



Reframing a global public relations practice: Identifying global capability framework from Asian perspective

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ABSTRACT

Reframing public relations for a changing world remains a significant challenge. This study presents a three-year research project intended to propose the Capability Framework for public relations practitioners, employers/consultants, and academic communities in Malaysia. It has validated the three capabilities categories: communication, organisational, and professional, as encapsulated in Anne and Fawkes's Global Capability Framework. The study employed a mixed-method approach with a dominant qualitative component. In the first part, the Delphi method was conducted to understand the fundamental issue of acceptability of the Global Capability Framework. Secondly, the study included an online survey that provided descriptive results about variations in the Global Capability Framework's applicability within the Malaysian context. For the final part, interviews were organised to explore the views of three PR communities on the Global Capability Framework at the individual, organisational, and professional levels in Malaysia. This study is the first attempt to provide a comprehensive Global Capability Framework for the Malaysian context. We found that cultural capability should emerge as a new dimension of this framework in Malaysia's PR context. Hence, this study will benefit all PR communities in standardising and delivering a country-specific capability approach based on the Global Capability Framework to deal with national and global challenges in an increasingly complex world.

1. Introduction

Public Relations (PR) as a global profession has made important strides throughout the years. Currently, PR is expected to fulfil more strategic-centric responsibilities, where practitioners are expected to play an important role in the decision-making process (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019). Corporate communications are also expected to take up a more pivotal role within the managerial and administrative functions. While progress has been made, there is still much to be done to achieve the desired level of PR professionalism. Given the dynamic nature of the discipline, it becomes important to espouse and encourage critical debates concerning the realm of the public relations profession (Zamoum & Gorpe, 2020). Due to the continuously evolving field of public relations, professionals must possess the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate a dynamic environment and adapt to forthcoming transformations effectively. Tsetsura and Vergara (2021) also underscored the significance of incorporating public relations (PR) professional

capabilities, which entail the capacity to flexibly and adeptly apply knowledge and skills across diverse contexts to optimise outcomes.

One of the most notable efforts toward establishing the Global Capability Framework (hereafter GCF) by the Global Alliance (GA) is geared toward ensuring that PR practitioners have skills and capabilities necessary to face and overcome challenges in global communications management (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019). The GCF serves as a global benchmark for PR practitioners and other stakeholders and is meant to raise the degree of professionalism within the field. It essentially covers three major areas: communication, organisational, and professional capabilities. The goal is to establish a global standard that fosters a more profound understanding, personal benchmarking, and accountability among professionals within the PR industry to consistently measure excellence and best practices (Lee & Kee, 2017).

Three broad categories of capabilities—communication, organisational, and professional were identified as the strategic bedrock of the global framework that serve as a set of strategic communicative

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guidelines for academicians and practitioners alike (Tsetsura & Vergara, 2021). The project's next phase is to test its capacity to allow for improvements within diverse market realities. As with other constructs with global ambition, the greatest challenge would be how adaptable the framework is within a diverse set of circumstances, locations, and markets (Ismail & Ahmad, 2015). Such a breakthrough can be achieved by discovering variations and shared capabilities through adaptability and testing of the model in different countries to capture its divergence and acceptability (Broom & Cutlip, 2009). Many factors showing discrepancies, including cultural differences and divergences in skills and resources, are profoundly manifested. A more pliable model that includes specific country or market characteristics could be developed, thus increasing the practicability and relevance of the GCF. Therefore, the framework must be put to the test in different settings that include developed and developing markets where variations in terms of operational efficiencies and communications expectations will provide a better mix of best practices within multiple settings (Hadwiger, 2018).

2. Literature review

The GCF identified essential elements and its viability as a benchmark for optimal practices within the industry. The GCF framework endeavours to cultivate a perception of professionalism in the broader public relations knowledge domain by promoting the development of communicative, organisational, and professional proficiencies (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019). The present study places emphasis on several sub-capabilities within each of the primary categories, which encompass strategic communication tactics, organisational reputational factors, and professional self-development strategies. These capabilities appear to align with the expectations of other scholars and observers regarding a comprehensive public relations framework on a global scale. Previous studies have suggested that possessing communicative, organisational, and professional competencies is crucial for individuals in positions of educational and professional leadership, particularly in the realm of communication (Mules, 2021). An instance of proficient communication within an organisational setting is the synchronisation of communication tactics with the purpose and values of the organisation. Moreover, the proactive identification and resolution of communication issues through evaluation can enhance the efficacy of communication across a wide spectrum of platforms and technologies (Alloza, Fontan, & Carerras, 2021).

The GCF has also identified a set of organisational competencies that can assist public relations professionals in constructing, evaluating, and emphasising significant reputational advancements (Tsetsura & Vergara, 2021). Academic opportunities and organisational demands influence public relations professionals' career trajectories like other professional domains. Implementing these "choices" has the potential to enhance the trustworthiness of professionals internally and externally, thereby augmenting their reputation and professional ethics. Individuals may develop expertise in certain fields while their proficiency in other areas may diminish, depending on their respective situations and occupations. Nevertheless, current and anticipated patterns appear to support this methodology. Diverse resources, individualised choices, and situational decision-making abilities empower professionals to overcome future difficulties, thereby yielding benefits for individuals, professional cohorts, and organisations.

Therefore, a comprehensive framework can be used in communication research and practice. This approach fosters and develops professionals by offering guidance in making decisions about intricate dilemmas within particular contexts. The framework facilitates individuals, organisations, and enterprises in the management of personal development, team augmentation, and educational strategising. This research uses the GCF to increase cultural and regional diversity understanding among associated professional entities and their members in the global public relations profession. Additionally, it contributes to developing a more comprehensive and inclusive set of guidelines for PR

and communications management capabilities. This perspective acknowledges that professionals require and employ diverse competencies based on their proficiency, which may vary concurrently at different levels (i.e., adept in certain domains and unskilled in others, contingent on their position), enabling them to advance within the organisational hierarchy. According to Gregory and Fawkes (2019), the GCF adequately caters to the requirements of worldwide public relations practitioners and experts.

To extrapolate the underlying justifications of this study, three areas, the state of global PR, the construction of the GCF, and the challenges of adopting the framework in Malaysia, were explored in greater detail. When looking at the state of global PR, two sets of phenomena could be further understood: whether PR is a profession or an occupation and the strategic roles delegated to PR (Cernicova & Palea, 2014). The first phenomenon is a philosophical question meant to rationalise the need for an experiential approach in guiding the trajectory of PR as an industry and prime strategic consideration within businesses and beyond. In contrast, the second one further rationalises the need for a heuristic but more operational rather than experiential standpoint (Niskala & Hurme, 2014). Both these issues would then point to the need for a guide, such as the GCF for the industry and how to construct it. Justifying the existence of the Global Capacity Framework and how it is constructed would require exploring how capabilities highlighted within the framework could serve as an essential element within the PR industry (Arcos, 2016). There would also be a discussion on how the framework could be related to forging greater professional competency within the PR industry (Pheung, 2018).

The final area of justification would be the challenges of adopting a global PR standard within the Malaysian market and context. Here, the complexities and uniqueness of the Malaysian scenario concerning PR will be explored, highlighted, and dissected (Yahya et al., 2016). As a knowledge-sphere, PR is a practice where certain aspects of how it is understood and performed can be shared within many groups of practitioners while remaining distinct based on specific applications or geographical areas. Hence, exploring the issues from a Malaysian perspective makes sense, but it would also help improve the usefulness of the discussed framework (Hadwiger, 2018).

Apart from the challenge of professionalising PR in Malaysia (Abdullah and Threadgold, 2008), another question that ought to be explored is the impact of culture on PR practices. One of the most used epistemic references for cultural values is Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, in which scholars tend to rate Malaysia along the line of being a high power-distance nation with a firm reliance on collectivism rather than individualism, along with a low preference for uncertainty avoidance (Selvarajah & Meyer, 2008). This means that culturally speaking Malaysians have a more relaxed attitude toward ethical deviance and time, show greater commitment to teamwork and familial relationships, and accept a hierarchical order rather than question it (Thien, Thurasamy, & Abd Razak, 2014). This means there would be some expectation that any framework whose values originate from countries with different sets of values might not fully fit Malaysia (Hussein, Omar, Noordin, & Ishak, 2016). Nonetheless, the deviations could later add to the tapestry of different cultural inferences that could add to the overall usefulness of the framework.

Hence, exploring the Malaysian experience with PR has yielded three main themes about the potential application of the GCF in Malaysia. The first is the historical evolution of the field, which showed a unique characteristic - PR in Malaysia originated from a colonialist-centred approach, giving it a unique origin point than perhaps other markets whose characteristics had informed the development of the framework. Secondly, Malaysia's natural progression towards a more service-driven economy saw an increased emphasis on the professionalisation of PR, which the GCF could help enhance. Thirdly, the cultural diversity within Malaysia represents an opportunity to extrapolate a more diverse set of data that could further develop the framework to make it more effective and inclusive across a wide swath of marketplaces.

2.1. Research questions

To expand the framework's efficacy, this paper aims to develop the first applicable GCF meant for relevant stakeholders in Malaysia vis-à-vis the identifications of variations and appropriateness based on the factors outlined within the blueprint. The paper will discuss which factors are shared globally and which are unique to the Malaysian scenario from cultural and other notable differences. The three research questions to be answered here are:

RQ1. Does the shared set of PR capabilities represented in the GCF define the profession in Malaysia?

RQ2. What are the GCF variations that are applicable within the Malaysian context?

RQ3. How can the GCF be used in Malaysia at the individual, organisational, and professional levels?

Exploring these three questions could help develop a more focused and localised framework that would allow practitioners to adapt it more positively in Malaysia. Even the early adopters of the framework acknowledged that variations and local needs are important in developing a globally accepted benchmark. This study joins the list of research meant to improve the model by continuously adding another country and market. The continuous improvement of the model through replicating it in different settings is crucial. The replication can help identify and explore contributory factors improving its adaptability and acceptability on the global stage. Creating a sense of a 'moving target' rather than an 'end game' is both practical and serves as a more articulate reflection of the realities of PR and corporate communication.

The study explored how differences, especially cultural adaptability, may further enhance the GCF. Perhaps, including cultural capabilities within the framework could improve its capacity to be adopted within the global PR and corporate communication arena.

3. Research methodology

The methods used to address the issues and ultimately answer the three research questions outlined earlier were divided into three stages: (1) the Delphi study, (2) an online survey, and (3) in-depth interviews. Each stage corresponded to one research question (RQ), as the methods were designed based on their capacity to answer the RQs.

3.1. Population and sampling

The target samples for the study are.

1. PR practitioners working as PR or corporate communication executives in Malaysian corporations, government-linked corporations, or multi-national corporations;
2. Key academicians involved in teaching and researching PR and corporate communication; and
3. Top employers and consultants of PR firms.

These respondents represent a good combination of the PR industry in Malaysia. The respondents were selected from the directories of professional bodies such as the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) and the researchers' networks within the PR community. The study employed both purposive and snowball sampling methods to get a sufficient number of respondents. The study used the databases and membership rolls of professional associations for the purposive approach to recruit respondents. The snowballing technique, based on referrals from academicians and practitioners, helped the researchers recruit the required samples. This study adopted the sampling approach based on the Anne and Fawkes's Global Capability Framework. The main reason for this is to maintain a strong sense of continuation and consistency with the original objectives of the framework.

3.2. Delphi study and the rationale for its use

The study relied on the Delphi method to address RQ1 (Do the GCF's shared set of PR capabilities define Malaysia's profession? The general purposes of this study are to compare experts' opinions on future trends or directions in specific areas of study (Dawson & Brucker, 2001) and to seek consensus or judgement on particular issues (Berreta, 1996; Watson, 2008). Thus, it allows for the grouping and subsequent analysis of experts' ideas to understand specific issues better. In this study, 16 respondents participated in a Delphi method session, which yielded valuable data concerning the three main dimensions of the GCF: communication, organisational and professional capabilities.

This study conducted four discussions based on the GCF on public relations and communication management research (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019). The PR experts selected discussed questions based on the three categories of capabilities - strategic communication practices, operational communication practices, and generic professional practices.

The invitation letters were emailed to 30 PR experts, academicians, practitioners, and consultants in Malaysia. They were chosen for their distinction in research and practice and their leadership positions in leading universities and industries. The anonymous reporting of comments was emphasised. Sixteen responses were accepted. They were five academicians, eight practitioners, and three consultants. The Delphi phase took place over eight weeks and involved four rounds. Each round ran for two weeks (21 October to 4 November 2019; 5 November to 19 November 2019; 20 November to 4 December 2019; 5 December to 17 December 2019). During each round, responses from PR experts (e.g., academicians, practitioners, and consultants) were analysed to achieve greater consensus.

3.3. Online survey and the rationale for its use

Following the GCF on public relations and communication management research (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019), an online survey was conducted in 2020 amongst key academicians, practitioners, and employers/consultants of Malaysian PR professionals and industry bodies. The data collected was used to answer RQ2 (What are the variations of the GCF applicable within the Malaysian context?), as it observed the experts' views on the practice of public relations in Malaysia.

Therefore, it allowed the researchers to answer the second question - variations in the GCF applicable within the Malaysian context. The online survey was characterised by a structured questionnaire that served as an instrument developed by Gregory and Fawkes (2019). The survey questionnaire's content was based on the three categories of capabilities clustered as strategic communication practices, operational communication practices, and generic professional practices. This study received 58 valid responses from respondents (e.g., PR experts) who were picked from companies listed in the Bursa Malaysia database and other specific databases such as PR educators and the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia.

The invitation letters were sent through email and WhatsApp to 200 PR experts ranging from academicians, practitioners, and consultants in Malaysia. They were chosen for their distinction in research and practice and their leadership positions in leading universities and industries. The data collection took place over three months, from 1 August until 30 October 2020. Multiple reminders were sent to respondents every week during these dates. A total of 58 effective responses were received from 18 academicians, 8 practitioners, and 32 employers/consultants.

3.4. Interview and the rationale for its use

The final stage of the data collection process involved in-depth interviews with experts to explore RQ3 (How can the GCF be used here in Malaysia at the individual, organisational, and professional levels?). After completing the descriptive analysis conducted during the second

stage, an in-depth interview script was developed based on the interview guide provided by the GCF (Gregory & Fawkes, 2016). Purposive sampling was conducted to source 18 participants from PR practitioners, academicians, and PR employers/consultants. The rationale for employing this approach is that it allows for a more in-depth understanding of how to ultimately apply the framework here in Malaysia by considering the unique characteristics of the PR industry within the market. An interview allows for more diverse development of information and the chance to ask follow-up questions that can raise new and unexpected information that may enrich the study further (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). While an interview might not allow for generalisation, it could allow for better data triangulation. The interview method can provide a more comprehensive understanding of differences that can be understood vis-à-vis the application of the GCF as the reference point for Malaysia's PR and corporate communication sectors.

Data collection was guided by the theoretical framework and the study's research questions. A letter of invitation was sent through email and WhatsApp to 50 PR experts, academicians, practitioners, and consultants in Malaysia. Multiple reminders were sent to participants every week during these dates. Finally, 18 PR experts agreed to participate voluntarily in this study. They were six key academicians, practitioners, and employers/consultants. They were chosen for their distinction in research and practice and their position as leaders of leading universities and industries. The data collection took place over three months, from 22 January to 21 April 2021. Each interview lasted for 30–90 min. The interviews were held via Zoom meetings and WhatsApp calls. The in-depth interview method was chosen to conduct the sessions. The key informants were given the option to choose between English or Malay as the language for the interviews. Some of the questions had to be revised after the initial interview sessions to ensure adequate depth and richness of data. The authors promptly converted the interviews' audio data to text. The names of selected informants and organisations were kept confidential. Then, the NVivo 12 software was used to analyse all the texts. All texts are kept online for further explanation. From the encryption process, various themes were textured.

4. Findings

4.1. Findings of Delphi study

Round 1 (List and define the most important capabilities of the public relations profession).

For Round 1, the Delphi study was developed with open-ended questions based on the three categories of capabilities: strategic communication practices improving communication capability, operational communication practices enlightening organisational capability, and generic professional practices empowering professional capability. The Delphi experts were asked to list and define the most important capabilities of the public relations profession. Round 1 listed 33 topics commented on by three groups of PR experts. Specifically, 13 topics were highlighted for strategic communication practices, nine for operational communication practices, and 11 for generic professional practices. Notably, a considerable proportion of the discussions revolved around leveraging digital and social media platforms to augment the strategic alliance between an organisation and its stakeholders.

Round 2 (The importance of capabilities).

The second round of the Delphi study was developed using feedback from Round 1. The Delphi experts were asked to state the importance of capabilities highlighted in Round 1. The PR experts stated that 10 topics are extremely important for strategic communication, four for operational communication, and 10 for generic professional practices. It can be asserted that they placed considerable emphasis on the exact value of the strategic communication approach within their professional domain. Indeed, ethical communication capability depicts high professionalism in this profession.

Round 3 (The importance of capabilities by ranking).

The third round of the Delphi study was developed with answers from Round 2. The Delphi experts were asked to choose the 10 key capabilities highlighted in Round 2. Then, they were asked to rate them from one to ten. A brief explanation was provided for each capability. The PR experts had listed 10 key capabilities based on the 33 topics highlighted in Rounds 1 and 2. They were very concerned about the significance of media and communication strategy for internal and external stakeholders.

Round 4 (The importance of capabilities by preference).

As depicted in Table 1, the final round of this Delphi study was developed with answers from Round 3. The Delphi experts were asked to rank the 10 key capabilities they highlighted in Round 3. They placed them in order of preference, with one being the most favoured and 10 as the least favoured entry. The PR experts ranked "execute a high level of communication with key stakeholders on an organisation's strategic approaches" as the most favoured topic, followed by "organise and plan a communication strategy based on an ethical framework, as well as enhance public trust through ethical communication". Next in the third rank is "work as a team with top management to identify the best communication strategy".

4.2. Findings of the online survey

4.2.1. Sample profiles

The survey included questions on gender, age, type of function, salary, and job title; Tables 2 and 3 provides additional information.

4.2.2. Communication, organisational and professional capabilities

The results of the survey showed that most of the PR communities recognised the importance of four PR communication capabilities - (1) planning communication in alignment with strategic purpose 63.5%, (2) communicating effectively across traditional and digital channels, (3) creating written and visual content across traditional and digital platforms, and (4) conducting formative and evaluative research to underpin communication strategies and tactics (53.5%). Furthermore, the results suggested that the PR communities indicated the importance of three PR organisational capabilities - (1) maximising the use of resources (67.2%), including people, time, and budget, (2) working collaboratively with both internal and external stakeholders (63.8%), and (3) gathering relevant intelligence (58.6%), including environmental scanning.

The PR communities also identified the significance of the following four PR professional capabilities; (1) providing and promoting responsible leadership and governance (50%), (2) developing self and others,

Table 1
Final Round.

Remark (s)	Ranking
Execute a high level of communication with key stakeholders on an organisation's strategic approaches.	1
Organise and plan a communication strategy based on an ethical framework and enhance public trust through ethical communication.	2
Work as a team with top management to identify the best communication strategy.	3
Develop social outreach plans to grow and increase audience engagement on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other digital platforms.	4
Monitor media constantly to stay abreast of new issues and trends relevant to clients' needs and interests.	5
Access and monitor all forms of social media, and manage media coverage to ensure media ROI is achieved.	6
Understand the organisational policy and plan the communication strategy accordingly.	7
Advise the management on communicating organisational governance and sustainability to internal and external stakeholders.	8
Develop a media strategy for clients and determine target audiences.	9
Plan, develop, organise, evaluate, communicate, and execute communication strategies to present the organisation to the public in a positive manner.	10

Table 2
Key Demographic Variables of Sample Profiles (N = 58).

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	31	53%
Male	27	47%
Female		
Age	1	1.72%
18–24	29	50.0%
25–34	16	27.59%
35–44	11	18.97%
45–60	1	1.72%
> 61		
Type of role	32	55%
Employers/consultants	8	14%
Practitioners	18	31%
Academicians		
Salary/year	10	17.24%
Rather not say	5	8.62%
Less than 25000	14	24.14%
RM25000-RM50000	20	34.48%
RM50000-RM100,000	5	8.62%
RM100000-RM150000	1	1.72%
RM150000-RM200000	1	1.72%
RM200000-RM250000	2	3.44%
Above RM250000		
Job title	15	25.8%
PR Government Officer	6	10.34%
PR Manager	8	13.79%
PR Assistant Manager	11	18.96%
PR Marketing	1	1.72%
PR Researcher	5	8.62%
PR Head of Customer	7	12.1%
PR Executive	3	5.17%
PR Principal Partner	58	100%
Total:		

including CPD (63.8%), (3) gathering relevant intelligence, including environmental scanning (51%) and (4) exercising professional judgement and ethical standards is extremely important (65.5%).

4.2.3. Academicians, practitioners and consultants of public relations

Regarding PR academicians' capability, the results revealed that limitations in the curriculum (50%) might impede the capacity of PR academicians to incorporate PR skills into their staff in the next five to ten years. This was followed by 38.89% of the teaching staff's resistance to (further) change due to a skills shortage among colleagues—and professional body standards. Thus, universities' top management should practice a lean management approach by allowing their faculty more freedom to change the curriculum to suit the industry's expectations and demands. Meanwhile, to support academicians in achieving progress in teaching PR capabilities several factors were emphasised including (1) planning communication to align with strategic purposes (61.1%), (2) creating written and visual content (44.44%) and (3) communicating effectively across traditional and digital channels (44.44%).

In addition, the results identified undertaking formative and evaluative research to support communication strategies and tactics (44.44%) and planning communication aligned with the strategic objective (44.44%) as essential factors. Therefore, PR academicians should be aware of the need for strategic planning of teaching capabilities and encouraged to develop their course syllabus content in both textual and visual formats. Respondents agreed to several facades, including (1) curriculum review (44.44%), (2) professional body requirements (33.33%), and (3) training for the teaching staff (33.33%), when delineating the factors that will influence the development of future education in PR management (5–10 years from now). The evidence proves that PR academicians are concerned about the importance of a curriculum review to ensure that the curriculum taught is aligned with current trends and development and the future of PR capabilities. Finally, the PR academicians highlighted two PR capabilities: cultural sensitivity and skills discretion that align with contextual intelligence's

conceptualisation in the GCF (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019). Nguyen and Nguyen (2014) also stressed that cultural sensitivity significantly mediated the relationship between market orientation and relationship quality among Vietnamese businesses.

A majority of participants agreed that communicating effectively across traditional and digital channels (62.50%) and exercising professional judgement and ethical standards (50%) are significant factors in developing future education (5–10 years) in PR and communication management. Moreover, providing and promoting responsible leadership and governance (50%) also emerged as essential in PR management. Therefore, PR practitioners are more likely to use strategic planning to achieve organisational purpose in future capability building. Most respondents (87.5%) cited time constraints as a barrier that prevents them from achieving a significantly higher score in this capability.

Meanwhile, more than half of respondents agreed that the organisation's training policy (62.5%) and pressure on funding (62.5%) are the second most important factors. These results show that PR practitioners always work under pressure to achieve their work performance. Stress is important in PR work because it pushes people to meet numerous deadlines. Finally, all respondents (practitioners) were asked to provide a list of additional essential PR capabilities. Four PR capabilities were highlighted by PR professionals, according to the findings: new rules of engagement, resilience, change agents, and the ability to leverage re-killing and digitalisation. The respondents (43.75%) also stated that funding for external training is crucial for advancing the PR capabilities of the future workforce. The respondents also emphasised the importance of reevaluating recruitment policies (40.63%) and providing organisational support for in-house training (28.13%). Finally, all respondents (consultants) were asked to summarise any missing PR capabilities deemed essential. The PR consultants' response highlighted eight additional PR skills: strategy and goals, communication skills, trust and ethics, measurement, media engagement, content, trusted advisors, and writing skills.

4.3. Findings of interview

This section presents a summary of the key informants' demographic information. The researchers used a purposive sampling method to select key informants who met the sample criteria. They were selected based on their reputation in the PR industry. The selection was also based on the respondents' availability and willingness to be interviewed. The eighteen key informants' demographic profiles are identified. For confidentiality purposes, their original names have been substituted with pseudonyms. The key findings of the GCF are presented below.

This section presents the qualitative findings of the study as obtained from the in-depth interviews conducted based on the key objective of exploring the views of three PR communities on the GCF at the individual, organisational, and professional levels in Malaysian settings. The structure of findings and interpretations are arranged as the following.

The first section summarises the participants' demographic profiles. The second section presents the descriptive analysis of demographics and themes. The third section presents the findings across all participants based on three categories: 1) communication capabilities, 2) organisational capabilities, and 3) professional capabilities. The final section presents the concept of the GCF in the Malaysian context. The abbreviations used to facilitate comprehension of the findings of this study are listed in Table 4.

4.4. Findings of PR capabilities

The three main categories that framed this study are 1) communication capabilities, 2) organisational capabilities, and 3) professional capabilities. The themes for these categories will be further explained using participants' quotes in the next section.

Table 3
Profiles of Interviewees.

Participant	Position	No. of years in work experience	Organisation	Specialisation	Interview date
Practitioner A	Senior Manager, Corporate communication	12	Top construction and property development company	Corporate communication	22 January 2021
Practitioner B	Head, Group corporate communication	20	Malaysia's leading engineering and construction company	Corporate communication	29 January 2021
Practitioner C	Senior Manager, Corporate communication	32	Leading global public transport company	Corporate communication and branding	9 February 2021
Practitioner D	Head, Event management, social media, and advertising, & corporate communications	15	Malaysia's leading financial corporation	Corporate communication, event management, social media, and advertising	17 February 2021
Practitioner E	Manager, Marketing & communication	18	Malaysia's printing company	Corporate Communication and Marketing	23 February 2021
Practitioner A	Senior Manager, Corporate communication	12	Top construction and property development company	Corporate communication	2 March 2021
Consultant A	Founder and CEO	11	Malaysia's top PR training management firm	PR training and PR services	3 March 2021
Consultant B	Managing Director/President	15	Top PR and strategic communication firm / Malaysia's PR Professional body	PR and strategic communications and issues management	10 March 2021
Consultant C	Executive Director	20	Leading PR and marketing communication firm	Corporate and marketing (brand/lifestyle) communications	12 March 2021
Consultant D	General Manager	15	World's leading global communication consultancy	PR issues and crisis management, media training, and account planning	17 March 2021
Consultant E	Managing Partner	18	Leading PR firm	PR, crisis communications, media relations, social media, marketing communications, and CSR	22 March 2021
Consultant F	Communication Manager	8	Global strategic PR and communication consultancy	Corporate communications, media relations, social media, and strategic brand marketing	26 March 2021
Academic A	Professor	37	International Private University	Media, communication and public relations	24 March 2021
Academic B	Associate Professor	13	Public Research University	Public relations and media framing	30 March 2021
Academic C	Senior Lecturer	20	Top Private University	Public relations and corporate communication	2 April 2021
Academic D	Professor	32	Public Research University	Public relations and persuasive communication	9 April 2021
Academic E	Senior Lecturer	22	Leading Private University	Public Relations and political communication	13 April 2021
Academic F	Senior Lecturer/ Specialist (Formerly Associate Professor)	12	Leading Private University	Public relations and corporate communication	21 April 2021

Table 4
List of Abbreviations.

CPL	:	Continuous Professional Learning
CPP	:	Communication of Problem Proactively
CS	:	Communication Strategies
ER	:	Evaluative Research
EP	:	Ethical Practices
I	:	Intelligence
LA	:	Leadership Abilities
OR	:	Organisational Reputation
PT	:	Platforms and Technologies
RS	:	Relationships with Stakeholders
SCA	:	Strategic Counsel and Advisory

4.4.1. Communication capability

Four themes emerged for the communication capabilities category, and they are 1) communication strategies, 2) communication of problem (s) proactively, 3) evaluative research, and 4) platform technologies.

4.4.2. Communication strategies

The findings show that the proposed five knowledge and abilities capture and reflect the domain's importance of communication methods in preserving organisational purpose and values. PR professionals require five abilities to plan communication strategies. They can organise and run events, communicate well, use technology and graphic design, plan strategically, and tell stories. The majority of the

respondents agreed with these five knowledge and skills. On whether conferences and webinars for stakeholder groups are required for organisational and running abilities, academician #C accepted this first skill -event organising and operation. He said, "*we acknowledge that organising and operating event skills is also needed... [...] we also have extended our invitation and open the registrations of our conducted webinars for IPRSM student association from different private/public colleges and universities*". One participant (consultant #E) stressed on the importance of organisational skills and tactics to handle events, by saying "*advice changes based on the market. For example, suppose the media cannot attend a certain event. In that case, we will look for other ways and tactics*". In particular, the participant (practitioner #A) added on the importance of media engagement with stakeholders - "*you need to be able to manage the relationships with a journalist... [...] we have media engagement sessions where I go around meeting with editors and journalists and share our company's latest development*".

4.4.3. Tackling the communication of problem(s) proactively

Most participants supported the second theme, proactively tackling communication of problem(s). Academician #E stressed the necessity of public opinion research to tackle communication issues; "*PR people do research a lot as when identifying problems and looking for solutions that involve communication audit... [...] we need to identify the current trend(s) in terms of public opinion, like customer preference*". In particular, a participant (consultant #B) added the need for brainstorming ideas in

handling communication problems. He said "as we are a consultancy, we need to sit down together to brainstorm ideas and solutions as a team. It's not a one-person job".

4.4.4. Evaluative research

The third theme highlighted that PR communities should examine the issue and analyse communication programmes properly because diverse audiences should be treated differently. A participant (consultant #A) stated that strong research skills are critical for the PR fraternity. He said, "you need to have strong research skills... [...] you are not just at the surface level. By understanding a particular thing, you can equip yourself... to consult your clients accordingly". One participant (consultant #E) stressed the importance of context in advising clients - "Context is also equally important because you cannot get advice if you are in a bubble and do not know what's trending".

4.5. Platform and technologies

The study found that good PR companies should communicate via radio, TV, online, and social media (Camilleri, 2021). Indeed, each technology application has a purpose. For instance, Instagram and Facebook may share community news, whereas LinkedIn can share chat or leadership feeds. A participant (practitioner #A) underscored the importance of various online social media platforms: "Likewise, community news will be uploaded in Instagram and Facebook, meanwhile talk or leadership feed will be in LinkedIn... [...] Twitter is now the platform that is being used to gain current news. Key information is channelled faster on Twitter".

4.5.1. Organisational capability

Three themes that emerged for the communication capabilities category are 1) relationship with stakeholders, 2) organisational reputation, and 3) intelligence (cultural, social, politics, economy).

4.5.2. Relationship with stakeholders

The findings revealed that relationships with stakeholders consist of internal and external relationships. Internal relationships entail top management supporting subordinates to overcome obstacles by letting them organise their work to meet organisational goals. As evidence for the importance of internal relationships, academician #C noted that internal stakeholder ties are crucial, "I have 110% support from the top management, and they have given my team and I the freedom to plan." Another participant (practitioner #D) added, "The strategy is to support other departments and the company's cooperation to meet the objectives". Thus, local community engagement through CSR activities may enhance business sustainability in Malaysia (Abdullah et al. 2017).

4.5.3. Organisational reputation

The findings revealed that PR practitioners could enhance organisational reputation by being key opinion leaders responding to clients' crises. A participant (consultant #B) emphasised as evidence: "It is the brand promise and communication back to stakeholders... [...] a brand is something you build from inside and what you have promised to your customers.". Therefore, PR communities should deliver their promises and act as their clients' spokespersons with stakeholders to solve any problems. Furthermore, it is intriguing to note that cultural diversity in Malaysia and other Asian countries may improve the organisational reputation of corporations (Abdullah, 2009).

4.5.4. Intelligence (Cultural, social, political, technology, economy)

The findings revealed that organisations should provide contextual intelligence based on cultural, social, political, technological, and economic factors to look at an issue from a broad perspective. Organisations must adapt as the world changes, especially in the above five intelligence contexts. As evidence of the need for contextual intelligence based on culture, a participant (academician #C) stated that "the skill of

sensitivity towards clients, the community, and stakeholders. [...] sensitive here can be broad, which means the understanding of demands, services, events, writing and timely delivery on the requested matters". There is a significant relationship between learning organisational culture and organisational innovativeness among Malaysian academics (Hussein et al. 2016). On the need for contextual intelligence based on the social factor, a participant (consultant #A) stated, "S= Social culture. This is where we begin.. the context of culture influences PR much". Another participant (practitioner #F) expressed a primary regarding social organisations, "...we maintain focus on the environment, social and governance. Therefore, we must take care of these three elements in maintaining trust with our stakeholders". PR professionals should therefore acquire contextual intelligence based on the social factor to enhance their professionalism. Abdullah (2007) states that understanding cultural diversity is central among PR practitioners for multinational corporations in Malaysia.

4.6. Professional capability

Four themes emerged under the communication capabilities category, and they are 1) strategic counsel and advisor, 2) leadership abilities, 3) ethical practices, and 4) continuous professional learning (self and others).

4.6.1. Strategic counsel and advisory

The analysis revealed several common counsel and advisor characteristics, including trusted personnel, good listening, honesty, and transparency as factors influencing the success of organisations. Trust is key as strategic counsels and advisors are seen as decision-makers leading a company. When trust is strengthened, it is easy for PR personnel to manage a crisis as clients are willing to reveal all of their secrets to advisors to understand the situation and plan tactics to build the client's reputation. In addition, a trusted advisor explains an issue honestly, can say "NO" if a client does something wrongly, and asks the client to let the professionals tackle it. Strategic counsels and advisors should take control of the negotiation process for the sake of all stakeholders. A participant (academician #C) stated, "Before this, I was offered this position, but I declined. On the second time I have been offered, I know that they trust me to head my peers and become a leader for this programme".

4.6.2. Leadership abilities

The findings also revealed several common leadership abilities or values that PR professionals should practise, such as trustworthiness, good decision-making, integrity, listening, negotiation, networking, and multitasking. These abilities will be reflected through leaders' communication with stakeholders in persuading and solving issues, leading to their name's branding. A participant (practitioner #B) was concerned with the crucial need to demonstrate more exhaustive industry knowledge for strategic implementation, saying that "the other must-haves are extensive business, industry and general knowledge, critical and analytical thinking, the ability to strategise and undertake implementation after that, as well as empathy – the ability to put yourself in the other person's shoes".

4.6.3. Ethical practices

The findings revealed that organisations should embed ethics in their practices concerning professional and public societies' expectations. Ethical core values encompass honesty, courtesy, morality, sincerity, transparency, respect, integrity, accuracy, credibility, trustworthiness, health, and sustainability, aiming to foster clients' trust and confidence. A participant (practitioner #A) stressed the importance of being sincere and transparent: "You need to be sincere, transparent, manage the relationship with your peers and keep it to the point. [...] you need to be careful with what you update or say, even on your personal social media platform. This is because when you represent a company, as the communicator, you need to be beware of this".

4.6.4. Continuous professional learning (Self and Others)

The findings revealed that professional learning can be divided into self and others. PR personnel should take responsibility for their continuous professional development by attending or signing up for courses and up-skilling training. Learning never stops, and people must constantly strive to improve themselves and become aligned with current trends. One participant (academician #D) emphasised the importance of continuous professional development, saying, *"I have attended professional CSR programmes in the UK. Now, I am doing courses under IPR masters which are all professional courses that I am doing CPD. I have been developing myself as a PR person much more than required. That is why if you ask my sentiment, I am distraught with those who do not bother to develop themselves"*.

5. Discussion

RQ1. Do the shared set of PR capabilities represented in the GCF define the profession in Malaysia?

The outcome of this Delphi study was ranked, and the results highlight the important PR capability topics according to the related research questions. Accumulating four rounds of the Delphi study; finally, many PR experts ranked "execute high levels of communication with key stakeholders on an organisation's strategical approaches" as the highest among ten key topics. The overall Delphi results, therefore, demonstrate that communication capability is increasingly central to the process of planning effective communication with key stakeholders. On the organisational capability, PR professionals develop content for corporate publications, speeches, and websites for the benefit of both internal and external stakeholders.

Most importantly, for professional capability, ethical communication is highly recognised for greater professionalism. Specifically, ethical communication reflects a degree of culturally respectful and appropriate manner in public relations works. Those capabilities are represented in the GCF in the Malaysian setting.

RQ2. What are the GCF variations that are applicable within the Malaysian context?

The quantitative results show that few significant communication capabilities such as (1) creating written and visual content across traditional and digital platforms, (2) communicating effectively across traditional and digital channels are paramount. This finding is consistent with the concepts of publicity and harmonised relationships between organisations and stakeholders (Broom & Sha, 2013; Tench & Waddington, 2021). Presently, numerous PR professionals use digital media to communicate with stakeholders, especially during crises (Camilleri, 2021). On organisational capabilities, the findings indicated three significant additional capabilities. Specifically, maximising resources, including people, time, and budget, were significant. This result is aligned with the concept of strategic planning for public relations (Smith, 2002). PR professionals must have strategic planning knowledge to uphold more incredible professionalism. For professional capability, the results highlighted that four capabilities are noteworthy. Among these capabilities exercising professional judgement and ethical standards were the most emphasised by the respondents. The findings presented in the current study are consistent with prior research. Specifically, Haque and Ahmad (2017) emphasised the significance of ethics grounded in a responsible advocacy framework. Morris and Goldsworthy (2020) have also corroborated this notion by highlighting the significance of ethical principles and industry codes of ethics for the public relations profession. Interestingly, practitioners should understand how to act ethically in different cultural contexts (Presbitero & Teng-Calleja, 2019).

RQ3. How can the GCF be used in Malaysia at the individual, organisational, and professional levels?

Overall, all participants (practitioners, consultants, and academicians) had a similar understanding of the GCF (Gregory and Fawkes, 2016). All participants supported all themes extracted from the main

categories. However, two themes, 'communication of problem(s) proactively' and the selected practitioners, did not support 'evaluative research'. Specifically, Fig. 1 manifests the three main categories: communication, organisational, and professional capabilities as capabilities PR communities need to have a competitive advantage in this field. Thus, the GCF can be developed using NVivo analysis for the Malaysian setting. This answers the research question of how the GCF can be used in Malaysia at the individual, organisational, and professional levels.

Interestingly, all participants had different preferences regarding the most significant PR capability. The PR practitioners chose 'Platform and Technologies' (PT) as the key theme, while the PR consultants preferred the key theme 'Strategic counsel and Advisory' (SCA), and finally, the PR academicians favoured the key theme of 'Contextual Intelligence' (CI). All participants were concerned with the themes accounted for based on their scope and nature of work. These findings are parallel with PR roles of manager and technician (Dozier & Broom, 1995). Later, these PR roles were extended to the Excellent Public Relations and Organisations: A Study of Communication Management (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) model. Then, these PR roles were expanded by Breakenridge (2012) and Neill & Lee, (2016) to elucidate new strategic roles associated with the PR management of social media. Nowadays, Malaysian PR practitioners use digital media to communicate their corporate messages to their stakeholders. Cornelissen (2017) argued that PR requires strategy-making or becoming a strategist rather than a technician. Therefore, Malaysian PR consultants provide strategic counsel and advisory services to their key clients. Otto (2019) urged that PR practitioners require a wider understanding of the country's social and cultural system. Unsurprisingly, Malaysian PR scholars encourage the PR practice to be seen using a more extensive picture socially, culturally, economically, and politically.

Table 5 illustrates close similarities between GCF Malaysia and GCF Global. PR practice across Asia, Africa, America, and Europe focuses on similar issues and recognises their significance. Although we found that the scope and variety of tasks and jobs within the profession are identical, the context: social, economic, technological, and political, is the main distinction. Therefore, understanding contextual differences is vitally imperative for PR professionals who work in multicultural environments.

6. Limitation of study

This study has the following limitations. First, even though we were able to compile a final sample of senior-level experts in the field to learn their opinions and perceptions of GCF instruments, this research's strategy is primarily qualitative, which could limit the conclusions due to frequent method bias. Second, our study has shown that, among other demographic factors, the number of years of experience, level of hierarchy, age, and gender of professionals may affect their opinions and impressions. Third, these findings are limited to the small responses from the population of professionals who practised public relations in Malaysia using an online survey. Therefore, further research is required for a large-scale sample size quantitatively across Southeast Asian countries. Furthermore, future studies may generalise the capability framework holistically. As cultural factors have shaped our study, future scholarship may study the relationship between cultural dimensions and PR capabilities in an Asian setting.

7. Implications and conclusions

Although the Delphi study was used to reveal views from recognised experts on the capabilities of the PR communities, it has a significant number of implications based on the findings of this study. It is interesting to imply from the data that the top capability of public relations shows how practitioners are adept with a high level of communication as it can be considered leadership communication. The PR experts also

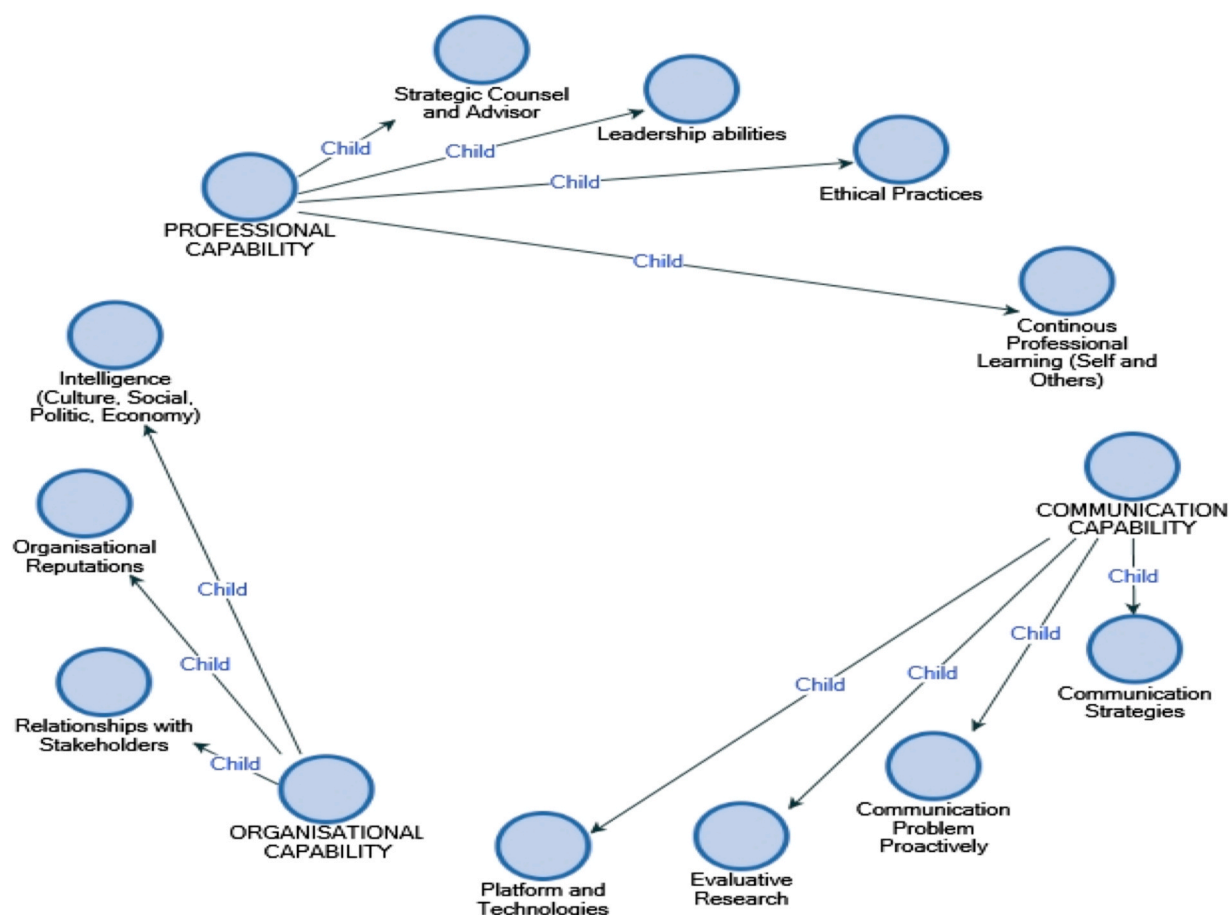


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of Global Capability in Malaysian Setting.

Table 5

Comparable directions of PR profession throughout the world.

GCF Malaysia	GCF Global
Communication Capability	
Communication strategies	Align communication strategies with organisational purpose and values.
Tackling communication problems proactively	Identify and address communication problems pro-active
Evaluative research	Conduct formative and evaluative research to underpin strategies and tactics.
Platform and technologies	Communicate effectively across a full range of platforms and technologies
Organisational Capability	
Relationship with stakeholders	Facilitate relationships and build trust internally and externally
Organisational reputation	Build and enhance organisational reputation.
Intelligence (Cultural, Social, Political, Technology, Economy)	Provide contextual intelligence
Professional Capability	
Strategic counsel and advisory	Provide valued counsel and be a trusted adviser.
Leadership abilities	Offer organisational leadership
Ethical practices	Work within an ethical framework.

expressed a preference for structuring their communication strategy based on an ethical framework. Ethics are a big concern among practitioners as they can be used to gain public trust. Further findings imply top management's importance in convincing organisational leaders of the best communication strategy. Thus, strategic communication capability is central to Malaysian public relations practice to ensure organisational excellence.

Indeed, theoretical and managerial implications emerged from the

online survey. First, this study empirically extends basic PR capabilities to global capabilities by comprehensively emphasising three categories: communication, organisational and professional capabilities. Second, this study contributes to the Asian public relations and corporate communication literature (Sriramesh, 2002; Mohamad, Nguyen, Melewar, & Gambetti, 2019). Third, the study contributes to several models of global public relations studies, such as the 2021 Global PR and Communication model (Alloza et al., 2021), the European Communication Monitor 2020 (Zerfass, Verhoeven, Moreno, Tench, & Vercic, 2020), the GCF (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019), and the European Body of Knowledge on Public Relations and Communication Management (Vercic & Ruler, 2000). From the managerial standpoint, this research highlights enhancements to the current curriculum for academic programmes and revamped existing professional development for students and practitioners. Finally, this study extends the global accreditation governed by related Malaysian public relations bodies such as the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) and the Public Relations and Communication Association of Malaysia (PRCA).

The qualitative interview amplifies the key capabilities of PR communities. This study's finding suggests a substantial number of implications. Firstly, this study advanced the third stage, which is the development of a GCF based on the Malaysian perspective. Thus, it is imperative to note that this qualitative method relies on text data showing unique steps in data analysis scientifically (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thus, we summarise this complex analysis by creating a conceptual framework based on the GCF (Gregory & Fawkes, 2016). Secondly, Malaysian PR practices are still immature as they rely on the 'technician' role rather than strategists, especially among PR practitioners. Also, practitioners lack leadership ability in practising their roles, especially during a crisis. Thus, it is debatable whether Malaysian

public relations practitioners can be members of the dominant coalition. Finally, it is found that cultural capability should emerge as a new dimension of this framework. Interestingly, all PR communities agreed during the rigorous data analysis that providing contextual intelligence is the top PR capability. Therefore, cultural capability should be considered essential to Malaysian public relations practices to ensure organisational distinction.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

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