.142
	Non-for-profit	52	2.77	0.899

Note(s): *Likert type scale 1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree
Source(s): Table by authors

Table 3.
Means and standard deviations of Italian public relations practitioners' use and acceptance of interpersonal relationships by sectors and indicators

Indicators	Sectors	N	Mean*	SD
My organization uses relations with influential public and their testimonials, to make people try products/services and to influence their attitudes and perceptions	Private	71	2.65	1.110
	Private-Agencies	154	2.75	1.116
	Public	92	2.51	1.143
	Non-for-profit	51	2.78	1.101
To have good relationships, influence opinions, and obtain favours, it is useful to offer some benefits (e.g. dinners, gifts, etc.)	Private	74	2.81	1.106
	Private-Agencies	155	2.63	1.070
	Public	97	2.46	1.173
	Non-for-profit	54	2.67	1.099
To maximize journalists' participation, we give them a token gift of value before a press conference	Private	57	2.51	1.020
	Private-Agencies	141	2.22	1.196
	Public	77	1.94	1.043
	Non-for-profit	46	2.48	0.983
We organize and offer media junkets to maximize journalists' participation in one of our events	Private	60	3.20	0.971
	Private-Agencies	151	2.99	1.131
	Public	85	2.40	1.125
	Non-for-profit	50	2.66	0.961
We offer a meal or drink, using the organization's money, for reporters invited to the event (e.g. press conference)	Private	59	2.63	1.065
	Private-Agencies	139	2.47	1.163
	Public	81	2.07	1.104
	Non-for-profit	47	2.53	0.952
I try to maximize my relationship network through knowledge management tools such as databases and other data management software	Private	73	2.79	1.312
	Private-Agencies	154	3.00	1.237
	Public	95	2.71	1.193
	Non-for-profit	54	2.93	0.949

Note(s): *Likert type scale 1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree
Source(s): Table by authors

Table 4.
Means and standard deviations of Italian public relations practitioners' strategies and tactics to cultivate relationships by sectors and indicators

for the public sector). Yet, all practitioners across sectors deny that they may have offered a meal or drink, using the organization's money to humour journalists invited to an event (ranging from M = 2.63, SD = 1.065 for the private-in house to M = 2.07, SD = 1.104 for the public sector), and that they offered a token of value to journalists before a press conference (ranging from M = 2.51, SD = 1.020 for the private-in house to M = 1.94, SD = 1.043 for the public sector).

RQ4: Is there any difference among the three main sectors (corporate, non-profit and government) in their use of interpersonal relationships for leveraging personal influence?
The results show limited statistical differences in the way respondents from the four main groups used personal influence in their interpersonal relationships. The use of their relational network for achieving organizational objectives ($F_{(3,380)} = 10.665$, $p < 0.001$) is mostly used by professionals working in private agencies compared to those working in the public sector (3.41 ± 1.283 min, $p < 0.001$) and in the non-for-profit (3.43 ± 0.910 min, $p < 0.001$), whereas private sector professionals agree more to use of media junket ($F_{(3,342)} = 8.306$, $p < 0.001$) compared to the public sector (2.40 ± 1.125 min, $p < 0.001$) and non-profit professionals (2.66 ± 0.961 min, $p = 0.046$). Professionals working for private agencies also agree more to have contacts with opinion leaders ($F_{(3,384)} = 9.234$, $p < 0.001$) compared to public sector ones (3.06 ± 1.252 min, $p < 0.001$). The use of interpersonal relationships inside ($F_{(3, 392)} = 7.724$, $p < 0.001$) and outside the organization ($F_{(3,391)} = 8.641$, $p < 0.001$) also differ across groups. Interestingly, non-for-profit professionals agreed much lesser than other groups on the importance of interpersonal relationships inside their organizations (private, 4.26 ± 1.012 min, $p = 0.008$; private-agencies, 4.41 ± 0.808 min, $p < 0.001$; public, 4.27 ± 0.962 min, $p = 0.003$, as

well as their use outside the organization (private, 4.26 ± 1.025 min, $p = 0.002$; private-agencies, 4.39 ± 0.909 min, $p < 0.001$; public, 4.11 ± 0.938 min, $p = 0.022$).

Among the personal influence strategies and tactics, only offering a token to journalists ($F(3, 317) = 3.832$, $p = 0.010$) and offering a meal or drink ($F(3, 322) = 3.585$, $p = 0.014$) resulted to be moderately different by sector. Compared to the public sector (2.07 ± 1.104 min, $p = 019$), private sector professionals viewed less negatively the tactic of offering meals and drinks as a way to influence their key stakeholders. Public sector professionals are also the least likely to offer tokens to journalists before press conferences compared to private (2.51 ± 1.020 min, $p = 0.016$) and non-for-profit (2.48 ± 0.983 min, $p = 0.042$) professionals.

Years of professional experience also explained some differences across professionals specifically with the importance of having a contact book full of important people ($F(4, 361) = 3.120$, $p = 0.015$), having regular contacts with external opinion leaders ($F(4, 360) = 5.592$, $p < 0.001$) and the use of relational networks for own personal use ($F(4, 339) = 3.256$, $p = 0.012$) and for achieving organizational objectives ($F(4, 356) = 3.256$, $p = 0.012$). Years of experience also mattered to offering "media junkets to maximize journalists' participation" ($F(4, 319) = 5.165$, $p < 0.001$) and "a token of value before a press conference" ($F(4, 294) = 3.689$, $p = 0.006$). A Tukey post hoc test revealed that professionals with over 30 years of experience considered more important than professionals with less than 10 years of experience to have a contact book full of names of important people (3.55 ± 0.904 min, $p = 0.011$). They also have much more contacts with external opinion leaders compared to other groups (4.15 ± 1.142 min, $p < 0.001$), use more their relational networks for achieving organizational purposes than young professionals (3.51 ± 1.108 min, $p = 0.006$) and are more likely to use their relational network for own use in career advancement compared to junior professionals (2.63 ± 1.220 min, $p = 0.037$). Interestingly, the use of media junket is mostly a practice that is prominent among the 21–30 years of experience group compared to the 6–10 years of experience (3.17 ± 1.122 min, $p = 0.002$) and the 11–20 years of experience (3.01 ± 1.063 min, $p = 0.012$) groups. The offering of a token to journalists is also more prominent among the 21–30 years of experience group compared to the 1–5 years of experience (2.35 ± 1.198 min, $p = 0.019$) and the 6–10 years of experience (2.47 ± 1.197 min, $p = 0.004$) groups. No statistically significant differences were observed when professionals' education, sex and job positions were tested against personal influence strategies and tactics.

RQ5: How is personal influence manifested in Italian public relations?
Our analysis identified different strategies and tactics of personal influence than those from early literature. For simplicity reasons, we represent them separately, but these strategies are not mutually exclusive, and are often occurring simultaneously or in conjunction. We classified them under four main categories: (1) *Relational Closeness Strategy,* (2) *Engagement Strategy, (3) Expertise Strategy* and (4) *Added Value Strategy*.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relations between strategies for acquiring personal influence and the required skills for professionals to achieve it. Personal influence can be obtained through *intrinsic characteristics*, such as cultural idiosyncrasies, specific emotional attitudes and people-oriented feelings, or *extrinsic characteristics* acquired through experience, training and obtaining organizational resources. Additionally, personal influence can be achieved through a combination of *soft skills*, which include people skills, communication skills, and social and emotional intelligence, as well as *hard skills*, encompassing knowledge, expertise and abilities gained through training and experience.

Relational Closeness Strategy was used by those who claimed that personal influence is possible if one has established good interpersonal relationships and for this to work several soft skills such as social and ethical skills are required. Most of our respondents who employ this strategy underlined how important it is to be social, show courtesy, be open to dialogue, and, above all, dedicate time as relationships need to be cultivated over a period.

Being social, courtesy, competent, available to dialogue is essential, and above all time: personal relations should be cultivated without haste, Female, senior professional.

The 'closeness' dimension is visible also in statements indicating the need to get 'mentally' closer to key stakeholders to have a deep understanding of their needs, working and social conditions, which is a precondition to knowing when and how to leverage personal influence. This understanding was also considered paramount for best serving key stakeholders.

Showing genuine empathy, and understanding is essential, Female, mid-career professional.

I say, being helpful when contacts seek information or advice is the key, Male, senior professional.

To reach this level of closeness, professionals often referred to the importance of being empathic and transparent, particularly with their intents. Furthermore, they mentioned that respect for other people's work, correctness, and professional ethics can pave the road to get close relationships.

My approach to building interpersonal relationships is to be transparent and clear in my relationships, respecting others' work, being fair and ethical, Male, mid-career professional.

Ensuring transparent communication with stakeholders about the reasons behind our desire to establish a relationship is paramount. We must clearly articulate our objectives, approaches, and the active role we envision for the relationship. By doing so, we provide stakeholders with a comprehensive understanding of our intentions, methods, and the mutual benefits we seek to achieve through our engagement, Female, junior professional.

When close relationships are established, then personal influence was much easier to take place.

The *Engagement Strategy* consists of all those activities that aim at making key stakeholders part of the organization's settings. For example, by involving selective stakeholders in organizational decisions and by using digital and social media channels to keep conversations going on with them.

I effectively utilize my personal influence with stakeholders by actively involving them in strategic decisions within my company, and organizing conferences where they are invited to be esteemed guest speakers, [. . ..]. Male, senior professional

I use social media to keep up conversations with them. Female, junior professional

I inform my key stakeholders of important governance events and seek their view on some upcoming decisions. Female, senior professional

Nature of personal influence	Required skills	
	Soft skills (empathy, charisma, courtesy, commitment, engagement, etc.)	Hard skills (competence, knowledge, expertise, gaining organizational support for intangible activities, etc.)
Intrinsic (dependent on the professional's persona.)	Relational Closeness Strategy	Expertise Strategy
Extrinsic (dependent on professional experience and training)	Engagement Strategy	Added Value Strategy

Figure 1.
Italian professionals' main strategies to leverage personal influence with key publics

Source(s): Figure by authors

The engagement strategy was often mentioned in connection with the relational closeness strategy. The two strategies sustain each other, in that, the more stakeholders are engaged with the organization, the closer they feel to the organization and the professional who make it possible for stakeholders to be more active in organizational decisions.

> Credibility, courtesy, and transparency in expressing our intentions are crucial in building strong relationships, which in turn facilitate greater stakeholder engagement in key decisions within my organization. Female, mid-career professional

Furthermore, when professionals can develop close relationships with stakeholders, it was perceived to be easier to engage stakeholders directly with organizational activities. Thus, the two strategies mutually contribute to cultivating positive relationships between organizations and stakeholders. For these strategies to be successful the role and personal influence of the professional, who acts as a bonding entity between the employer or client organization and key stakeholders, was underlined as essential.

> The credibility and professionalism I have gained through years of hard work are essential for my organization's ability to effectively leverage influence with key stakeholders. Male senior professional

The third, *Expertise Strategy* was also often mentioned by professionals when discussing how they can gain personal influence among certain stakeholders. Influence was leveraged by showing a high level of expertise and professionalism in all types of contacts and interactions among professionals and stakeholders. Respondents indicated that they invested time and energy in self-education by personally participating in conventions/events in the discipline, reading different materials and books and investing in continuous preparation on current affairs to have updated and regarded expertise that can be at the disposal of stakeholders, as indicated in these illustrative quotes:

> Engaging in discussions and sharing viewpoints with stakeholders is made possible by my active involvement in conferences and events, staying current through specialized websites, and reading pertinent literature and informative materials, Female, mid-career professional.

> It is crucial to invest in continuous education and training on current topics. This allows me to be well-prepared for meaningful discussions and the sharing of diverse perspectives. Such training plays a vital role in understanding stakeholders' viewpoints and the societal norms that shape their beliefs and behaviours, Male, mid-career professional.

Professionals believe they can enhance their influence on stakeholders through their knowledge and expertise, essentially by sharing it and showing how it could serve stakeholder interests. Such expertise must be always updated and relevant, therefore, as part of this expertise strategy, good research activities, documentation, and editing were mentioned often.

> I believe that conducting thorough research, documentation, and writing are essential to provide credible and compelling information to stakeholders regarding the topics of interest, Male, junior professional.

> To provide valuable information to my stakeholders I conduct thorough research, engage in meticulous documentation, and effectively compact my takeaways in writing. These are essential!, Male, senior professional.

These activities help professionals to provide credible and convincing information about topics of interest for stakeholders and help position themselves as important links to the organization.

Finally, *Added Value Strategy* deals with providing both utility and social benefits. A certain number of respondents indicated that being of reciprocal utility and exchanging useful information and extra insights/opinions on different issues is more efficient for leveraging influence than offering material benefits, e.g. gifts/dinners/drinks.

Being valuable when contacts seek information or advice. Male, senior professional

Instead of merely offering gadgets or tokens, I would say, the key strategy lies in fostering reciprocal utility and the exchange of valuable information, Female, senior professional

It is important to note that to provide extra insights on issues, often respondents reported also employing an expertise strategy, i.e. investing in self-education. Providing additional services such as press release drafts, business leads, etc. to media stakeholders is also considered an added value and a reason why media stakeholders would be interested in establishing good relationships with public relations professionals.

Providing additional services to stakeholders such as draft communications, additional business leads, etc. is very helpful in nurturing relationships and influence. Female, mid-career professional

Identifying for the client their "blue oceans" while avoiding them from encountering the "red oceans", [and thus avoid them] the bloody battle, Female, senior PR professional

On the social side, offering to individual stakeholders occasions and venues where social interests can be cultivated, inviting them to conventions where stakeholders can be speakers, and organizing targeted cultural events (e.g. art, music, cooking, etc.) are other tactics within the hospitality and friendship dimensions that public relations professionals believe can have an impact on key stakeholders' attitudes and the level of influence.

I effectively utilize my personal influence with stakeholders by [….] developing tailored cultural opportunities such as online newsletters and blogs specifically designed for their interests and creating niche experiences for them centred around their specific areas of interest, such as art, music, cuisine, and more, Male, senior professional.

Socially oriented tactics illustrated by professionals in the added value strategy can also benefit from a parallel use of the relational closeness strategy.

Discussion and conclusions

Most current research in Western societies focuses on understanding indirect forms of personal influence such as those undertaken by organizations and public relations professionals when seeking the collaboration and engagement of digital influencers. This study sets out to investigate the presence, practices and manifestation of direct personal influence by professionals in Italy, a country which in many regards shows societal norms and cultural elements such as friendship, family and hospitality similar in some ways, but different in others, to those of Asian cultures.

This study contributes to public relations literature by empirically confirming the use of the fifth public relations model (Grunig *et al.*, 1995) and the important role of personal influence in Italian professional settings. Anecdotal assumptions (Muzi Falconi, 2009; García, 2016) have been made on the importance of interpersonal relationships in Italian public relations, but were not tested and empirically confirmed before this study. The findings, indeed, indicate that the close-knit nature of Italian culture fosters strong interpersonal networks that facilitate collaboration and favour-sharing across different fields. Personal influence is commonly used in various sectors, such as corporations, agencies, public sector organizations and non-profits with limited differences. The prevalence of personal influence among public sector communication professionals, traditionally focused on information dissemination (Luoma-aho and Canel, 2020), was both notable and surprising, particularly considering that certain forms of hospitality, such as giving and receiving gifts in the public sector are strictly forbidden by the anti-bribery framework covered in the Article 319 of the Italian Criminal Code (Pisano, 2023).

The findings also show that experienced professionals with over 21 years of work history were more inclined to offer gifts to journalists compared to their junior counterparts.

Arguably, young professionals may be more likely to utilize digital media in their media relations. The changing media landscape, particularly the rise of social media, may also have altered how some public relations professionals interact with journalists, impacting their strategies and personal influence too. Although many professionals may consider it unprofessional, they still employ similar tactics by offering benefits to stakeholders. This highlights the impact of international ethical codes on some professionals' perception of acceptable practices but also underscores the practical limitations of these idealistic principles.

The study further advances our understanding of personal influence as a specific strategy in conducting public relations; key findings indicate that leveraging these relationships allows organizations to gain intelligence, insight and influence through stakeholder collaborations and resource exchanges. This form of power derived from interpersonal relationships helps address stakeholders' concerns while also benefiting the organization.

Furthermore, this study makes a second contribution by examining the manifestations of personal influence expanding thus the repertoires of practices that is currently much focused on Asian culture. In doing so, it deepens our comprehension of personal influence within the Italian cultural context and provides valuable strategic insights for international professionals aiming to harness influence in Italy. The findings reveal the use of specific strategies and tactics (named relational closeness, engagement, expertise and added value), emphasizing the significance of empathy, hospitality and close relationships. Elements of *renqing* (favour) and *mianzi* (face) (Chow and Ng, 2004), as well as *ubuntu* (people-oriented practices) (Anani-Bossman, 2022), are present in both relational closeness and added value strategies, whereas the direct engagement strategy utilized by US advocacy organizations (Gallicano, 2009) shares commonalities with the engagement strategies identified in this study. A new aspect that contributes to professional credibility, respect, trust and influence is the incorporation of "continuous learning" and "self-documenting" within the expertise strategy. These strategies involve a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic elements, as well as a blend of soft and hard skills, highlighting the importance of professionalization, education and training, as well as the development of social and emotional intelligence. The four identified macro manifestations contribute to our understanding of contemporary practices in today's vastly transformed societal, technological and cultural environments, marked by the evolution and shifting role of media relations activities. These environmental changes urge scholars to re-consider relationship cultivation strategies, including the use of personal influence and revise professional toolkits with more suited practices. In light of this, the findings suggest some practical implications for improving public relations education and training. Incorporating social skills, ethics and transparency into instructional practices through innovative teaching methods, curriculum enhancements and educational interventions can provide students with opportunities to build strong interpersonal relationships and social capital that can be used to effectively leverage personal influence.

Limitations and future research
Like many non-probabilistic quantitative studies, this research has some limitations. First, non-probability sampling impacts the validity of our findings, as some sectors were not equally represented. Second, while the self-administered online questionnaire ensured anonymity and encouraged honest responses, the sensitive nature of certain questions on potentially unethical or inappropriate practices may induce social-desirability bias in respondents. Lastly, surveys with open questions tend to receive fewer useable responses. Despite these limitations, this study provides initial empirical evidence of the significance of personal influence in managing relationships and achieving public relations goals within the Italian context.

Further research could explore the dynamics of leveraging personal influence across different situations, contexts, and cultures. Cross-cultural comparisons of personal influence strategies and tactics could enhance both practice and scholarship in public relations. Also qualitative studies using direct observations and ethnography can provide a deeper understanding of the four identified strategies. This exploration will contribute to a more comprehensive database of strategies and tactics, illustrating the interpersonal nature of public relations activities.

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