Research Article

Patterns of Communication between Gen Z and Public Institutions in Times of Crisis: A Study Based on Relationship Marketing Principles

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Abstract

In time of crisis, the role of public institutions is on the rise and the communication between citizens and institutions is increasingly important, in order to preserve society's civic fabric and ensure the maintenance of trust in the aftermath of the crisis. This study analyzes communication patterns between Gen Z citizens and public institutions in a time of crisis. Through a qualitative process, the article evaluates the levels of trust in public institutions, as trust is a main concept and indicator in relationship building and a predictor of commitment, and it provides recommendations based on relationship marketing communication principles. The research was based on 86 interviews carried out in Romania with Generation Z participants. The article adopts an anticipatory approach towards communication, because once society's normal functioning resumes, albeit in a changing environment, citizens' trust and commitment and the maintaining of civic ties are paramount.

Keywords: COVID19, public institutions, communication, trust, relationship marketing, Generation Z, Romania.

JEL: M31, M38, D73

Introduction

Public institutions are gaining in prominence during the current sanitary crisis. The communication between citizens and institutions is increasingly important

for managing the crisis, preserving society's civic fabric, and ensuring the maintenance of trust in the aftermath of the crisis. It is relevant to look at communication in an anticipatory way because once society's normal functioning resumes, albeit in a

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changing environment, citizens' trust and commitment and the maintaining of civic ties are paramount. The objectives of the research are to (1) study the communication patterns between citizens and public institutions in a time of crisis caused by the COVID19 pandemic, (2) evaluate trust levels in public institutions, as trust is a main concept and indicator in relationship building and predictor of commitment, and (3) provide recommendations based on relationship marketing communication principles.

Literature Review

The public sector's communication has to involve the threefold implication of public institutions at legislative, executive, and judiciary levels, in an accountable, transparent, and efficient manner. This produces a domino effect on other areas of society, such as business, academia, and civil society, empowering them to define their role and represent their interests and rights. The functioning of the public sector depends on an interwoven complexity of relationships and interactions between the executive, the legislative, the judiciary, the national, regional and local administrations, the armed forces and the police, the business, the academia, the media, the non-profit sector, the trade unions, and the religious organizations. (Uphoff, Krishna 2004)

A healthy public system is based on commitment, loyalty, credibility, and combating corruption (Dimant and Tosato, 2017). We follow the established view that there are two main influencing factors of commitment and loyalty: an attitude dimension and a behavior dimension (Day, 1969, Dick and Basu, 1994; Kiesler, 1969; Knox, 1998; Lee and Zeiss, 1980; Mowday et al., 1979; Mägi 1999; Söderlund, 1999; Williams and Hazer 1986). The behavior dimension refers to the fact that people show greater commitment when making more effort to obtain something (Cialdini, 1988; Grusky, 1966; Kiesler, 1971; Söderlund, 1999). Making a sacrifice or a renunciation can lead to self-justification and increase commitment (Kanter, 1968; Farrell and Rusbult, 1981; Lund, 1985;

Rusbult, 1983; Salancik, 1977). Commitment is increased when the end-user, in this case, the citizen, participates, and creates value (White, 1959; Bateson, 1985; Stott and Walker, 1995). Participation contributes to reduced perceived discrepancy between expectations and results. Therefore, people tend to give less importance to problems when investing in an outcome or course of action (Raaij and Pruyn, 1998). These findings point out that public institutions need to increase commitment and loyalty by involving citizens in a participatory, voluntary, and effort-based engagement in public consultations and policymaking.

The relationship of the citizen with public institutions revolves around the added value of the public Institution, the co-creation of value with the citizen, and trust and communication (Cătoiu and Ţichindelean, 2012; Gummesson, 2008; Payne and Frow, 2005). In the following paragraph, we analyze the relationship of the citizens with public institutions through the prism of Surej's (2019) four relationship marketing pillars:

1. Trust - is the "confidence in exchange partner's reliability and integrity" (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p.23) and it is at the centre of the capacity to develop a relationship and let it mature (Miquel-Romero et al., 2014; Moorman et al., 2006; Verma et al., 2016; Churchill and Surpernant, 1982). The essence of relationships and exchanges is trust; therefore the concept of trust is central in relationship marketing (Gummesson, 2008) and it applies to the public sphere through the challenge of building trust with constituents and citizens (Andrei, 2018). Trust, in the sense of delivery and fulfilment of promises, is indispensable for a healthy public sector climate. Studies using factor analysis make an attempt at measuring trust, although its measurement is difficult (Pop and Pelău, 2017). Particular care should be given to the relationship marketing approach in relation to trust, as there is an unintended consequence of making consumers more distrustful of

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organizations which applies its principles, because it risks to become associated with self-interested rhetoric or intrusive practices. On the contrary, trust starts with delivery of promises, cooperation, and mutual respect for each other's values. (O'Malley and Prothero, 2004).

2. Commitment - is the institution's "enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship with its stakeholders" (Verma, Sharma, & Sheth, 2016, p.209), it is at the centre of relationship marketing research (Addison, Lingham, Uslay, and Lee, 2017; Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and it has the capacity to determine the success of a relationship marketing campaign (Miquel-Romero, Caplliure-Giner, & Adame-Sánchez, 2014; Ndubisi, 2007; Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman, 2006). Attention is also required for the frequency of the communication flow, as private sector experience shows that a much too dense or scattered communication flow risks to produce an information overload and has counter-productive effect on commitment (Bright et al., 2015; Sasaki et al., 2015; Bawden and Robinson, 2009).

3. Service - the service culture aims to convince citizens that the institutions deliver on their promises. Reality looks worrying both in the public and private sectors, as levels of trust in public interventions are low (Ortiz-Ospina, 2016) and service feedback in private sector is equally disconcerting, with consumer complaints increasing in the US for example (Fournier et al., 1998) and customer loyalty decreasing in the UK, as complaints management seems not effective in generating loyalty (Management Services, 2000).

4. Information technology - in an era where privacy concerns and data theft are threats, the importance of ethical practices and of trust is crucial (Kushwaha et al., 2020). Communicating with the citizen gains in importance during times when disinformation is pervasive. The communication of public institutions covers two aspects: 1) managing citizen's information in a responsible and respectful manner and 2) making use of new informational technologies and new media (Henning-Thurau and Hansen, 2000).

As indicated by Andrei (2019), there is currently a widespread anti-establishment mood characteristic of contemporary societies. Globalization has a double effect: firstly, a divisive result is characterized by disrupted traditions, and secondly, a uniting effect based on similar goods, mobility across borders, and simultaneous trans-border dialogue and exchange via the Internet. There seems to be a "global mirroring of the self" (Andrei 2019, p. 304), in the sense of globalization of fears, emotions, expectations, needs, and ideas. In terms of relations with public institutions, internationalization adds an extra disruptive dimension, namely, global events influence perceptions of public institutions and markets beyond the influence of public leaders and national market leaders. Such disruptive processes are magnified by phenomena such as fake news, Internet trolling, pervasive myths, or just, plainly, criticism from other world areas.

In terms of image, a country's image consists of a real image and a projected image (Picazo and Moreno-Gil, 2017). For this reason, a regional approach is often considered to be fairer as a representation of an area (Margarisová and Vokáčová, 2016), especially for big countries with large differences between areas. Like a political campaign, in the long run, an effective country policy considers regional differences and the different interests of the stakeholders (Anholt, 2008). The so-called "halo effect" (Nisbett and Wilson, n.d.) designated the loyalty that a satisfied consumer develops towards the producer of a product or a service that they are satisfied with is applied for countries as well and can be fostered by an image branding exercise.

Communication of public institutions towards citizens has to consider whether the object of communication is services or products. Communication about services is different from communication about products because of the services'

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intangibility (Hill and Gandhi, 1992) and a higher level of perceived risk when accessing a service due to the lack of assurance that expectations will be fulfilled (Mortimer, 2002). The challenge of the marketer is to demonstrate benefits that are more experiential than the material in nature. Experiential marketing aims for creating pleasant, exciting, and memorable consumption experiences of products and services (Shobeiri et al., 2018; Pine, Gilmore, 1998; 1999; Schmitt, 1999; Mathwick, Malhotra and Rigdon, 2001). It adds a range of sensory-emotive mechanisms added to rational and benefit-seeking motivations (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Schmitt, 1999).

Services and products have different nature, symbolic meaning, and meaning that the citizen invests it with (Hakkio & Laaksonen, 1998), while the marketer acts as a mediating filter between the nature of the product and its role for the consumer (Pelau and Chinie, 2018). The development of the service sector is a defining feature of the modern economy market and it requires the continuous improvement of applications in the field of quality, manifested by a considerable evolution in terms of service quality management (Teodorescu et al., 2009). Currently, citizens have increased possibilities to review and comment on public services and goods on Internet platforms. Studies show that 84% trust online reviews of services and products (Schuckert et al., 2015). Word of mouth, and its electronic equivalent, online forums, is a significant differentiating factor among private brands (Shardanand and Maes, 1995), and a logical evolution will be the spread of such tools to public brands.

Emotional appeals effectively influence a favorable attitude towards services (Mattila, 1999; Zhang et al., 2014). The most effective advertising strategy for services is to showcase the citizen using the service and, secondly, to show a physical representation of the service (Décaudin and Lacoste, 2018). Both ways indicate that the crux of communication in the service sector is to reassure the audience and help them identify themselves emotionally and anticipatorily with the advertised service.

Tangible attributes are more objective than intangible ones because they reveal themselves to the consumer's mind through the senses instead of intangible ones, which are a projection of the consumer's mind (Hirschman, 1980). The marketer has available a series of strategies for tangibilization (Hill, Gandhi 1992; Mittal, 1999, 2002; Mortimer, 2002, 2008): (1) the use of documentation to prove the service's competitive advantage or value; (2) providing visual examples of the service situation, like the way it is used or sold; (3) stressing physical components (Mittal and Baker, 2002), e.g., an ambulance for medical emergency services, a car and bags for home delivery, books and school premises for education, a fire brigade car for emergency interventions, etc.; (4) by using an established brand image (Pina et al., 2006; Brodie, Whittome and Brush, 2009).

An important factor impacting the communication between citizens and public institutions is culture. Understanding the national or regional culture's specificities is crucial for designing effective services (Davis, Wang, Lindridge, 2008; Laroche et al., 2000), including for public services. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) point out these cultural differences in experiential consumption. From nation to nation, there are perceptible differences in trust, level of civic commitment, different expectations, and preferred types of confidence-building displays, such as campaigns. One of the most widely spread frameworks for cross-cultural studies was developed by Hofstede (2011). Hofstede's model contains six societal dimensions, individualism vs. collectivism, long-term orientation vs. short-term orientation, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, and indulgence vs. restraint, in order to explain the differences among national cultures (Hofstede and Minkov, 2010; Hofstede, 2011; Pelau and Pop, 2018). Societal features such as individualism, masculinity, short-term orientation, uncertainty acceptance, and indulgence lead to a pragmatic approach towards public services, preferring fast delivery and electronic formulas, despite eventual risks or procedural shortcomings.

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Methodology

The present article is a qualitative research study, using the method of semi-structured discussion and the technique of the interview based on the conversation guide tool. Based on the research objectives mentioned in the introduction, a fundamental literature review, including COVID related literature, was carried out starting from May 2020 and until August 2020. Based on this, the following hypotheses were drawn to form the basis of the research:

H1:   The communication between the young generation (Z generation) of citizens in Romania and public institutions depends first and foremost on trust;
H2:   The young generation (Z generation) of citizens in Romania expects increased use of IT and electronic means;
H3:   The measures undertaken by the Romanian public authorities in   response to the COVID19 crisis are timely and effective;
H4:   The young generation (Z generation) of citizens in Romania trust the public institutions;
H5:   The young generation (Z generation) of citizens in Romania avoid the traps of disinformation in times of crisis.

In order to research these hypotheses, 86 interviews based on a conversation guide were carried out with students from the University of Economic Studies in Bucharest, Romania, throughout September and October 2020. The condition to take part in the study was to have contacted public institutions within the former 6 months preceding the study, from March onwards, since the start of the COVID19 pandemic. Several 150 students were contacted, out of which 93 accepted to participate in the study. For consistency reasons, the answers of 86 Gen Z participants, aged between 18 and 25 years old, were retained. Generation Z comprises individuals born after 1995 (Dabija et al., 2017). Anonymity was guaranteed to the participants. The majority of participants are women. Most of the participants originate from Romania, Bucharest, and they live in an urban area. The interviews were conducted online with the help of e-mails. Following the answers' receipt, the authors returned to some of the respondents with additional clarifying questions in written or through Skype.

Discussion

The interviewees ranked the public services they used in the former past six months in the following decreasing order of interaction frequency: education, health, tax collection, community facilities (water supply, gas, sewage, sanitation, thermal energy, public lighting, public transport), population registration services, culture, environmental protection and restoration, and the police.

The following parameters influence the communication between the participants and public institutions in decreasing order: trust, reciprocal commitment, relationship building, direct interaction, the objective, rational attributes of the citizen's area of action, personalized interaction, national and local culture, the demonstration of the added value of the public institution's activity, negotiation and, finally, the demonstration of value-added of the citizen's request or initiative. As an example, an interviewee emphasized that, in her perception, public institutions are antiquated from both a physical and moral perspective. Based on the synergy of all these observations, H1 (communication between the young generation (Z generation) of citizens in Romania and public institutions depends first and foremost on trust) is confirmed.

Interviewees were asked to provide recommendations about the way communication with public institutions can be improved. Unsurprisingly for the nature of the sanitary crisis, an overwhelming majority of participants named the use of electronic means, such as e-mail, Internet, video conferencing, web streaming, and online public administration services indispensable to better communication followed by the use of social media. A minority of interviewees mentioned the

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improved use of classical communication means, such as TV, radio, printed publications, and face-to-face communication. The automatization of data processing and the official documents issued, coupled with the client service's enhancement, was proposed only by two interviewees about the age group between 26 and 35 years old. We conclude that H2 (the young generation (Z generation) of citizens in Romania expects increased use of IT and electronic means) is confirmed.

When asked to evaluate the measures taken by the Romanian authorities in response to the pandemic, the interviewees considered that the most useful measures were, in descending order, the (1) possibility to work from home, including for public servants, (2) the organization of online university courses, and (3) the digitization of institutional processes, in order to avoid going to the counter, (4) the social distancing measures, including the closure of public spaces, (5) the granting of technical unemployment, (6) the postponement of fees and bank rates during the crisis, (7) the surveillance and treatment measures for suspected or infected persons and (8) the subsidies provided by the state to companies in severely affected industries. An interviewee points out that although most measures are useful theoretically, they are not implemented effectively.

Almost a third of the interviewees rate the management of the COVID19 crisis in Romania by the public institutions at 6 out of 10 on a Likert scale. A fourth of the participants rate the said crisis response at 7 out of 10 on a Likert scale. A sample of 84 was retained for this, as 2 participants did not answer this last question. Only 10 interviewees rate the crisis response of Romanian authorities at 8 out of 10, and 3 interviewees are very satisfied with a rating of 9 out of 10. Overall, 56 out of 84 interviewees rate the crisis response over 5 out of 10, while the rest of the 30 rates it under 5, with a sixth of the interviewees giving a rating as low as 3 out of 10.

Therefore, we conclude that H3 (the measures undertaken by the Romanian public authorities in response to the COVID19 crisis are timely and effective) is disproved. However, we note the positive reaction of interviewees to the measures (1) to (7) mentioned above and of the majority of participants being fairly positive towards the crisis response by rating more than 5 on a 10-point Likert Scale.

Interviewees were invited to rate the most common community public services according to their level of trust on a Likert scale from 1 to 10, with the results portrayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Levels of trust in public services (Source: data collection made by the authors)

Service	Number of interviewees with a trust level from 1 to 5 on a 10-point Likert scale	Number of interviewees with a trust level from 5 to 10 on a 10 point Likert scale	The most prominent rating of trust out of 10 (the highest proportions of participants)
Social security	36	50	6 out of 10 (aprox. a fifth of participants)
Tax collection	37	49	5 out of 10 (aprox. a third of participants)
Culture	19	67	8 out of 10 (aprox. a fifth of participants)
Urban development	40	46	7 out of 10 (aprox. a fifth of participants) 5 out of 10 (a further fifth of participants aprox.)

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Education	12	74	8 out of 10 (aprox. a third of participants) 7 out of 10 (aprox. a fifth of participants)
Population register	25	61	9 out of 10 (aprox. a fifth of participants) 8 out of 10 (a further fifth of participants aprox.)
Public roads and bridges	55	31	4 out of 10 (aprox. a fifth of participants)
Environment protection and restoration	50	36	6 out of 10 (aprox. a fifth of participants)
Health	39	47	7 out of 10 (aprox. a third of participants)
Community emergency services (mountain rescuer, lifeguard, first aid)	31	55	8 out of 10 (aprox. a fifth of the participants) 5 out of 10 (aprox. a fourth of the participants)
Community services of public utility (water supply, gas, sewage, sanitation, thermal energy, public lighting, public transport)	29	57	8 out of 10 (aprox. a fifth of the participants) 7 out of 10 (aprox. a fifth of the participants)
Police	35	51	6 out of 10 (aprox. a fifth of the participants) 5 out of 10 (aprox. a fifth of the participants)
Sport	31	55	8 out of 10 (aprox. a third of the participants)

Source: Authors' own creation.

The interviews show a high amount of trust in education and culture, most and foremost, followed in decreasing order by the population register services, community services of public utility (water supply, gas, sewage, sanitation, thermal energy, public lighting, public transport), community emergency services (mountain rescuer, lifeguard, first aid), sport and the police. The lowest levels of trust are, by far, bestowed upon public roads and bridges and environmental protection and restoration. The grey areas of trust are decreasing trust in urban development, health, tax collection, and social security. We, therefore, conclude that H4 (the young generation (Z generation) of citizens in Romania trust the public institutions) is tested and proved for the sectors of education and culture, population register services, community services of public utility, community emergency services, and, in a lesser measure, for the sectors of sport and the police. The said hypothesis is disproved for public roads and bridges and environmental protection and restoration.

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The interviewees were also questioned about the fake news phenomenon. It resulted that almost half of the participants are reading only news from sources that they trust and select based on personal selection criteria. Almost a third of participants consider that they can differentiate between accurate information and attempts of disinformation. Eleven interviewees admitted to having given up all news or social media lectures, while six interviewees affirmed not trusting any source any longer. This adds up to almost a fifth of the respondents showing signs of resignation towards disinformation and a withdrawal from information sources altogether as a fatigue response. Fifteen out of the said interviewees are within the age group 18-25 years old, and only 2 are from the age group 36-45 years old. Therefore, we consider that this resignation occurs very early in the participants' lives and might pose a threat to future citizens' morale and attitude, in case this phenomenon is not curbed. In particular, in times of crisis, the disinformation phenomenon is taking dangerous, life-threatening proportions. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the interviewees acknowledge the phenomenon and build a "defense" strategy. Therefore, we conclude that H5 (the young generation (Z generation) of citizens in Romania avoids the traps of misinformation in times of crisis) is neither proved nor disproved.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The research confirms trust as the main vehicle of communication between the young generation (Z generation) of citizens in Romania and public institutions. We recommend that trust is built upon anti-corruption measures and whistleblowing mechanisms. Direct, personalized interaction with the young generation, particularly through the use of IT and electronic means, is a priority. The digitization of institutional processes should be a priority and a facility in terms of teleworking, unemployment safety net, and financial and fiscal mechanisms to support the youth in bridging the crisis. Positive examples such as education and culture can be emulated to conceive an action to improve urban development, health, tax collection, and social security services. Urgent intervention is needed in the area of road infrastructure, bridges, and environmental protection and restoration. Urgent measures are also required in the area of disinformation in order to prevent fake news fatigue from creating victims of resignation and civic withdrawal. We propose creating an Internet policing unit, able to patrol and sanction online disinformation and intimidation.

Limitations

Given the nationality homogeneity of the cohort investigated, the research specifically aims at analyzing the situation in Romania. However, a wider national study can lead to nationwide conclusive results. A deeper sociological analysis has to be made regarding whether Generation Z in Romania shares the same features as the members of this generation in other parts of the world. The historical and socio-cultural context indicates a similarity with post-communist eastern European countries. Moreover, the interviewees are students with a high level of education and scholarization. We can see that education is one of the services valued at its highest, which is both an indication of the student's perspective and a vote of confidence and appreciation for the education system in Romania, which largely subsidizes students based on filtering admission exam grades.

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