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To cite this article: Chiara Valentini & Elina Melgin (2026) Personal Relationships in the Nordics: Finnish Leaders' Social Capital Practices and Their Strategic Communication Value, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 20:3, 352-375, DOI: [10.1080/1553118X.2026.2667947](https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2026.2667947)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2026.2667947>



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Personal Relationships in the Nordics: Finnish Leaders' Social Capital Practices and Their Strategic Communication Value

Chiara Valentini^a and Elina Melgin^b

^aSchool of Business and Economics, Jyväskylä University, Jyväskylä, Finland; ^bSchool of Marketing and Communication, University of Vaasa, Vaasa, Finland

ABSTRACT

In the Nordic context, communication plays a pivotal role in managing stakeholder relationships, where strong, mutually beneficial ties foster trust and legitimacy. The high social capital of Nordic societies – anchored in both generalized and particularized trust – offers a distinctive setting to explore how communication professionals build and leverage stakeholder relationships for organizational and professional goals. This study examines Finnish communication leaders' perceptions of utilizing social capital to achieve strategic communication objectives and strengthen stakeholder engagement. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of social capital, qualitative expert interviews provide empirical insights into its value in everyday professional practice. The research also investigates leaders' communication styles in relation to Nordic communication principles. Findings underscore the strategic importance of social capital for both individual leaders and their organizations, while revealing evolving social expectations surrounding its use. Overall, this study advances understanding of Nordic strategic communication through Finnish perspectives, delivering both theoretical contributions and practical implications.

In the Nordic context, communication is central to managing stakeholder relationships (Valentini & Luoma-Aho, 2023). Building strong, mutually beneficial relationships is essential for trust and legitimacy. While strategic communication scholarship acknowledges the importance of stakeholder relationship management (Ki, 2015), the culturally bounded strategies and activities professionals use to build such relations (Hamrin et al., 2016) and their contribution to the discipline remain underexplored. Even in the Nordic region, some variations in how senior managers support organizational goals, the role they attribute to stakeholder relationships, and their communication styles have been noted (e.g., Haavisto et al., 2025). In Nordic societies, where communities are often characterized by generalized and particularized trust (Kitai & Waragai, 2024), personal relationships and stakeholder engagement carry significant weight. Within this context, stakeholder relationship management frequently hinges on the social capital activities of individuals (Luoma-Aho, 2018). Social capital serves as a powerful relational resource – enabling the formation of networks, the establishment of shared norms, and the cultivation of trust (Bourdieu, 1986). As a result,

CONTACT Chiara Valentini ✉ chiara.valentini@jyu.fi 📍 School of Business and Economics, Jyväskylä University, Mattilanniemi 2, Jyväskylä 40100, Finland

📄 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2026.2667947>.

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communication professionals are expected to dedicate significant time to engaging with both internal and external stakeholders – seeking to understand their expectations, involve them in organizational activities, and support the achievement of strategic goals (Broch et al., 2018; Heide et al., 2018). Given the central role of stakeholder relations in strategic communication, it is crucial to examine how professionals use their networks for themselves and to connect their organizations with stakeholders and broader society (Johnston & Lane, 2018; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011). This includes examining the strategic communication value of personal relationships as a key asset for strategic communication practices.

Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of social capital as an individual asset – developed, nurtured, and mobilized at a personal level – this qualitative study investigates the role and strategic use of social capital in stakeholder relationship management among Finnish communication leaders. It aims to understand the perceived value of social capital in their professional practices (RQ1), the specific strategies and activities they undertake to cultivate and sustain mutually beneficial relationships with internal and external stakeholders (RQ2), and how they articulate their strategic communication style within these social capital-building efforts (RQ3). The study also examines whether their styles reflect Nordic communication principles or represent a variation. As stakeholder relationship management is a key duty for senior communication professionals, the study focuses on Finnish communication leaders' experiences in leveraging personal networks as key resources for stakeholder relationship management. Overall, the findings offer empirical evidence of how contemporary communication leaders in Finland leverage social capital to sustain stakeholder relationships. Interpreted through Nordic scholarship (cf. Falkheimer et al., 2016; Hamrin, 2016; Johansson et al., 2014), this study provides a culturally informed understanding of relationship-building at both personal and organizational levels. It further underscores the strategic value of social capital in the relationship management practices of today's communication leaders.

Literature review

Strategic communication, stakeholder relationship management and social capital

Building and maintaining social capital has become vital for managing an organization's stakeholder relationships, as stakeholders can significantly impact activities and outcomes, legitimize organizational actions, support ethical initiatives, and influence credibility and reputation and overall, an organization's goals (Kennan & Hazleton 2006; Luoma-Aho, 2018). Given its centrality, relationship management research has advanced extensively over the last thirty years, with numerous studies on the antecedents, strategies, and outcomes of relationship activities, as well as relationship quality measurements (cf. Cheng, 2018; Ledingham, 2021). However, relationship management research has primarily focused on the meso level, examining organization-public relationships. The micro level, which refers to social capital or personal relationships and how communication professionals develop, nurture, and eventually end relationships in professional contexts, has received in comparison much less attention in strategic communication. Social capital refers to the connections, networks, and norms of trust and reciprocity among individuals, and is regarded as an intangible resource or asset (Ihlen, 2007; Luoma-Aho, 2018; Putnam, 2000). It comes from social interactions, including official memberships, informal networks, trust, and tolerance,

and represents the benefits gained through relationships (Aher & Luoma-Aho, 2026; Coleman, 1990). At the micro-level, social capital emphasizes the positive and productive aspects of sociability that individuals can gain from an extended network of relationships (Coleman, 1990; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011). A person's social capital has been studied based on dimensions such as the network's size, its complementarity/diversity, its content (instrumental/expressive), and the overlap of different ties (Broch et al., 2018; Burt, 2000). Recognizing the value of social capital, Luoma-Aho (2018) argues that communication professionals should leverage their own social capital to prioritize the creation and maintenance of organizational social capital. This, in turn, can enhance an organization's goodwill, build trust within society, and help preserve its social license to operate (Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021).

To date, most of the attention to social capital in the context of personal relationships has come from studies on social networks (for e.g., Saffer, 2019; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011) and the personal influence model in public relations scholarship (for e.g., García, 2023; Huang, 2000; Sriramesh et al., 1999) or in the context of employee and leadership communication literature (for e.g., Grandien & Johansson, 2012; Hamrin, 2016; Johansson et al., 2014; Men, 2014), particularly concerning manager-employee interactions. In the context of the personal influence model, developed and subsequently tested by Sriramesh and his research collaborators (see Sriramesh & Fisher, 2021, for a review of this scholarship), establishing and cultivating personal relationships with key stakeholders is essential for being influential and effective in achieving public relations goals (Ki, 2015). This stream of research highlights that engaging external stakeholders is highly cultural and context-dependent, and strategies for building social capital are likewise culturally specific (Chen & Lee, 2022; Hamrin et al., 2016; Valentini & Sriramesh, 2024). In employee and leadership communication studies (Hamrin, 2016; Mitson et al., 2024; Verhoeven & Thøis Madsen, 2022) personal relationships and the communication style of managers were found to help improve employee commitment to work, identification with the organization, motivation, and engagement, leading to positive attitudes to the workplace (Broch et al., 2018; Jiang & Luo, 2018). Building internal relationships requires leaders to show care and empathy (Johansen et al., 2022; Mitson et al., 2024), show trust and respect when openly sharing information (Falkheimer et al., 2016), involve employees in key decisions, and hold themselves accountable (Jiang & Men, 2017). The significance of leaders' networks is often implicit, particularly when leadership transitions prompt incoming leaders to assemble their own teams, drawing on high social-capital ties to secure trust and support (Valentini, 2010). Considering the evolving context and the advancement of professional competencies among communicators (Johansson et al., 2014), we question whether social capital holds the same values in today's strategic communication in the Nordic region, particularly in Finland. With this objective, we thus ask:

RQ1: What role does social capital play in today's Finnish communication leaders' stakeholder relationship management?

Cultural norms and social expectations strongly influence how organizations build social capital and how professionals cultivate stakeholder relationships (García, 2023; Halpern, 2005). Perceptions of socializing activities and ethical acceptability vary widely across contexts (Hamrin et al., 2016; Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016). For example, research in the

Asia-Pacific region highlights practices such as favor exchanges, gift-giving, and dining with media stakeholders (Sriramesh & Fisher, 2021; Sriramesh et al., 1999), while in Africa, *ubuntu*—a philosophy emphasizing dialogue and a people-centered approach – plays a central role (Anani-Bossman & Tandoh, 2023). In the United States, Gallicano (2009) identified strategies such as direct engagement, task sharing, and investment in local relationships, whereas in Italy, professionals rely on relational closeness, expertise, engagement, and added value to build social capital (Valentini & Sriramesh, 2024). In Finland, saunas have historically served as spaces for social bonding and political dialogue, a practice referred to as “sauna diplomacy” (Sysiö, 2022). Although nudity can pose a cultural challenge for foreigners, this tradition has been incorporated into Finland’s national branding (Tillotson et al., 2021). In the past, relationship-building among senior managers often involved recreational hunting, cultural gatherings, and drinking sessions (Virta, 2022). Historical accounts suggest that these social activities were used by political and business leaders to foster a sense of community and build social capital. However, the extent and nature of these practices varied significantly depending on context, situation, and leadership style (Tillotson et al., 2021). Amid recent shifts toward responsibility and sustainability, some traditional practices may have lost relevance in modern social capital strategies, prompting us to ask:

RQ2: In what ways do Finnish communication leaders cultivate social capital in their stakeholder relationships?

Leadership communication: The Nordic style

Communication leaders are central to executing organizational strategy while holding strategic responsibility for fostering relationships across organizational and public boundaries (Johansson et al., 2014). Such relationship management requires culturally sensitive communication approaches, as both stakeholder expectations and leadership styles are influenced by societal norms (Halpern, 2005). The Nordic leadership style is characterized by openness, transparency, trust, and integrity, reinforced by flat structures, a participative and cooperative culture involving employees in transparent decision-making rather than relying on directive leadership (Andreasson & Lundqvist, 2018; Haavisto & Linge, 2022; Haavisto et al., 2025; Hamrin et al., 2016). This style features low power distance and prioritizes consensus and cooperation over competition, with a significant focus on individualism (Andreasson & Lundqvist, 2018; Warner-Söderholm & Cooper, 2016). Leaders act as coaches, motivating employees rather than giving direct instructions (Buhmann et al., 2021; Johansen et al., 2022). Notwithstanding these communalities, there are variations in Nordic leadership styles (Haavisto et al., 2025). Finnish leaders are typically authoritative, pragmatic, and direct, valuing quick decisions and integrity, while Swedes emphasize consensus and flexibility (Johansson et al., 2014). Norwegians favor collaboration and employee-driven choices, and Finns often avoid small talk, focusing on business (Andreasson & Lundqvist, 2018; Haavisto et al., 2025). Since cultural differences do not merely influence communication styles, but they actively shape stakeholder engagement and the strategies leaders use to build social capital, we thus ask:

RQ3: What communication style do Finnish communication leaders adopt when building and maintaining social capital? To what extent is this perceived to be unique, or similar, to that of other Nordic communication professionals?

Method

The study employed an explorative qualitative research approach to examine how Finnish communication leaders engage in social capital activities. Expert interviews (Döringer, 2021) were conducted during the summer and late fall of 2024. The professional experts interviewed had extensive experience in communication, including marketing and branding, and often held high-level positions such as CEOs or Vice-Presidents. They were all working for middle to large-sized organizations. The data set included 30 interviews with senior leaders from various sectors: ten from companies, eight from public sector organizations, six from nonprofit/non-governmental organizations, and six from consultancies and communication agencies (see Appendix A). These experts possessed deep knowledge of Finland's communication landscape and stakeholder environment (Döringer, 2021), enabling them to provide insights into current stakeholder relationship practices. To ensure diversity, selection was based on four criteria: extensive experience, sector affiliation (private, public, nonprofit), stakeholder management expertise, and a leadership role. Gender was not prioritized, as prior research found no significant differences in professional identity or relationship quality (Valentini & Sriramesh, 2024).

The study followed national ethical guidelines and the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were informed of their rights and data handling procedures and provided written consent. Given the nature of the interviews, the first author's institution waived the need for an ethical review. The interviews were conducted remotely via Teams, recorded, transcribed, and verified for accuracy. Minor edits were made for clarity without changing content. The expert interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, giving participants freedom to share insights from their leadership and career experiences. Questions were aligned with the study's research aims and adapted to each participant's industry and background. Interviews started with socio-demographic questions, then explored the role of social capital in work and its strategic relevance (see Appendix B). Interviewees were asked to discuss approaches to building social capital, stakeholder connections, and related tactics, and to reflect on Finnish and Nordic communication compared to other countries. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 15 minutes.

We applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis using Atlas.ti. One researcher conducted the coding, while the other reviewed themes and supported interpretation. After familiarizing with transcripts, open coding identified all topics, which were grouped into first-level codes – based on semantic similarities (e.g., 'size of the network,' 'personal value'). Themes were then organized by research questions into broader categories – second-level codes– (e.g., 'importance of social capital,' 'social capital motivations,' 'rules for social capital activities,' 'leaders' behaviors'). Finally, macro-theme names and meanings were refined – third-level codes– (e.g., 'value of social capital,' 'social capital activities,' 'social capital strategies') (see Appendix C for coding examples). These macro-level themes were then interpreted in relation to the research questions to provide structured answers to the study's research objectives. For clarity, the results are organized by research questions,

with three separate visualizations (Figures 1, 2, and 3)-one for each question. Because many themes in the analysis were closely interconnected, some second-level codes were linked with two-way arrows.

Results

RQ1. Social capital value for communication leaders

The thematic analysis on the macro theme ‘social media value’ identifies five second-level codes pertaining to the a) leaders’ social capital network, b) the importance of social capital, c) social capital motivations, d) social capital as an organizational strategy, and e) reasons for neglecting social capital. Each of these codes included different first-level codes, as reported in Figure 1, which are summarized in the following.

Characteristics of leaders’ network and their perceived personal and organizational importance

The network size and composition were mentioned by all the interviewees as important value for them personally and professionally. Leaders’ social capital primarily comprises networks of former colleagues and industry peers, often spanning multiple organizations. These connections have been cultivated over the course of their careers through a range of professional experiences across sectors, industries, and collaborative projects. All leaders stressed that regularly investing time – frequency of contacts – is crucial for building strong stakeholder relationships.

They also agreed on the importance of social capital, describing it as a vital asset that enhances job performance, supports professional activities, and opens career opportunities (Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011; Valentini, 2010). As one leader (#27) stated:

“When you have relationships that are based on trust, you share more, you are more open, you can rely on both parties wanting to do their best and in the long run it should create better results because you base all the decision making in as much information as possible even though it would be slightly delicate topic” (Head of marketing and communication, International humanitarian organization).

Yet a clear gap remains between acknowledging the importance of social capital and actually investing in it. Several leaders admitted they engage in these activities less often than they should, and most noted that social-capital work receives only informal support. In many organizations, such activities are informal and not strategically integrated. Only one-third (#2, 4, 6, 12, 15, 18, 21, 22, 25, 29, 30) reported that social capital is included in organizational strategy with dedicated budgets, while the remaining two-thirds described it as part of the culture – valued, but not formally structured. This tension between valuing social capital and failing to embed it formally exposes a persistent contradiction: leaders champion its strategic importance, yet social-capital practices remain largely informal and ad hoc, signaling missed opportunities for more systematic integration.

Social capital motivations: The interplay between personal and organizational reasons

Among the motivating factors, all interviewees consistently viewed social capital as an inherent expectation of leadership roles, regardless of sector. Finnish leaders noted that social capital is both personally beneficial and strategically vital for organizations, helping

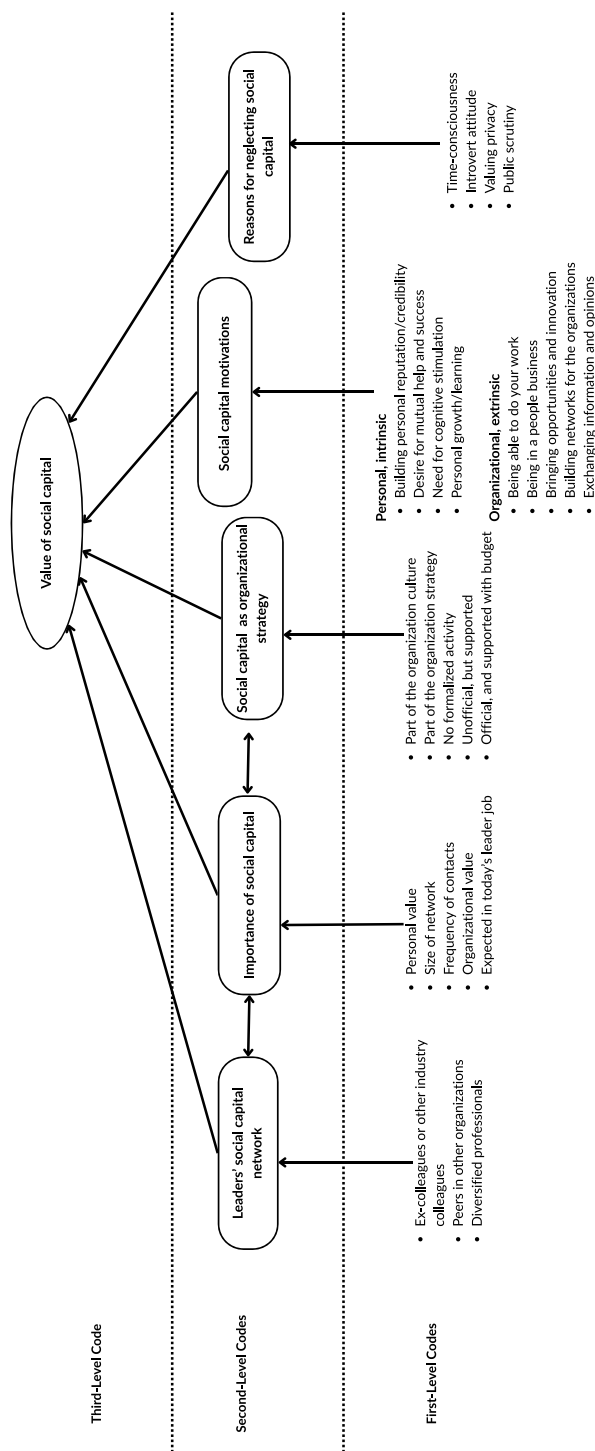


Figure 1. The value of social capital.

advance broader organizational objectives. As one leader (#3) from a Finnish company explained, “staying informed and collaborating widely expands a toolbox of contacts that support both individual and organizational success.” Engaging in social capital activities is essential for leaders to fulfill their roles effectively, particularly when tasks involve influencing organizational dynamics – such as shaping policies that affect the organization (Aher & Luoma-Aho, 2026; Luoma-Aho, 2018; Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021). As one chief communication officer (#5) from a governmental agency stated, “it is vital in Finnish society; to do your job effectively, you need to know who to talk to, even outside the official agenda. Building relationships and knowing the right people helps you navigate influence and power through your networks.” Leaders stressed that these connections offer critical advantages, while exclusion can mean losing access to key relational dynamics. As another interviewee (#13) put it blandly:

Finland can be seen not just as a country, but as a kind of *Country Club*. This says a lot about the importance of relationships—you have to build them, and you can’t afford to let anyone down. If you don’t follow the unwritten rules of how things are perceived in society, you risk losing those connections over the long term. This, I believe, is Finland’s secret and its competitive edge: people generally know and respect each other, and they can have conversations and maintain relationships based on certain rules—rules that are grounded in trust. (Chief communication officer, government agency)

Other key motivators for building social capital include mutual support and advancing organizational interests. In communication roles – often managed by a single professional – networks serve as sounding boards for sharing insights, solving challenges, and broadening perspectives. Internal ties foster knowledge sharing and collaboration, while external contacts offer fresh viewpoints and help navigate complexity. Broad societal and international networks prevent communicators from working in isolation. Trusted relationships are essential for effective performance, as leaders rarely succeed alone; their achievements depend on collaborative networks of colleagues and partners.

Among those who felt they needed to improve their social capital investment, common reasons for neglecting such activities included limited time and a desire to preserve personal life over professional socializing, which led to more selective participation in events. Introversion and a desire for privacy, further restrict engagement, particularly with external stakeholders. The fear of scrutiny is another reason for avoiding public engagement on matters that their key stakeholders care about, particularly on social media, as one leader (#6) from a nonprofit shared their reluctance in such activities: “I don’t want to be a controversial person. I don’t want to be in the public eye of people who want to destroy something.” They also noted that while a digital presence is expected of leaders, they sometimes feel uncomfortable due to the decline in communication etiquette in digital environments.

RQ2. How leaders cultivate social capital: strategies and activities

The analysis reveals two key dimensions of social capital cultivation: one related to leaders’ strategies and traits, and another linked to their choice of specific activities. Each of these third-level codes includes several interconnected second-level themes (see Figure 2), as well as a diverse set of first-level codes describing strategies, tactics, leader traits, activities, and rules governing the choice and considerations for social capital activities.

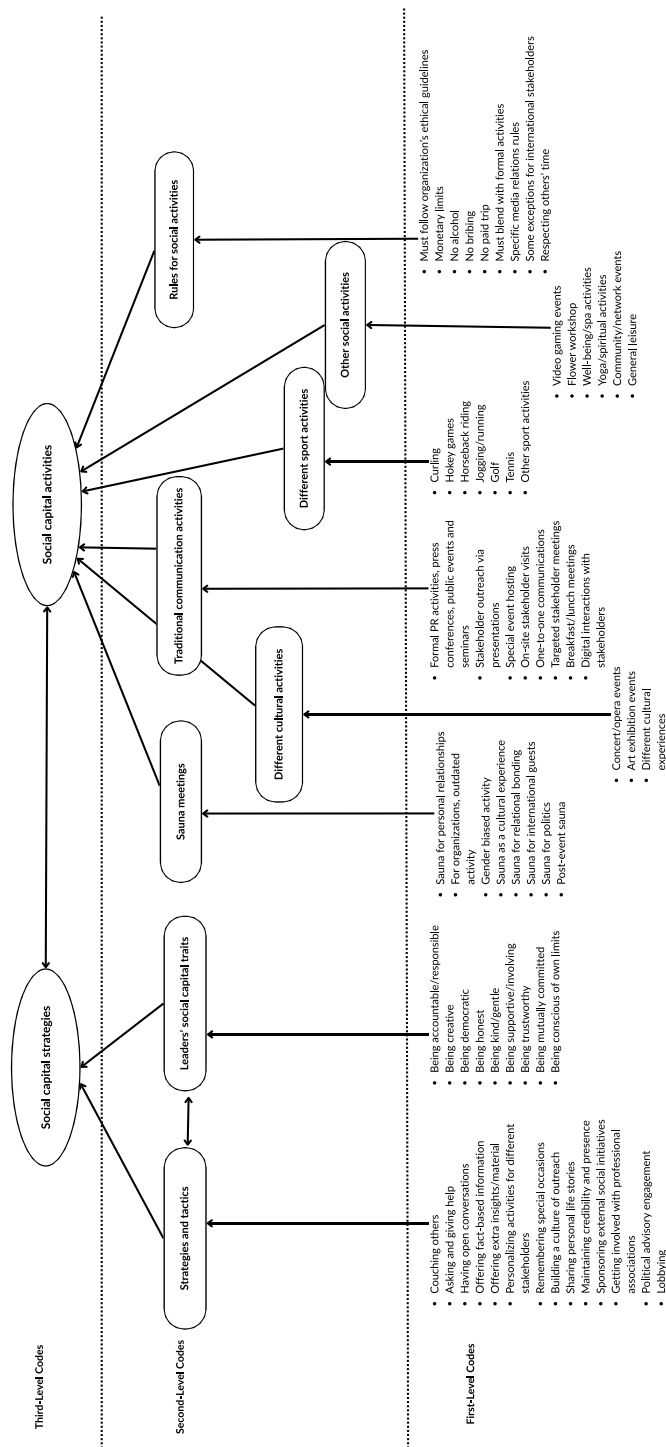


Figure 2. Social capital strategies and activities of Finnish communication leaders.

Leaders' social capital traits

A big part of social capital strategy was about leaders' personal characteristics and how they relate to social capital traits. To build and maintain strong social capital networks, Finnish leaders emphasized the importance of being honest, trustworthy, accountable, and responsible, and at the same time of being democratic, kind, gentle, supportive, and inclusive when managing stakeholder relationships – qualities aligned with participative leadership and a humane orientation (Haavisto et al., 2025). As one interviewee (#22) from an international humanitarian organization said: “It’s about being nice to people. Even if you meet them after seven years, they still think nicely of you, and that’s the general thing that you behave or you treat people as you would like to be treated.” Another leader from a Finnish consultancy (#16) shared that building social capital is also “about giving an example and like respecting people and showing respect in the way that is natural to everybody or anyone.”

These personal characteristics were found to be particularly relevant in critical times where leaders need to demonstrate care and empathy toward stakeholders (Johansen et al., 2022; Mitson et al., 2024) and align closely with several Nordic leadership values identified in other studies (Andreasson & Lundqvist, 2018; Haavisto & Linge, 2022), suggesting that the leaders' individual values are deeply intertwined with broader societal norms in the region (Grandien & Johansson, 2012).

Social capital strategies and tactics

Effective social capital strategies often begin with leaders' everyday behaviors. Relational behaviors strengthen connections both within and beyond the organization, enabling smoother collaboration, better information flow, and a more resilient social fabric.

Leaders internally create trust by engaging in coaching and mentoring, offering and requesting help, and maintaining open conversations that encourage transparency. While coaching and training have traditionally been associated with internal leadership and employee development (cf. Johansson et al., 2014), our interviewees told us they apply them in interactions with external stakeholders and professional peers too. They also mentioned the use of relational tactics – leaders remembering special occasions, encouraging outreach among peers, and sharing aspects of their personal lives to build rapport – as important in humanizing interactions and solidifying social bonding. Dedicating time, keeping promises, or ‘walking the talk’ and being consistently available are essential for building trust. As one interviewee (#2) from a large company said, “to truly listen to people and take the time and patience to really hear what people have to say” is key to building and maintaining social capital. Leaders emphasized that active listening and regular one-on-one meetings to discuss both work and personal well-being help demonstrate genuine care and strong relationships – what Hamrin (2016) refers to as the importance of ‘responsiveness’ and ‘being available.’—

Leaders also highlighted broader organizational strategies that foster social capital for their organizations and help them exert influence (Meng & Neill, 2022). These focus on strengthening institutional ties and projecting a unified identity. Common tactics include engaging with professional associations, serving in political advisory roles, participating in lobbying efforts, and leading stakeholder-driven initiatives – all aimed at reinforcing external relationships and enhancing organizational influence. Yet, the most frequently mentioned strategy is providing fact-based information, which

helps leaders become trusted sources and attract stakeholder attention toward them and their organization. One leader (#10) from an international company elaborated on this by saying: “First and foremost, we are basing our messages on facts and facts only. So that’s the cornerstone for trust building for me, to only use facts when we are communicating.” Leaders also keep networks engaged by proactively offering extra content and insights, aiming to be seen as “experts” and “professionally valuable” while adding value for those who interact with them. Supporting social initiatives further demonstrates organizational responsibility, helping create strong, lasting relationships and credibility.

Mediated and in-person social capital activities

Several interviewees underscored the importance of creatively identifying the ‘right moments’ and designing social activities that resonate with specific stakeholder groups. In digitalized societies, like Finland, social capital activities are increasingly taking place online. Among the online or mediated activities, social media interactions, particularly on LinkedIn, were frequently mentioned. Finnish leaders viewed these interactions as a way to maintain professional networks and fulfill organizational expectations. By following others, commenting on posts, and engaging in online conversations, they felt they could sustain contact with fellow professionals. Traditional activities, such as formal PR events, including traditional press conferences, were mentioned as activities that can also foster social capital. However, the most common activity for these leaders is arranging breakfast or lunch meetings with key stakeholders to share and discuss matters relevant to both parties. As a managing director (#6) from a trade association exemplifies how they interact with their professional peers outside the organization: “We meet, they ask, I ask. We meet for breakfast or lunch. If we have this kind of relationship, I can simply ask a work-related question or something about my business.” Dinner meetings, by contrast, were mentioned less often, as leaders noted a growing respect for personal time and a general reluctance to accept invitations outside of working hours.

Sports, cultural and other social activities

Sports-related in-person social activities were consistently highlighted by leaders, particularly in interactions with internal stakeholders and, to a lesser extent, with external ones. A Vice President (#21) emphasized the growing organizational focus on wellbeing and internal engagement, noting that sports have become a natural and effective way to build relationships and maintain stakeholder connections while promoting wellbeing. Examples of social activities include company football teams, team-based marathons, and jogging or running with stakeholders who share the same interest. Horse-riding, attending hockey matches, and participating in tennis and golf remain popular choices. In contrast, hunting appears to have declined in popularity – possibly due to increased attention to sustainability. Beyond sports, cultural activities included art exhibitions, concerts, and events reflecting Finnish culture, especially for international stakeholders. Other examples of social capital-oriented activities were flower workshops, yoga sessions, spa and wellbeing activities, and participation in video gaming events. Most interviewees also noted that it is more common to organize in-person social activities with their own team members (internal relations) or some

ex-colleagues (external but consolidated relations) that have become ‘friends’ and to a lesser extent with international and selected external stakeholders, but not with regular Finnish external stakeholders. In general, they prefer attending social events organized by others where they can mingle and socialize rather than organizing them.

Relational bonding: The role of sauna meetings in maintaining social capital

When asked whether sauna meetings are still used, most leaders across sectors believe it is an outdated activity, often viewed as gender-biased, that does not align well with contemporary interaction methods. As one leader from a governmental agency (#13) explained, sauna meetings were once exclusive and male-dominated, functioning as ‘boys’ clubs’ that excluded women. Sauna activities are now mainly private, shared with close friends or select professionals with whom they have friend-like relationships. While sauna diplomacy (Sysiö, 2022) is still occasionally used in political contexts, or when international guests visit Finland, several interviewees noted its limited relevance in the daily work of communicators. Despite these predominant feelings, some leaders acknowledge that sauna still remains an optional activity.

Rules for social capital activities

A sub-theme that emerged from the discussion on social capital activities is the shift toward stricter ethical rules for social capital activities and stakeholder engagement. In the past, practices such as sponsoring trips for journalists, like visits to Lapland to experience the Nordic wilderness, or covering travel expenses for stakeholders were common and widely accepted. These sorts of activities were seen as part of relationship-building, similar to practices identified in Asian contexts (Sriramesh & Fisher, 2021; Sriramesh et al., 1999). Today, however, such practices are no longer permissible. Ethical guidelines have become significantly stricter, prohibiting even smaller gestures such as covering travel costs for journalists or other stakeholders, offering gifts or tokens of appreciation, that could be perceived as attempts at undue influence. Monetary limits were also mentioned in relation to what it can be offered and the no-bribing policy. All social capital activities for promoting socializing and networking are now expected to be tied to formal or informational purposes and events.

Another ‘rule of thumb’ is the respect for participants’ time and work-life balance, as a key consideration in organizing stakeholder social events. In today’s fast society, leaders and their networks generally prefer to avoid activities outside working hours – an attitude that directly influences their choice of social capital initiatives. As a chief communication officer of a state agency (#13) stated: “In the past, you had to rely on perks or invitations to maintain relationships. I wouldn’t put much emphasis on those social events anymore. People today are far more engaged and busier with their daily work and social lives.” This sentiment is shared by several interviewees, who noted a growing respect for personal time, especially among younger generations who prefer to keep work and social life separate. Another leader (#1) described this shift as sustainability-driven, noting that while informal meetings like lunches continue, expensive PR practices such as dinners and weekend retreats have been phased out. The company avoids using stakeholders’ free time or offering goods, reflecting a modest, sustainability-driven approach.

RQ3. The Finnish communication style: Nordic influences and differentiations

Leaders described their communication styles in various ways, emphasizing transparency, the delivery of factual information, and a sense of responsibility that extends beyond what is explicitly stated. One-third (#1, 4, 5, 10, 13, 14, 17, 20, 21, 24) rejected the idea of a distinct Nordic style, arguing that communication principles and practices are largely universal across global contexts. In contrast, the remaining two-thirds identified a shared Nordic style, with some also recognizing uniquely Nordic and some specific Finnish characteristics (Figure 3)

Most leaders described Nordic strategic communication as shaped by cultural and societal attributes, with similar preferences for leadership and communication styles (Johansson & Bäck, 2017). Interviewees described Nordic communication as characterized by ‘what is said is what is meant’ (#11). This style was described often in contrasted with Anglo-American styles, which use more superlatives and a grander tone, or with the German-speaking contexts, which emphasize hierarchy and limit openness. In their views, Nordic communication stands out for its honesty and straightforwardness. Nordic professionals are seen as proactive and structured, favoring risk analysis and thorough planning, which, professionals said, fosters security and ease in collaboration. Yet this structured communication style is also seen as ‘less bold’ (#6) communication than in other regions. They also claimed that strong peer support and ease in reaching out to other professionals, enabling anyone to challenge managers and ask difficult questions – an approach seen as essential for trustworthy communication – are defining attributes of Nordic communication styles. As one interviewee (#10) from a company said: “In good communications, the communicator should ask the difficult questions too and be trustworthy to the external and, of course, internal stakeholders too.” This contrasts with more hierarchical cultures, where questioning leadership is discouraged. Stakeholders are also more open to listening to organizations, enabling organizations to play a visible, trusted role in societal conversations, as one interviewee (#9) claimed:

I feel that in the Nordics it’s quite easy to discuss with the stakeholders as an industrial representative. It’s quite easy to get access to, let’s say, policymakers or governments, and they are willing to have conversations with you, which is not the case in all the countries (VicePresident, International company).

Finnish leaders pointed out also some specificities of the Finnish communication style, including their pragmatic, down-to-earth communications, self-reliant attitude not to ask for help, their preference for swift decision making and more strict and formal communication than in other Nordic countries. As one leader from a company (#3) said, “Swedes and Finns are similar yet different. In Sweden, communication is softer and more personable, while we Finns are quieter, stricter, and more formal.” Yet, another leader (#30) for a public sector organization noted that while marketing and communication practices are consistent across Nordic countries, crisis communication varies due to different levels of societal crisis awareness. They gave the example that a crisis preparedness guide might be received calmly in Sweden, but in Finland, it could cause alarm and prompt drastic actions, like stockpiling iodine and preparing for war. In general, leaders across sectors observed that Finns tend to be reserved, prefer working independently, and show

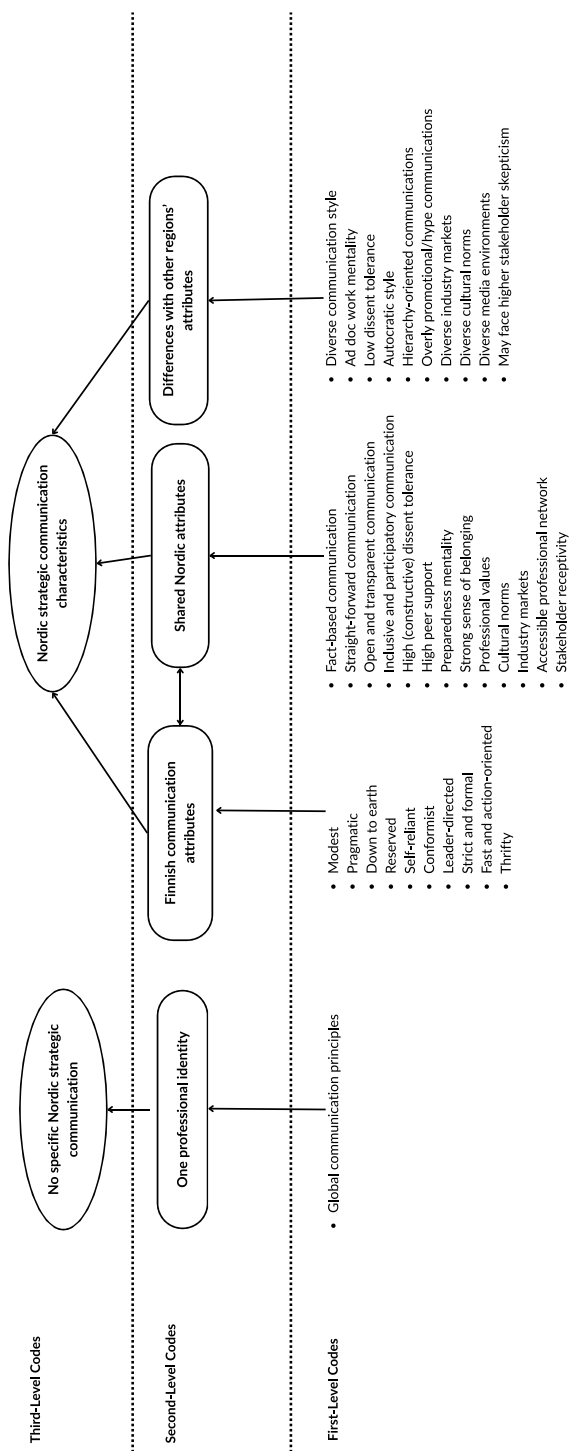


Figure 3. Finnish communication style in a Nordic perspective.

a strong inclination toward rule-following and decision acceptance. They noted a cultural preference for hierarchical leadership – led by the boss – over dialogic approaches common in other Nordic countries (Simonsson, 2002). However, a few interviewees noted a shift in Finnish communication style, embracing more of a dialogic approach in interactions often described as a characteristic of the “Swedish model of communication.” The differences are not major but outline some specific aspects related to communication tone, etiquette, and style in interactions among people, which are mostly culturally related, thus confirming the importance of cultural understanding even in societies that may look alike (Haavisto et al., 2025; Hamrin et al., 2016).

Discussion

This study provides an in-depth examination of how Finnish communication leaders utilize their social capital in their professional settings. The findings reveal its multifaceted nature, emphasizing both intrinsic and extrinsic value (Broch et al., 2018). Four key insights emerge, each shedding light on the strategic importance of social capital in communication professionals’ practices.

The inseparable link between personal relationships and organizational success: A Finnish perspective

This study reveals that social capital holds important value (RQ1) at senior levels and that personal and organizational social capital are impossible to separate. A leaders’ persona and networks are not just individual assets – they are strategic resources that directly influence organizational success (Valentini, 2010). Finnish leaders focus on quality and diversity over size when building networks. These networks often begin with ex-colleagues and communication professionals (Burt, 2000) but expand to stakeholders across industries, creating complementary and diverse ties (Broch et al., 2018; Burt, 2000). They combine instrumental connections – formed through work roles – with expressive ties like trust and social support, which strengthen collaboration and resilience. Social capital remains essential for professionals, delivering benefits such as trust-building, positive media coverage, and stronger internal communication (Gallicano, 2009; Mitson et al., 2024; Sriramesh & Fisher, 2021). In Finland’s small, cohesive communities, social capital holds exceptional value. Finnish leaders view it as a cornerstone of leadership identity, enabling idea exchange, project advancement, and influence on key issues (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022; Ihlen, 2007; Kennan & Hazelton, 2006). Yet, few embed social capital into formal organizational strategies, even though all agree that personal relationships are indispensable for professional success (Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011).

Credibility and expertise as leverages: How leaders build and maintain social capital

The study reveals that the most effective strategy (RQ2) for building and maintaining social capital in the Finnish context is the reciprocal exchange of information (Cross & Parker, 2004). Finnish leaders strengthen relationships by sharing fact-based insights, echoing peer-linking and task-sharing approaches (Gallicano, 2009). They prioritize being seen as

credible experts and engage stakeholders by offering added value – strategies that resemble those undertaken by professionals from Italy (Valentini & Sriramesh, 2024). Many strategies are consistent with the participative leadership style prevalent in Nordic culture, which emphasizes transparency, openness, and honesty (Haavisto et al., 2025). Leaders highlighted their roles in coaching and encouraging participation (Buhmann et al., 2021) both inside and outside the organization, reflecting the values outlined by, for example, Andreasson and Lundqvist (2018), and Haavisto and Linge (2022).

Mindful engagement: Balancing rules while respecting stakeholders' interests and time

The evolution of social capital activities over the past two decades is another significant finding (R2), which adds to the literature on personal relationships and informal relations (Sriramesh & Fisher, 2021). While breakfast and lunch meetings remain common, dinner events have become less frequent, and sauna meetings are now confined to limited situations such as for cultivating expressive connections (Burt, 2000). This shift signals a broader cultural change: Finnish leaders are adopting more mindful engagement, striving to balance stricter government regulations with the needs and interests of key stakeholders. While they remain firm in what can be done for domestic social capital activities, leaders of international firms emphasize flexibility when organizing events and social activities for global guests.

These findings align with Halpern's (2005) concept of norms and sanctions in social capital, highlighting the importance of leaders being perceived as ethical and compliant with conduct rules. They also reflect a general Finnish mindset of honesty and transparency as guiding principles in how communication professionals strategically think and act in their social capital activities (Andreasson & Lundqvist, 2018; Lämsä, 2010).

Additionally, the study highlights the importance of considering time and work-life balance (Haavisto et al., 2025) for social capital activities. The significant concern for work-life balance – a key contemporary value in Nordic societies (Johansen et al., 2022) – is also visible in how the Finnish leaders think about social capital activities. This value is not only directed toward employees and coworkers but also extends to the entire spectrum of stakeholders and even to the leaders themselves. Social capital activities such as going out for dinners (Sriramesh & Fisher, 2021) seemed to be counterbalanced by various forms of sports-related activities, which are common in building social relations, particularly considering promoting well-being, especially within an organization (Johansen et al., 2022).

Nordic values shaping Finnish leadership communication

When it comes to the Finnish communication style (RQ3), our findings show the growing influence of Nordic values on Finnish leadership communication. Finnish professionals increasingly enact their leadership roles in ways that reflect shared Nordic principles, both within organizations and in stakeholder interactions. Continuous collaboration with Nordic colleagues fosters mutual learning and exchange, gradually reshaping Finnish communication styles. Leaders noted that these changes have become particularly visible in recent years, some even describing the shift as adopting “the Swedish way” of managing teams and a dialogue-oriented approach (Simonsson, 2002).

Is the Finnish communication style different from or similar to that of their neighbors? According to our findings, Finnish communication style exemplifies many of the Nordic strategic communication attributes (Haavisto et al., 2025) as Finland shares core values with its Nordic neighbors, which underpin similar strategic communication practices and preferences for communication principles. Yet, notable distinctions remain. Finnish leaders still tend to favor a more formal, directive, and straightforward approach, marked by down-to-earth interactions and a stronger tendency to trust authority and accept decisions without question (Lämsä, 2010).

Theoretical and practical implications

The study on social capital among Finnish communication leaders offers several theoretical contributions. It expands strategic communication and relationship management literature (Ki, 2015) by integrating insights from personal relationship practices and social capital, partly drawn from public relations and partly novel. It also emphasizes social capital as a core element of communication leadership identity, not just a strategic tool (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022), enriching leadership theories by highlighting the role of social networks in effective leadership (Luoma-Aho, 2018). The research adds a Finnish perspective to the Nordic research, showing how strategic communication intertwines with cultural norms and values (Haavisto et al., 2025; Lämsä, 2010), underscoring the need for cross-cultural studies on social capital.

Additionally, the study expands our understanding of Nordic leadership communication styles (Haavisto et al., 2025) with Finnish insights on social capital as a relationship management activity for personal and professional objectives. It identifies a gap between the recognized importance of social capital in strategic communication and its formal integration into organizational strategies, suggesting incorporating them in the strategic planning. Finally, it highlights personal and logistical barriers – such as introversion and time constraints – as hurdles for more relational activities, calling for theoretical models to explore how individual and organizational contexts affect social capital development.

This study also offers key practical implications. Given the central role of social capital for leadership positions, organizations should integrate social capital development into strategic planning, allocating time and resources for leaders to build and sustain networks as a measurable asset for strategic communication. Training programs that strengthen networking, relationship-building, and maintaining diverse connections can enhance professional competence. For international firms, understanding and respecting cultural differences in social capital practices and adapting approaches to these variations is crucial. Embracing a participative leadership style grounded in transparency and openness can foster environments where networks thrive. Additionally, organizations should support leaders facing challenges – such as introversion or time constraints – through informal networking opportunities, mentorship, and recognition systems. Finally, ethical standards ensure that all social capital-oriented activities align with organizational norms. Implementing these measures can strengthen the effectiveness of their communication leaders, foster stronger relationships, and ultimately achieve better strategic outcomes.

Limitations and future research

Given the qualitative design, findings are not generalizable and reflect the perspectives of a limited sample, potentially influenced by social desirability bias. No specific sectoral differences were identified, though the underrepresentation of nonprofit leaders may have constrained insights into alternative forms of social capital and stakeholder engagement. Future research could employ ethnographic methods, such as shadowing leaders during meetings and events, complemented by interviews and focus groups among leaders' networks to capture external perceptions of social capital activities. Cross-country comparisons would further contextualize these findings and advance understanding of social capital and stakeholder relationship management across cultural settings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by Liikesivistysrahasto under the Grant number [24-13744].

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the privacy of research participants.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Table A1. Finnish communication experts.

Interviewee	Gender	Years of experience	Organization	Sector
#1	F	30	Finnish company	Private
#2	F	23	Finnish company	Private
#3	F	33	Finnish company	Private
#4	F	30	Finnish company	Private
#5	F	31	Government agency	Public
#6	F	23	Association	Nonprofit
#7	F	18	Government agency	Public
#8	F	20	Government agency	Public
#9	F	30	International company	Private
#10	F	25	International company	Private
#11	F	15	International non-governmental	Nonprofit
#12	F	25	International company	Private
#13	M	21	Government agency	Public
#14	M	35	Consultancy	Private
#15	F	25	International company	Private
#16	M	30	Government agency	Public
#17	M	40	Finnish consultancy	Private
#18	F	16	Finnish consultancy	Private
#19	F	30	International company	Private
#20	F	14	Government agency	Public
#21	F	20	Finnish company	Private
#22	F	30	Association	Nonprofit
#23	M	25	Finnish consultancy	Private
#24	F	36	Finnish consultancy	Private
#25	F	25	Finnish communication agency	Private
#26	M	24	Government agency	Public
#27	F	25	International humanitarian organization	Nonprofit
#28	F	30	Foundation	Nonprofit
#29	F	25	Foundation	Nonprofit
#30	M	17	Government agency	Public

Appendix B

Background questions:

1. What is your educational background?
2. How many years have you worked in communication related positions in total?
3. How long have you worked for this organization?
4. Can you briefly describe your current position?

Now think at how you utilize the social capital you have for your own personal and professional activities. For social capital we mean all the valuable relationships you maintain with key individuals or organizations – connections you can rely on for support, advice, collaboration, or assistance when needed.

5. How important is it to know a lot of different people in your work?
6. How often do you contact such people and ask for help/support in order to achieve your organizational goals?

7. In what circumstances, do you count on favors or exceptional help from specific individuals/ stakeholders/ organizations?
8. How do you exert influence to achieve your objectives? Can you give some examples?
9. Is building social capital part of your organization's overall communication strategy? If yes, can you share how your organization works on creating and maintaining social capital through its communication efforts?
10. What strategies or tactics do you use to support positive relationships with key stakeholders or individuals you value important? Can you offer some examples?

Please think at how you develop, maintain and sustain your social capital through different stakeholder relationship activities. . .

11. Who are your primary stakeholders?
12. What kind of official PR/communication activities do you undertake to make sure you meet your key stakeholder expectations? Please provide some examples from across your key stakeholder groups
13. In your experience, what role do social activities – such as invitations to dinners, cultural events, or concerts – play in strengthening relationships with key stakeholders and encouraging their engagement with your organization's activities?
 - a. If you see this as important, what kinds of social activities do you think Finnish stakeholders value most?
 - b. And what about international stakeholders – are their expectations different?
14. Does your organization have specific guidelines or processes for communication activities related to offering/receiving such activities?
 - a. Can you give a summary of the main aspects underlined in these guidelines?
15. Do you undertake other informal, non-official activities with your stakeholders to support positive relationships? and if so, what do you do?
16. In the general collective understanding, in Finland, sauna is an important part of business relations. Do you agree/disagree with this idea? Why?
17. Have you used sauna for stakeholder relationship activities?
 - a. When and for what purposes?
 - b. If you haven't used it, why not?
18. What other recreational activities than sauna (for e.g. hunting, fishing or other sport) do you think can help building positive relationships?
 - a. Can you give some examples of activities you or your organization have organized for your key stakeholders?
19. Did you use any of the mentioned activities with international stakeholders? and if so, which ones?

Now think at your communication style and approach and that of fellow Finnish professionals in comparison with the style of professionals from the Nordics or other regions of the world

20. In your experience, is there something characteristic about Nordic communication practices compared to other regions? Can you give some examples?
21. How would you define this 'Nordic communication approach?' What characteristics? Main attributes?
22. What about something specifically 'Finnish?' Is there something different? Can you identify any characteristics or attributes that define it?

Appendix C. Coding examples.

Codes, Level 3	Codes, Level 2	Codes, Level 1	Illustrative Quotes
Value of social capital	Importance of social capital	Size of network	"Really crucial when I'm in a job interview, I usually say that my biggest asset is my phone catalog and the fact that the people I have in my catalog know me and they are willing to answer the phone when I call them."
		Being able to do your work	"It is very important and it's one of the core elements of being able to succeed in your work, to have internal network, to start with the people who you need to reach out to, the people who know something that you want to access or and you need just a sparring partner in order to be able to do your work. I think that's the key thing."
Social capital activities	Social capital motivations	Desire for mutual help and success	"For me personally, I think it's really important because you can go to these people for professional advice or for professional support or, you know, just mental support on difficult issues, so I think it's really important."
	Sauna meeting	Sauna for relational bonding	" <i>Sauna is a very traditional way for arranging hospitalities. It is a unique experience for some company guests. Sauna helps people bond and get to know each other better</i> "
	Rules for social capital activities	No paid trips	"For example, when I used to be a young journalist working for Finnish newspapers, it was very common that communication departments just sent invitations to some boat cruise or massive event. And that was, you know, like this kind of party-events. I don't think that exists anymore and it is not cool anymore."
Social capital strategies	Leaders' behavior	Being kind/gentle	"... it's just basically about being nice to people. Even if you meet them after years, they still think nicely of you, and that's the general thing that you behave as you want to be remembered or you treat people as you would like to be treated."
	Strategies and tactics	Offering fact-based information	"I think when you come from the perspective of an organization in which social capital is the knowledge and the connections you have and bring to the organization, then I feel it's very important that we can offer them [stakeholders] something they can learn from or they feel like that they gain something."
Nordic strategic communication	Shared Nordic attributes	Strong sense of belonging	"And there is this sense of belonging, or sense of community within the Nordic communication leadership that we felt that our markets are similar enough that we can actually start working really closely with each other and using same concepts or same messaging even throughout the Nordic markets."
	Finnish communication attributes	Leader-directed	"I think that Finns are more straightforward and more led by the boss. So, the boss of the team leader is more like saying what we will be doing."