

# Employee satisfaction with internal communication in private companies during the first lockdown

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# BledCom

## Reboot: Should Organizations Rediscover Communication with Internal & External Stakeholders?

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Public Relations Research Symposium BledCom**  
**EDITORS:** Dejan Verčič, Ana Tkalac Verčič and Krishnamurthy Sriramesh

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## **Reboot: Should Organizations Rediscover Communication with Internal & External Stakeholders?**

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### **EDITORS:**

Dejan Verčič  
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**Chmiel, Michal**, *Royal Holloway, University of London (UK)* • In his research, Michal compares advertising and public relations messages to identify how both types of communication work in unison to influence buying behaviour and produce the most favourable attitudes. Michal also analyses the societal impact of advertising and public relations communication. As a practitioner, Michal has more than 14 years of experience in incorporating social psychological evidence into PR and communications projects for multinational companies and public figures.



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**Čater, Tomaž**, *University of Ljubljana (Slovenia)*

**Čater, Barbara**, *University of Ljubljana (Slovenia)*



**Dabo, Krešimir**, *University of Zagreb (Croatia)*



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A recipient of several research awards, Dhanesh actively consults for various national and multinational organizations. She is a lead researcher for the Global Capabilities Framework project in the UAE and university lead for the UN Women Unstereotype Alliance UAE chapter-Zayed University partnership.



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**Fux, Patricia**, *University of Ljubljana (Slovenia)*



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**He, Mu**, *University of Miami (USA)*



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**Homann, Reimund**, *IMWF Institut für Management- und Wirtschaftsforschung (Germany)* • Reimund Homann, Dr., born in 1980 in Hamburg/Germany, is a Business Analyst at the IMWF Institut für Management- und Wirtschaftsforschung in Hamburg and a former Business Analyst at the Hamburg-based management-consultancy faktenkontor. At the IMWF he specializes in the quantitative analysis of digital communication. He is the author of several books dealing with mathematics and economical analysis of law and edited several books on various managerial and economical topics. He also has a vast experience as a lecturer in statistics and managerial sciences.

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**Hübner, Renate**, *Alpen-Adria University of Klagenfurt (Austria)*

**Jakopović, Hrvoje**, *Edward Bernays University College Zagreb (Croatia)*



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**Jungblut, Marc**, *Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (Germany)*

**Kanajet, Karlo**, *Edward Bernays University College Zagreb (Croatia)*



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**Lee, Hyelim**, *University of Oklahoma (USA)* • Hyelim Lee is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Seoul National University. Her primary research interests are studies in public from the PR theory perspective. She has a tremendous interest in the public members' relationships with the organizations. She recently published an article about the underground information market dynamics in the *Dong-A Business Review (DBR)*. She conducted extensive survey research on employee communication of the major Korean companies such as KT and SK.



**Le Roux, Tanya**, *Bournemouth University (UK)* • Tanya is a Principal Lecturer at Bournemouth University. Before stepping into academia, Tanya worked as a communication professional in South Africa and the UK. She consulted for large and small companies on strategic communication and communication management issues. She has lectured strategic communication management for 13 years in South Africa before joining BU in 2017. Tanya strongly believes in combining academic work and practical experience, locally and internationally, in order to benefit both academia and professional practice. Her research interest is focused on strategic corporate communication management, and specifically the application thereof within the field of disaster risk reduction.

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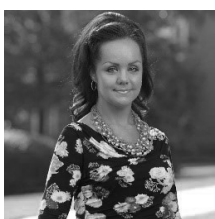
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**Najjar Raškaj**, *Dijana, University of Zagreb (Croatia)*

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**Serfontein-Jordaan, Muriel**, *University of Pretoria (South Africa)* • Dr Muriel Serfontein-Jordaan is a young academic in the field of Strategic Management, with a specific focus on Strategic Communication Management. She is a lecturer in the Department of Business Management at the University of Pretoria with specialisation in Strategic Management subjects at postgraduate level. Dr Serfontein-Jordaan completed her PhD in August 2020. In her PhD research she expanded her research focus area to Strategic Investor Relations.



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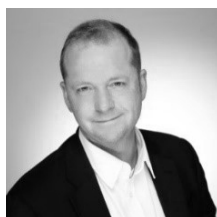
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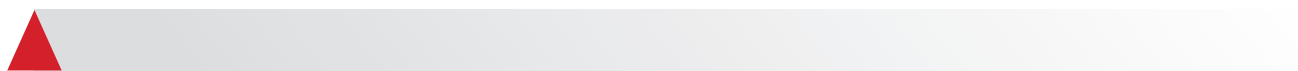
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**2022 PAPER  
ABSTRACTS**



## A Decade of Theoretical Frameworks in Social Media Research in Public Relations

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### **Introduction and purpose of the study**

Social media (SM) has become a key operating channel in public relations (PR) and triggered PR scholars to learn more about the value of SM. In addition to PR practitioners that perceive SM as changing the way PR is practiced (Wright & Hinson, 2014), PR scholars have also demonstrated an increased interest in this unique phenomenon over the last decade. However, from a scholarly standpoint, research has shown that PR scholars often borrow theories and concepts from mass communication, journalism, advertising, and other fields when exploring SM in PR rather than building a unique SM theory of PR (Kent & Li, 2020) or even suggesting a unified terminology (Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2015). The aim of this study is to explore and analyze the theoretical frameworks used in SM-related PR research in the period of 2010-2020, to better understand the state of the field and future theoretical developments.

### **Literature review**


SM research is the fastest growing area in the history of PR, and new media are changing the way PR is practiced and the way organizations communicate with stakeholders, gatekeepers and audiences (European Communication Monitor, 2021; Wright and Hinson, 2017). This might be due to the dominant features of SM: immediacy,

availability, convenience of use, personalization and rapid exposure to messages based on full media consumer participation and the ability of both consumers and organizations to respond at any time. The centrality of SM in the field of PR has driven scholars to try and build a normative SM theory specifically tailored for PR based on SM's unique attributes such as dialogue, engagement, social presence, and conversational human voice, in order to better understand the phenomenon and its practice.

Despite the above-mentioned studies, none of them have systematically identified peer-reviewed journal articles in SM or presented the theoretical growth of SM research from a PR perspective. To fill this gap, this study systematically investigated theoretical frameworks used in SM-related PR research in the last decade.

### **Methodology**

This study is based on a systematic review and a content analysis of 575 articles addressing SM research from a PR perspective, published between 2010-2020 in nine PR-focused peer-reviewed journals (Public Relations Review, Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, International Journal of Strategic Communication, Corporate Communications: An International Journal, Journal of Communication Management, Public Relations Journal, Journal



of Public Relations Research, Prism, and Public Relations Inquiry). Articles were included in the sample if they were (1) full-length articles, (2) published in one of the nine journals selected, (3) included one of 16 SM terms defined in advance in their title, abstract or keywords, (4) were conducted in the field of PR, and (5) were published between January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2020.

## Results and conclusions

The search resulted in a total of 926 hits, and after cleaning the data (removing duplicates, commentaries, etc.) a total of 575 articles were included in the final sample.

A relatively high percentage (66.26%) of studies explicitly presented theoretical frameworks. The most frequently used theories were theories from the PR domain: Dialogic Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). It is interesting to note that while relationship management theory was the second most frequently used perspective in PR research during the first decade of the 21st century (Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Jones, 2003), it was less frequently present in SM research from 2010 to 2020, in the articles assessed in this research.

In addition to the popularity of SCCT, the increasing scholarly interest in crisis communication encouraged the development of Social-Me-

diated Crisis Communication Model (SMCC) over the past decade, and it became one of the most used PR theories. Finally, the findings also point to the multidisciplinary of the field of PR that still “borrows” theoretical frameworks from other related fields such as mass communication, journalism, and others. This finding is in line with Kent and Li’s (2020) argument that a specific SM theory for PR does not really exist, though it is much needed considering the abundance of scholarship on SM in PR.


## Limitations

Our data collection procedure included only peer-reviewed articles published in 9 selected journals in English and no other venues, languages, and disciplines.

## Implications for future research

Our study can be viewed as a starting point for the development of a stronger theoretical understanding of incorporating SM within PR. It is expected that future theoretical frameworks will relate to various developments in the field of PR, such as new SM platforms, increasing organizational capabilities to store and analyze big data, and various ethical and moral challenges related to privacy, transparency, personalization, and information security.

**Keywords:** *Social media, Systematic review, Content analysis, PR theory, PR Journals*



## Power of words and angry online publics: A study of discursive muscularity in networked mobilization of fan groups in China

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As the communication technology (ICT) shifts and reshapes the modes and processes of social interactions, there is increasing interest among public relations researchers in various online activist publics and their impact on the strategic goals of organizations. In comparison to brick-and-mortar organizations in which members exercise embodied interactions with each other, online activist networks or collectives are characterized by exchanges in mediated and discursive forms. As the discursive aspect is central to understanding online publics, so is the question of discursive muscularity in their organizational processes. Does online activism have the same kind of social impact as protests in the street, for example? Can an angry internet-based collective pose similar challenges to business organizations that work offline? In other words, do discursively constructed online collectives have the ability to bring about substantive, material outcomes? The question about discursive muscularity becomes more important during the COVID pandemic, as more social collectives, even those that used to operate face-to-face, are moving more of their activities online.

In this study, I examine the characteristics and processes of discursive muscularity of online publics, using the example of activist mobiliza-

tions among online fan groups in China. Using data collected from Weibo, a China-based social media platform, I observe how members of fan groups combine the logics of ethical consumption, national pride, and celebrity-fan relationship, and successfully mobilize collective/connective actions that specifically target at non-discursive (i.e., material) outcomes using largely discursive means. In doing so, I argue that fan groups represent a discursively “porous” structure that can amplify the reifying power of language.

Social structures and organizations can be either “porous” or “impermeable” to material, substantive influences of discursive events. In highlighting the impact of social structural and organizational features on discursive muscularity, I recognize that fan groups in China serves as a “porous” organizational structure where member of the organization, fans of celebrities (most of them luminous figures in the entertainment industry), have found a clear and consistent pathway of using their individual or collective voices to influence socio reality that are otherwise impermeable.

Fan pressure is a routine part of the life in a fan group. Communication activities in the forms of discussions, petitions, informal sensus and votes, and picketing (both on and off-line), etc., rou-



tinely takes place in attempts to sway the decisions of the celebrity on matters both private and public, ranging from marriage decisions to sponsorship contracts, from outfit choice to stance on political issues. The porousness of the fan group stems, first and foremost, from the internal logic of the groups. Such relationship, based on the idea of a special celebrity-fan relationship, legitimizes open exchanges over the personal and professional lives of the celebrity and encourages impassioned pressure over their decisions, unbarred by ethical concerns for autonomy or privacy.

Members of the fan group can set and reset, draw and undraw organizational boundaries often with no more than an impassioned exchange of words. Fan group activism is founded on the economic logic of “liking”. It is this economic logic that gives an online fan group its discursive porousness. As industries tap into the popularity of the celebrities for commercial success,

ROI, and brand image, the fan base largely determines the professional and commercial value of the celebrity. In this sense, fan power is not real grassroots power, but power granted by the multi-billion dollar celebrity-based industry, and more fundamentally, the “separation of labor” or “outsourcing” of the communication-relationship aspect of business by giant, consumer-based, industries.

Based on my observation and analysis of online fan groups in China, I discuss how online activist group like these gain ‘discursive teeth’, resulting in effective and consequential mobilization and organization of connective actions. I also discuss the theoretical and practical implications of new forms of connected activism, in particular the strategic maneuver of polarization and suppression that are demonstrated in the selected cases.

**Keywords:** *fan group, online activism, chinese social media*



## PR Education: Reloaded. The Pandemic's Legacy for Public Relations Teachers and Students

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

After two years of primarily remote public relations teaching due to the pandemic (which is expected to be over soon), PR educators and students prepare to shift to an in-person instruction that had been common before spring 2020. This task will require reestablishment (or reboot) of relationships between instructors and their students to meet the new, post-pandemic expectations of the PR industry. After the pandemic, some technology-based teaching methods are likely to stay on for longer. In contrast, others will be dropped as ineffective and harder to implement, especially in such areas as PR ethics and professional standards in the industry. Research among PR students should help educators and PR industry leaders to improve PR studies curricula in the post-pandemic era and to better respond to many challenges (like a lack of in-person relationships and online instruction at schools) PR students have been facing over the last two years.

### Research questions

Therefore, several research questions on PR students' level of preparedness to work in their chosen field, their attitude towards the ethical problems and professional standards in the PR industry, and the pandemic's influence on preferred teaching methods and effectiveness of online instruction should be asked:

**RQ1** – How do PR students perceive the role of the PR industry, especially during the pandemic (and beyond)? Are they aware of reputational issues that have been plaguing the field?


**RQ2** – What are PR students' expectations towards their careers? Do PR studies prepare them adequately for PR jobs, also in pandemic (by mostly online instruction)?

**RQ3** – Which online instruction methods have been proven effective during the pandemic and should be kept on in the PR curricula when the situation gets back to normal?

### Literature review

Scholars pointed out that during the pandemic and later, a heavy reliance on online educational techniques will create both threats and opportunities to PR education: the former include declining academic standards and the lack of situational (in-person) learning, while the latter refers to collaborative learning, open education resources, extended dialogic and feedback mechanisms, and to applying new technologies, more student-friendly, especially online- and mobile-based (Vujnovic, & Kruckeberg, 2021; Fullerton, & McKinnon, 2015).

Calls for ongoing dialogue among the PR industry, practitioners, and educators to develop a PR curriculum relevant to contemporary challenges



and needs of clients and employers, also created by the pandemic and post-pandemic era, have been consistently voiced by PR experts and leaders. They address many vital themes in PR education, including a mix of theory and practice in the PR curriculum, a list of required courses, skills and competencies of teachers, and technological, cultural, and social aspects of communication (Kim, Quesenberry, Sutherland, & Freberg, 2021). However, they overlook the opinions and experience of PR students who have to struggle and adjust to the PR industry's requirements during their first professional efforts, like internships and entry-level jobs.

## Methodology

The study will be based on quantitative research among undergraduate and graduate PR students in a European country. Respondents (at least 200 students) will be recruited by their teachers (by request of this researcher) at several universities that run PR sequences. As similar research was conducted previously (before the pandemic in 2019 and at the height of it in 2021), the results will allow for comparisons of PR students' attitudes and expectations towards their field, their preferred teaching methods (including online ones), and awareness of ethical issues and professional standards in the more extended period.


## Results and conclusions

The research will find out whether PR students (as would-be practitioners) are prepared adequately to make it in their field and whether PR curricula – primarily based on online methods during the pandemic – are functional and effective from their point of view. The results will also suggest which remote teaching techniques should be kept in PR schools beyond the current pandemic, thus improving the overall quality of PR education.

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**Keywords:** functionalism, online teaching, public relations education, public relations students



## Adopting a network perspective for stakeholder engagement and research during Covid- 19: The case of GBV research among private sector organisations in South Africa

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### **Introduction and purpose of the study**


We aim to show how the new paradigm of strategic public relations that embraces a network perspective (Yang & Saffer, 2019), supported and enabled ground breaking GBV research that not only fostered meaningful stakeholder engagement, but also created new platforms for multi-sectoral partnerships and collaboration in future research. This paper presents a case study on how a network approach was used to engage with leaders in private sector organisations in South Africa to explore their views and opinions about the private sector's role and responsibility in addressing GBV as in issue that affects all sectors of society and that necessarily impacts employees in all sectors.

### **Literature review**

Over the past three decades there has been a noticeable paradigm shift in public relations theorising, placing increasing emphasis on the relationships between organisations and society (Holmström, 2006). The central tenet is that all stakeholders, including private sector organisations, universities, government organisations, non-government organisations and civil society

must engage in issues that affect sustainability locally, as well as globally (Benecke, 2019). Public relations scholars have been researching the development of stakeholder networks, the various nodes and actors involved, how these relate to each other and the issue at hand as well as the influence of these networks on society (Yang & Saffer, 2019). Networks increase interaction, variation and selection (Davis, 2011) and in doing so they enable communication that would not have occurred otherwise.

Since the publication of the National Strategic Plan in South Africa on 11 March 2020, there has been an increasing call on private sector organisations to participate in addressing gender-based violence (GBV) that is five times more prevalent in South Africa than in other countries. Previously, GBV has been addressed predominantly as a public health concern and the private sector, as well as most social scientific disciplines focused on organisations, business, or strategy, had been excluded from GBV discourses and engagement (Davis, 2020). However, the business case for global sustainability has long been established and the Economic, Social and Government (ESG) scores have become a key



driver of strategy for the private sector. Since GBV has been flagged as a critical global sustainability issue, estimated at costing the global economy more than \$10 trillion annually (UN Women, 2016), it is indisputable that it is an issue that necessitates all stakeholders to collaborate in addressing it.

### Research approach and data collection

A case study research approach (Cutler, 2004) is followed to investigate these stakeholder networks with a key focus being placed on the various nodes and actors involved and how interconnectivity features and what the effects of the various affiliations were on inter-organisational networks. Secondary data as presented by the various engagements between actors as well as interviews with selected organisational representatives will be used to inform the findings.

### Contribution of the study

This study forms part of a bigger study involving the development of multi-organisational structures to address the GBV crisis in South Africa. This study will contribute in documenting the various networks actors and nodes, their interactions and the influence of these interactions at the onset of the project.

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## Reboot: Rediscover Communication with Internal and External Stakeholders through Engagement on Social Issues

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### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in March 2020 brought an opportunity to better define the “S” of ESG (Environment, Social and Governance). Investors were quick at expressing wanting to see a greater emphasis on the “S” of ESG by getting companies to reflect how they were treating their employees during these difficult times and making it clear it was going to be a consideration when analyzing their ESG reports moving forward.

Shortly after the pandemic outbreak, major societal issues emerged in 2020, whether the death of George Floyd in the United States in May 2020 which prompted the Black Lives Matter movement, or the discovery of unmarked graves at a former residential school sites in Canada in 2021, opening an era of communication expectations from businesses on engaging and addressing social issues.

### **Purpose**

Edelman’s 2022 Trust Barometer identified a state of “cycle of distrust” where people do not trust businesses to actually “walk the talk” when it comes to social issues and values, which clashes with people’s expectations wanting more from businesses when it comes to engagement on social issues. In most cases, respondents said “companies aren’t doing enough to address issues like

climate change or economic inequality – which contributes to the lack of trust”.

Employees and consumers, especially Millennials, are increasingly becoming more socially conscious (and that trend is likely to continue with Gen Z). Younger consumers tend to research companies before they make purchasing decisions to identify these companies’ actions towards social issues. Younger employees do similar research before applying to a job posting. This provides an opportunity for how organizations interact with their publics. Communication and public relation practitioners must play a role to earn back trust from their organizations’ stakeholders.

### **Methodology**

A media content analysis

### **Research Problem and Questions**

- (1) What is the history of organizations engaging on social issues?
- (2) Which stakeholders voice stronger opinions on businesses embracing social issues?
  - shareholders
  - employees
  - consumers
  - board members

(3) What is the state of businesses communicating social issues around the world?

- USA
- Canada
- Europe

(4) What are the current trends in communicating social issues?

(5) What are future perspectives in social issues management?

### Conclusions and Key Take Aways

Answers to the five research questions helped:

- Determine what is “responsible, sincere and authentic communications”.
- How communications and public relation practitioners can avoid the trap of “washing” their messages on social issues.
- Which social issues businesses need to embrace and communicate based on their stakeholders.

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**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility, CSR, corporate responsibility, corporate reputation, social issues, authenticity, trust, issues management, credibility

## Governmental Use of Social Media and AI during Disasters, Crises, and Emergency Response

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### Introduction and Purpose

This paper explores the conference theme of whether social media could use a reboot in communicating with stakeholders during disasters, crises, or emergencies. To some extent, this “reboot” is not optional: it is happening due to rapid changes in technology such as AI and machine learning, and due to social changes and pressures from the sustained crisis of the global Covid-19 pandemic.

### Literature Review

This study examines the literature of crises, emergency, and disaster management, as well as government and public affairs, ethics of governmental relations, and applications of artificial intelligence in communication and social media use. **RQ:** This paper asks, to what extent are public affairs officers (PAOs) - or Public Information Officers (PIOs) - using social media and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to help manage crises, emergencies, and disasters? **Method:** Data collection and analyses is still ongoing: Two focus groups and 8 in-depth interviews with 40 PAOs working in governmental agencies were conducted to understand how social media is used during a crisis, the extent to which misinformation interferes with accurate information, and the potential for AI application in optimizing efficiencies during a crisis or natural disaster.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Hurricane response was used as an example in a coastal southeastern state in the USA. This research is illustrative of response in that state but due to variances in states and governing structures, and across nationalities, the conclusions should not be applied to other areas without further study. Future studies could compare and contrast other states, public sector organizations, and nationalities in use of social media and AI in emergencies.

### Results and Conclusions

Officials detailed the extent to which they used different social media platforms during such an emergency, how media relations takes place, how misinformation is handled (from honest mistakes to maleficent bad actors), and how citizen-stakeholders are communicated with via social media during crises. Participants want an AI that can show sentiment analysis, monitor news sources, measure the reach of their own messages disseminated via social media, and find problematic or incorrect information. Currently, research, data analytics, and AI are little-used in governmental public affairs, especially during crises. This finding shows a need for formative and evaluative research, as well as a potential for marked improvement in efficiencies via AI applications.



## **Practical and social implications**

PAOs/PIOs could have a revolutionized ability to identify information reach, flows, provenance, and authenticity as well as to address misinformation on social media via the use of AI. As a computer science team develops the AI supporting this research, the use of AI and machine learning will be tested which can speed the efficiency and accuracy of responses to hurricanes and other crises/disasters. Emergency management could be improved in numerous ways and used in many locales.

**Keywords:** *Public Affairs; Social Media; Crisis; Disaster; AI*

**Acknowledgment:** Research funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF).



## “It’s just a job” Public relations careers in the sex industry

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### Introduction and purpose of study

The positioning of public relations as a strategic management function is the result of it drawing its body of knowledge and justification from a reasonably mainstream range of organisational types and cultures. Public relations may be more – or less – than this. We do not know because the research around the value of public relations to organisations has given little space to the opinions, innovations and experiences of those working in marginalised or ‘dirty’ roles or occupations. As Edwards points out: “the other must be allowed to speak [... and...] be able to construct a narrative of the world that reflects their own experience.” (2015:8) and as researchers, we have a duty to include all worlds when we talk about the public relations industry and not just draw our understanding from those we see as acceptable or performing the ‘right’ type of public relations.

To play a small part in including the views of ‘others’, my paper explores **the lives and work of women working in public relations and communication roles in the ‘adult’ industry** (worth an estimated \$15 billion worldwide). Tibbals notes that “the voices and experiences of women working in the adult film industry are often overlooked” (2013:21). In other words, just because we find an organisation distasteful, should it mean that we disregard the experiences of those who work in it?

### Practical and social implications

The ‘public relations’ experienced by older practitioners, freelancers, and those working in marginalised occupations (such as the sex industry and for ‘unethical’ causes such as tobacco as well as for radical causes) and those whose appearance, abilities, culture, religion or nationality marks them as ‘different’ are excluded as subjects from most public relations research. As a result, the industry’s desire for ‘diversity’ falls short – sometimes diversity of thought appears only to be acceptable when it comes from people considered worthy of inclusion by industry leaders and researchers. This, of course, excludes many modes of public relations practice that fall outside the dominant paradigm.

### Literature Review

Some may find the idea that the adult industry has public relations roles and a career structure problematic – how, for instance, does this sit with the notion that a public relations professional should be the “conscience of an organisation” (e.g. Neill, & Drumwright, 2012)? But dismissing a highly profitable but ‘dirty’ sector is to overlook and denigrate the people who work in it and the experiences and knowledge created therein. For instance, Calvert and Richards (2006), who interviewed five women working in professional roles in the adult film industry, noted that it was important to “benefit from understanding the viewpoints and options of real people who produce and perform the content

which is of scholarly debate” (261).

Within the adult industry the role of public relations is acknowledged and foregrounded. Cormella (2008), writing of the AVN Adult Entertainment Expo, Las Vegas observed that attendees included “adult retailers, manufacturers, porn producers, industry talent, fans, public relations experts, and members of the media.” And Tibbals noted that the adult industry was more diverse in its recruitment than mainstream public relations, giving employment to those who did not have “both a relevant degree and the class privilege required to complete an unpaid internship” (2013:30).

## Research questions

What is the lived experience of women working in public relations and communications in the adult industry?

What do these women think about the ‘mainstream’ public relations industry and their marginalised position within it?

## Methodology

To explore my research questions, I gathered informal interview data from women working in public relations and communications roles in the adult industry.

## Results and conclusions

My early research demonstrates that high quality public relations work is carried out within the adult industry and that professional qualifications are not unusual but those working in the industry feel excluded from many discussions about the role of public relations.

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**Keywords:** *Public Relations; adult industry; professionalism; lived experience; practitioners; pornography*



## The impact of marketing communication strategies on online consumer-brand community engagement during COVID-19 pandemic

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

Online brand community engagement plays a vital role in developing and sustaining consumer-brand interaction to disseminate the latest news to drive purchase intention (Bilro & Loureiro, 2020). Due to the social distancing and lockdown policies that led to various measurements against the local epidemic, the online brand community became the major communication channel for brands during the COVID-19 pandemic. In turn, various waves of pandemic measurements may affect consumer-brand interactions differently. To investigate the phenomenon, this study aims to quantitatively evaluate the changes in consumer-brand interactions on social media between two pandemic waves, including pre-, during, and post-pandemic periods.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, Taiwan has been one of the few areas with less confirmed cases after adopting solid epidemic prevention policies. Both moderate and rigorous epidemic prevention policies have been implemented, respectively, from January to April 2020 and from May to July 2021. Therefore, using Taiwan as an example to assess longer term consumer engagement behavior on an official brand social

media account would be appropriate. Considering the high social media penetration rate and industry characteristics (one of the most affected industries), the official Facebook account of a premium chain restaurant brand in Taiwan was selected.

### Literature review

The process of behavioral engagement of community members on social media could be explicitly elaborated by stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R model), brand-generated content stimulates (S) consumer's emotional reaction (from brand learning, entitativity, and hedonic values) that drives consumer's behavior response (Carlson, Rahman, Voola, & De Vries, 2018). Moreover, the stimulation of behavior engagement is based on service-dominant (S-D) logic, referring to an inherently beneficiary-oriented and relational framework (Chandler & Lusch, 2014). From a practical perspective, Raïes, Mühlbacher, and Gavard-Perret (2015) mentioned that behavioral engagement could be quantified by the frequency and level of brand-consumer interactions. The context of behavioral engagement on Facebook is adequate to elaborate its changes due to epidemic prevention policy be-



cause consumer-brand interaction is multilevel (posts, comments, and shares) and multivariate structure (reacts and replies) (Ángeles Oviedo-García, 2014).

## Methodology

The engagement data from the Facebook fan page of the premium chain restaurants were collected in 2020 and 2021 via web crawler technique, including posts (numbers of likes, comments, and shares within a post), comments (numbers of likes, replies within a comment, and the daily number of comments), and shares (numbers of likes, comments, shares within a shared post, and the daily number of shares). Two pandemic waves in Taiwan were examined from January 23 to April 13, 2020 (level 2 epidemic alert – L2EA) and from 15 to July 26, 2021 (epidemic alert – L3EA).

The pre- and post-pandemic periods were determined by the range of available data in the two epidemic periods, covering one month of the pre-pandemic period of L2EA and L3EA and four months after the two pandemics. In total, 192 posts, 19,912 comments, and 15,400 shared posts were collected. An independent t-test was adopted to examine the engagement variation between the two pandemic periods.

## Results and Conclusion

In the pre-pandemic period, numbers of likes ( $p < 0.001$ ) and replies within a comment ( $p = 0.004$ ) in the comment level in L3EA was significantly higher than L2EA, while numbers of likes within a shared post ( $p = 0.006$ ) in the L2EA share level was significantly higher than L3EA. During the pandemic, the comment level in L2EA was similar to L3EA, while numbers of likes ( $p = 0.001$ ) and comments within a shared post ( $p = 0.056$ ) in the share level in L2EA were significantly higher than L3EA. In the post-pandemic period, the daily number of comments in the comment level ( $p = 0.011$ ) and numbers of

likes ( $p < 0.001$ ), comments ( $p = 0.091$ ), and the daily number of shares ( $p = 0.004$ ) in the share levels in L2EA were significantly higher than L3EA. Though L3EA showed a higher engagement in the pre-pandemic, this trend did not sustain during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods.

## Practical implications

As one of the most affected industries during the pandemic, restaurants initiated many new ways to engage consumers through their online brand community by posting food delivery services, takeout, and food tips. During both pandemics, the restaurant brand attempted to capture consumers' attention and to stimulate their intrinsic motivation into behavior engagement response with similar services. One possible explanation of higher engagement in L2EA is that consumers had strong emotional needs of having restaurant services in the beginning of the pandemic that is in line with the S-O-R model.

L3EA, one year after the pandemic, did not perform a higher engagement that may result from the anticipated hedonic or utilitarian services from the restaurants that may not be able to satisfy consumers. The use of similar stimuli (the post content) could not raise the same engagement response or sustain engagement of brand-consumer interactions, resulting in a diminishing marginal utility effect in the online brand community. Hence, in the restaurant industry, the descending trend of online brand-consumer engagement could be expected in the future possible pandemic periods if no new or strong intervention.



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## All the lonely people: Considering the attributes of audiences who consume and share untruthful content

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### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profoundly negative effects globally. Beyond the immediate challenges to physical health of the virus itself, the policies and associated public communication of many national governments to protect their populations from physical harm – such as the authoritarian advocacy of lockdowns, self-isolation and social distancing – have generated unintended consequences in the form of mental health issues. In particular, while many people have reported a combination of anxiety, isolation and loneliness during the pandemic, Jones et al. (2021) identified that vulnerable minority groups such as ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, low-income families and those already in poor health were at significantly greater risk of experiencing loneliness.

The public communication style of many governments has combined authoritarianism with paternalism in order to compel citizens to comply with loose guidance and obey new and often hastily-imposed laws restricting freedoms. Despite this public communication effort, a proportion of citizens in many nations remains indifferent or opposed to public health messages on topics such as vaccination. Moreover, over two years on from the initial reports of COVID-19, groups and individuals continue to generate and distribute untruthful content, fake news and

conspiracy theories relating to COVID-19 and measures to mitigate the pandemic.

### Purpose

Scholars in public relations, public health and other fields have already diligently attended to senders and their messaging in relation to the pandemic and other crises. The focus of this project is to help public relations practitioners to better understand audiences in these situations. In particular, the purpose of the study that follows is to explore how various individual psychological attributes affect an audience's susceptibility to receive and accept untruthful content, as well as drive their propensity to share such material on social media.

### Literature Review

Previous studies suggested that supporters of right-wing ideologies manifest a stronger tendency to share fake news (FN) but political orientation alone did not explain the tendency to spread FN. Collective Narcissism (CN, de Zavala *et al.* 2009) defined as an unrealistic and exaggerated belief in greatness of one's ingroup was identified as a moderator of sharing FN. The more in-group self-esteem on an implicit level was lower the higher was the tendency to share fake information.



In the domain of conspiracy theories, Albarracín (2021) suggested a motivational continuum, ranging from knowledge to social integration whereby believing in conspiracy theories can serve an ego supporting function. More specifically, *this motivation entails defending the ego from unpleasant thoughts about the self* (p. 206, Albarracín, 2021). Several other motivational forces are also said to play a role in support for conspiracy theories: reduction of uncertainty, need for cognitive closure and need for uniqueness. These factors have been separately investigated as correlates of loneliness (e.g. Joubert, 1987; Parlapani *et al.* 2020).

Given this pattern of evidence, it would be interesting to investigate how a state of very few links with others (=loneliness) can further affect sharing fake information. The present study focuses specifically on the phenomenon of sharing fake information and its potential ascendants: loneliness, need for uniqueness and need for cognitive closure and CN. Fake News sharing (for the definitional discussion see Edson *et al.* 2017) is distinguished from disinformation as the latter of the terms implies the deceptive intent of the source (e.g. Greifeneder *et al.* 2021), while the goal of the study is to identify motivations of sharing fake information without making assumptions about harming or deceiving others.

## Methodology

Experimental design was proposed to establish causal relationships between investigated variables. Responses from 240 participants were collected as per sample size calculations provided by G\*Power (Faul *et al.* 2009). After collecting demographic and social media use information, Collective Narcissism (de Zavala *et al.* 2009), Need for Cognitive Closure (Roets & Hiel, 2011) and The Self Attributed Need for Uniqueness (Lynn & Harris, 1997) scales were administered.

In the next stage loneliness was experimentally induced. Finally, participants were shown fake news information about risks associated with COVID-19 vaccine and asked to assess it on several scales, including probability of sharing (separately) it on social media and among their peers. Participants also completed the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russel *et al.* 1980) twice – before and after experimental manipulation.

After the study, all participants received thorough debrief information explaining the manipulation, fake COVID-19 information and were suggested several credible sources with vaccination information. They were also encouraged to participate in the Covid 19-vaccination programme.

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**Keywords:** *Fake News, Collective Narcissism, Need for Uniqueness, Loneliness.*

## Establishing ‘tacit’ support as ‘CSR risk’: The case study of Boohoo and Black Lives Matter

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### Introduction

During the pandemic, and following the COP26 summit, there has been growing pressure, especially from millennials, Gen Z, consumer activists and institutional investors for Governments and corporations to pursue a wider range of CSR initiatives. Whilst many new initiatives are underway, there has also been a growing number of enterprises deciding to communicate public support for specific causes. This paper will explore whether publicly offered support can represent a significant reputational risk.

### Literature review

Coombs and Holladay (2015) acknowledged that CSR can be harmful for an organisation’s reputation if it is poorly executed. Both greenwashing (Lim et al., 2013), inconsistencies and mismatches of actions (Bhattacharya et al., 2011) are highlighted as potential stimulants for reputational challenges. However, these reactions assume that the policy or action taken is intended to tackle or highlight issues that relate to specific corporations’ intentions. They relate to when CSR activity is used to mitigate potential corporate risks (Bebbington et al., 2008) and cover when it aims to enhance a pre-existing reputation or counter activist engagement.

### Critique

This framework, whilst useful for helping to understand activists’ reactions to specific policy or corporate action, is less helpful when trying to understand the impact that tacit support for a cause might have for an enterprise. For example, during 2020 many corporations offered their support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Such support was not always linked directly to pre-existing CSR policies and in part was often an expression of abhorrence about the murder of George Floyd.

### Purpose

This exploratory paper will study the consequences for the UK based Boohoo fashion group, whose brands include Pretty Little Thing, Karen Millen and Wallis, of tacitly supporting the BLM movement in the summer of 2020. Their act of support stimulated a rapid and powerful consumer activist response. Boohoo’s support for a cause rather than a specific set of actions linked to pre-existing CSR policies and programmes, stimulated hostile consumer reactions. This raises a number of new questions around tacit support that require exploration.





## Core Questions

Firstly, can tacit support for a cause, unrelated to previous CSR activity or policies, be deemed a CSR risk? Secondly, will support for different types of cause stimulate different levels of reaction and types of consumer activism? Furthermore, if tacit support causes a strong reaction, will a previous track record as a 'good' corporate citizen with effective engagement with stakeholders, help mitigate against hostile consumer activism? Finally, when tacit support triggers consumer activism, are there preferred strategies to help deal with the type of risk?

## Research

To initially address these questions, findings from Clarke's (2021) study of the Boohoo crisis will be presented for the first time. They are based on an interpretivist and multi-method approach that allows for individual perceptions to be used to help create new thinking around how we can understand 'tacit support' and 'CSR risk'.

The study draws upon content analysis of 180 tweets from consumer activists criticising Boohoo's support for the BLM movement and subsequent accusations of failing to pay workers the National Minimum Wage in their garment factory in Leicester, England. Focus group work will also reveal attitudes of consumers and activists with regard to tacit support for causes.

The 2021 study looks at the circumstances of Boohoo providing tacit support for the BLM movement. It meticulously considers tacit support as a crisis risk.

The key focal point being whether Boohoo had the moral legitimacy to support BLM when they had failed to ensure that those producing their high street garments received the National Minimum Wage.

The speed and intensity of the consumer activists' threats are highlighted along with an exploration of the notion that race was a particularly intense trigger for action.

## Limitations

This initial study is not designed to present a complete framework for understanding tacit support as a CSR risk. Further research is required in relation to other circumstances where tacit support has promoted a hostile reaction. Equally, further work is required to help develop a classification of risk. Potential corporate reactions also need to be studied further.

## Application of Findings

Learnings from this study can be used by corporates to help assess the level of risk that is being taken when tacit support is publicly offered for a cause.

It will also be suggested to corporates and consultants that tacit support for a cause may vary widely according to the issue that is being discussed. For example, it is speculated that issues of race represent a higher level of risk.

Finally, this study is set to open a dialogue with PR professionals about relevant ways to respond to activist challenges that arise from tacit support for a cause.

**Keywords:** *CSR risk, BLM, Boohoo, Tacit CSR Support*

## Reboot communication job search after Covid-19 pandemic: an empirical analysis

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### Purpose

“If last year was about responding to an unprecedented shock, this year is about recovering” (Deloitte, 2022). Covid-19 pandemic has totally affected the scenario where public relations and communication practitioners operate by increasing risk perception and a sense of uncertainty towards different aspects of social and professional life (Zerfass et al. 2021). Professionals have been forced to reinvent themselves and their work tasks due to the pandemic effects of digital transformation of workflows and disintermediation of relationships with isolated stakeholders.

Moreover, according to OECD, Covid-19 has upended how we approach our economies and society, by underlining the urgency to reconstruct a more resilient labour market addressed to be sustainable and socially responsible (Laubiger et al., 2020). More specifically, empirical studies conducted by OECD have underlined how much Covid-19 pandemic has emphasised the importance of strategically addressing the issues of circular economy, sustainable development, diversity, equity, and inclusion. During the pandemic, we have assisted to short-term reduction in environmental pressure (for instance energy-related emissions have been reduced by 7%). The short-term results have heightened environmental and social awareness and has awakened consciences of public and private organiza-

tions about sustainability issues.

The health emergency has provided an opportunity to change the games rules in the professional development field by creating new jobs linked to sustainable issues; by replacing jobs in industries characterised by negative environmental impact with more sustainable jobs; by satisfying the educational need for competences, skills, and capabilities to manage socially responsible issues and activities. According to this scenario, it seems necessary to investigate how communication jobs and skills demand has changed during and after Covid-19 emergency with a specific focus on the area of sustainability and social responsibility.

### Methodology

A systematic analysis of communication job listings published on LinkedIn platform within the geographical area of European Union will be implemented. The research approach will include the following steps: a) the application of a multi-keyword search for monitoring job advertising within communication field including keywords linked to sustainability (i.e. “CSR”, “Corporate Social Responsibility”; “Circular Economy”, “Sustainability”, “Green Economy”, “Environmental Communication”; “Sustainable Report”); b) the implementation of webscraping technique, which extracts information from LinkedIn announcements by retrieving the con-

tent based on a query, aggregating it, and converting it from unstructured data into structured forms (Mitchell, 2018); c) the implementation of a semantic analysis and the machine learning-based technique of topic modelling which identifies and organises words co-occurrence in large collections of textual data, by attributing categories or labels based on topics or themes identified within the text (Hu et al. 2014).

### Research Findings

A total amount of 59581 job postings have been emerged in the first part of the analysis.

Keywords	Number of job listings
Sustainability	20595
CSR	17200
Environmental Communication	9860
Sustainable Report	6286
Corporate Social Responsibility	4129
Circular Economy	1279
Green Economy	232

A classification of professional competences linked to sustainability will be provided to identify professional activities required in the communication field.

### Research Limitations

The study is characterised by some limitations. First, on LinkedIn, job advertisements are user-generated contents, inserted and modified manually by LinkedIn users. This means that information included in the job posting could change or job advertisement could be deactivated during the analytical process. Therefore, the crawlers used for collecting data need to be maintained and fixed. The second limitation is

related to the topic model analysis, as the short text, the lack of structure and the lack of context characterising LinkedIn job postings could affect the machine learning techniques.

### Practical and Social Implications.

The study provides useful insights for aligning job and skills demands from communication market labour and educational programs offered by universities and business schools. The study contributes to delineate a draft of hypothetical professional profiles within the sustainable communication field.

### Originality and Value

This study enriches the stream of research focused on analysing the development of communication profession with a specific interest to the new trending disciplinary area of sustainability.

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**Keywords:** Sustainability; CSR; Job search; Professional Development

## Analysis of the WHO's social networking communication strategies during the COVID-19 infodemic: The consequences of managing Facebook page according to a diffusionist logic

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The COVID-19 pandemic, who could be described as a “megacrisis” (Sellnow-Richmond & al., 2018), has given rise to a second crisis—the “infodemic.” This last word refers to an overabundance of online and offline information of varying degrees of veracity, including inaccurate, misleading or fabricated news, images and videos circulating about the disease (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020a). The effects of disinformation are not insignificant, as they can weaken the actions of agencies tasked with effectively managing the crisis (Brünker et al., 2017), undermine the communication of trustworthy information to the public (Dornan, 2020), and potentially damage the reputations of healthcare organizations.

In the context of a global crisis such as COVID-19, the World Health Organization (WHO) has an obligation, as part of its mandate, to communicate scientific information (Blouin Genest, 2015) on public health. To this end, the WHO uses both public relations media (press releases and press conferences) and social networking sites to communicate public health messages to

the public (WHO, 2020b).

### Methodology

This paper explores how the WHO has used Facebook as an international strategic information and/or communication strategy in order to fulfil its mandate during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, we analyzed content published on the WHO page (4.8 million members at the time of conducting the study) between January 10 and September 19, 2020. We then performed a socio-technical analysis of the platform (Champagne-Poirier & Ben Affana, 2016) focused on 1) the page's technical architecture, 2) its interaction structures, and 3) the experiences and contributions of the users. Our analysis is mixed in that it qualifies and quantifies WHO practices as well as providing a better understanding of how the users participate in and contribute to the platform. Finally, linking our data to WHO obligations and objectives allowed for an analysis and interpretation of the communication strategies put in place.



A total of 481 WHO Facebook posts about the COVID-19 pandemic published during the study period were analyzed. These posts generated more than 3,343,636 comments, 250,000 of which we processed in order to reach what we consider to be “theoretical saturation” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

## Results

Our mixed analysis of the 481 posts led, among other things, to the observation that the publication types used most frequently by the WHO are infographics (42%), Facebook Lives (38%) and animated videos (11%). The three themes most addressed by the WHO in its 481 publications are preventive measures (26%), current events (20%) and conceptual and medical explanations (16%). Our qualitative analysis of the comments helped identify nine types of communicative intentions and twelve interrelated user profiles. Modeling of these relationships, as well as the specificities of the intentions of the WHO and user profiles, revealed that (unidirectional) diffusionist information strategies did not allow for an effective management and moderation of alarming, misinformative, disinformative or conspiratorial comments and contents (Landi & al., 2021; Malecki & al., 2021).

## Conclusion and implications

Globally speaking, the extent of interactions on the WHO Facebook page during the pandemic and the different ways it has been used show its importance in the WHO’s communication strategy. This project demonstrates the many different attempts made by users (the users/receivers) to participate in mediatization and sensemaking around the COVID-19 crisis through this page (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015; Généreux & al., 2020).

The page also exhibits a lack of moderation on the part of the WHO. This is particularly problematic considering that a large number of comments made on the page went against the mea-

asures and information dictated by the WHO. The contamination of the WHO’s statements is a concern in that it may undermine the fight against COVID-19 (Bridgman & al., 2020; Pavelea & al., 2021). Indeed, the WHO’s communication efforts were not adapted to the reality of the multidirectional exchanges on its Facebook page.

In sum, our paper aims to enable the WHO and more importantly all public health organizations to better understand the communicative nature of social networking sites in order to better use them in their communication strategies aiming to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on citizens and users.

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**Keywords:** Strategic communication, COVID-19; Facebook, World Health Organization, public health

## Role of the reflective (communication) strategist in obtaining social intelligence as part of environmental assessment: A case study of International Airport X

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### Introduction and purpose

The case selected for this multidisciplinary research in the corporate communication and strategic management domains is International Airport X -- Africa's third largest, most award-winning airport (e.g. Skytrax World Airport Awards ranked it 22<sup>nd</sup> Best Airport in the World in 2019). Seven of its eight senior management team members were the respondents in the descriptive survey conducted. As the researcher, the eighth (Senior Manager: Corporate Affairs) was excluded.

The main problem of this **intrinsic** case study is that the Airport's stakeholder/issues landscape is shifting drastically, inter alia due to pending infrastructural developments and extensive land acquisitions (e.g. a new runway has major consequences for the three surrounding informal settlements/shanty towns). Although competitive intelligence is gathered as part of the *environmental assessment* process, the need for and importance of obtaining *social intelligence* as a tool to address stakeholder/societal expectations and values as well as the early identification of concerns/issues, do not appear to be fully understood by senior management.

The secondary problem of this **instrumental** case study is theoretical: Firstly, to relook the

*reflective strategist* role in the corporate communication domain, conceptualised and empirically verified in South Africa (SA) by Steyn (2000); and to **explore** it in the context of obtaining *social intelligence* as part of the *environmental assessment* process. Secondly, to **reaffirm** this role empirically, according to senior management's normative *expectations* and their *perceptions* of its performance.

The **major research objective** set to address this two-fold problem is to **explore** and **describe** the role of the *reflective (communication) strategist* in obtaining *social intelligence* as part of the *environmental assessment* process at the societal (macro) level of an organisation, to be used as input into enterprise strategy development.

### Literature review

In the field of **corporate communication**, the focus was to identify questionnaire statements for the descriptive survey (in November 2019) to reaffirm the relevance of the *reflective (communication) strategist* role two decades later. The point of departure was the stream of research on the "PR strategist role" initiated by Steyn (2000); Steyn and Green (2006) who added a reflective dimension (based on the EBOK project); Everett (2006); Niemann (2009); and US researchers Tindall and Holtzhausen (2011).



Other strategic roles research -- notably Beur-er-Züllig, et al. (2009); Zerfass and Viertman (2017) -- provided conceptual guidance in developing new statements.

In the field of **strategic management**, the focus was on obtaining an initial understanding of the other major concepts *environmental assessment* and *social intelligence* (“competitive intelligence” from marketing provided most guidance).

## Methodology

Mixed methods (triangulation) was selected by conducting secondary research (literature review) and primary research (descriptive survey). The sample size of seven was small but represented a census. Eight previously verified measurement items (i.e. 25% of the 32 items) from the early stream of research was *replicated* in order to reaffirm the original “PR strategist/reflectionist” role. The other 24 items were developed based on the literature review. Hypothesis testing (paired samples t-tests) was done on the findings of all 32 items.

The rationale for a descriptive survey was to **maximise the valuable time** of senior executives; establish the **purpose** through the statements provided; provide a **common framework** amongst respondents to improve validity; and serve as an **educational tool** re the major concepts.

## Implications of results and conclusions

The survey provided senior management’s *expectations* and *perceptions of performance* with regard to gathering *social intelligence* as part of the *environmental assessment* process and the potential role of the *reflective strategist* therein. Organisations of today need to adopt a structured, formalised environmental assessment approach whereby senior management listens to, interacts with, and obtains feedback from their external (and internal) stakeholder and societal environ-

ment on a regular basis.

The above strategic and applied research findings contribute substantially towards addressing the **intrinsic case problem**. Although the findings cannot be generalised, they provide guidelines to senior management in the private, public and non profit sector.

(While not a research objective), the findings of the survey’s 32 items provided the foundation for the reconceptualisation of the *reflective strategist* role in providing *social intelligence* as part of the *environmental assessment* process, which advances theory -- likewise the conceptualisation of *social intelligence* based on the literature review. These basic and introspective research findings contribute substantially towards addressing the study’s **instrumental case problem**.

## Future research (to address limitations)

Exploratory/empirical research to provide a clearer understanding of the interrelationship of the concepts *reflective strategist* role, *social intelligence* and *environmental assessment*.

Further research on *environmental assessment* can address the ‘how’ it is to be done, i.e. develop a formalised system (and not only the ‘what’).

Limited literature on *social intelligence* necessitates further research of the concept.

Based on recent roles research, statements (activities) to broaden the *reflective strategist* role can be developed and measured.

**Keywords:** *Corporate communication strategist, PR strategist role, reflective strategist, environmental assessment, social intelligence.*

## Dear COVID-19, Message from Employee Diaries: Reformulating Employee Communication with the Pandemic

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

The aim of the study is to understand the challenges of the employees who are working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. What are their (non)challenges they went through with the shift of working remotely? What type of future are they forecasting in employee relations? What are the lessons to be taken from this experience for restructuring the employee relations in the future? There are not many studies which look at the impact of working from home on employee relations/communication. With COVID-19 pandemic, working from home has been widespread all over the world, in many industries, and in different type of organizations. Employee working can also employ a hybrid approach in future. This research can create awareness and may help to reshape employee and management communication/relations.


### Literature Review

Communicating effectively is always difficult, and when people are under stress, anxious and sad, this becomes even more difficult (DuFrene and Lehman, 2014, p. 444). Effective communication positively affects employees to engage in their jobs and achieve their goals in difficult times (Chanana, 2020). ‘No communication

ever falls into a vacuum in people’s heads” (Davenport and Barrow, 2009, p. 21). Organizations need to work to develop and nurture commitment to employees that requires two-way relationships (Robinson et al., 2004). “Employees are seeking to be informed, reassured, and encouraged” (DuFrene and Lehman, 2014, p. 444). COVID-19 global pandemic had created a global impact in the lifetime of many people in many ways. A study conducted by Institute for Public Relations and Peppercomm on how businesses are handling the crisis have found out that communicating the employees on COVID-19 was a priority for the communication function. (2020)

### Methodology

The research is qualitative. Diary method will be used. “A diary can be defined as a document created by an individual who has maintained a regular, personal and contemporaneous record.” (Alaszewski, 2006, p.1). It is an innovative way of gaining rich insights about the daily processes, relationships, products and consumers (Patterson, 2005, p. 142). “Diaries, self-report instruments used repeatedly to examine ongoing experiences, offer the opportunity to investigate social, psychological, and physiological processes, within everyday situations.” (Bolger et al., 2003,



p. 580). The sample of the study consists of 10 randomly chosen employees who are working either from home or hybrid. They will be asked to write their diary for a work period of five days. The employees will be asked to write on “how they spend their workday at home,” “how they dream spending their next workday,” and “what could be done to make their next day a better day.” Diary method is usually used with another method and the same group of people will also be interviewed. Diary method is not often used in communication studies so a research paper on employee relations during the COVID-19 pandemic can provide valuable insights.

### Results and Conclusion

The study is work-in-progress.

### Limitations of the study

It is exploratory research and the number of participants to the study are limited.

### Suggestions for future research

The diary method can be used with a larger number of employees working remotely, and industry specific employee experiences and perceptions could be studied as well.

### Practical and social implications

The public relations/communication and human resources functions of organizations have now actually an issue (COVID-19) where they can equally partner in managing employee relations. The research will inform us on communication challenges of working from home, expectancies of employees, and how to integrate human factor in this “isolated” environment. Suggestions will be made on how to communicate with employees and how employees want to communicate with the management and with their colleagues. Working from home may have benefits such as not commuting to work, (losing time) and has

also other negative impacts such as affecting the socialization and being accessible all times. The research will uncover the specific issues of employees who are working from home and suggest a guide for psychologically healthy employee who would be more productive and happier at the same time.

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**Keywords:** *employee communication, COVID-19, diary method, employee*

## Global Capability Framework in Turkey: Findings of the Delphi Study on Public Relations and Communication Profession Capabilities

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

The researchers extended the project of Global Alliance Global Capability Framework (GCF). GCF is a global study which has been carried by many countries' researchers to explore the capabilities required for the public relations and communication profession. This is a replication of the study which has three phases, Delphi, survey and focus groups. The aim of the paper is to share the results of the Delphi round carried out with a panel of public relations/communications experts to explore the capabilities.

### Literature Review

Knowledge has been discussed in public relations education, both in undergraduate and graduate curriculums, but there is not much information on the knowledge areas of European practitioners (Tench and Moreno, 2013). Of the many contributions of Global Alliance is a global standard (GBOK project) for the practice by studying the research, educational frameworks and credentials. From the GBOK project, another project developed- the Global Capability Framework. The rationale behind it is that public relations is not practiced in every country in the same way, therefore there is a need to approach it from the "capability" perspective. Capabilities


are linked to competencies, but they are more dynamic. Gregory (2008) defines competencies as "behavioral repertoires or sets of behaviors that support the attainment of organizational objectives (p. 216).

### Methodology

The research aims to look for the most important capabilities in public relations and communication management in Turkey. The initial stage comprised of a Delphi study in which a panel of experts were asked to identify the core capabilities of the field. The objective was to come up with agreed core capabilities. In the first round, the panel members were asked to list and define these capabilities. In the second round, they were asked to rate them in terms of importance. In the final round, they were asked to indicate the top most important ones by ranking them. The Delphi study carried out had 14 experts of which 6 of them are academics, 5 practitioners and 3 employers.

### Results and Conclusion

The paper will share the results from the Delphi panel. From the first round 30 capabilities came out. The contribution to the communication strategy, managing corporate reputation,



integration of the organization to updated national and international developments, effective use of digital and conventional communication channels, management of issues, risks and crisis, following the trends in the business world and integrating them to business models in the organization and following the technological advances are some of the highlighted capabilities by the Delphi analysis.

### **Limitations of the study**

This is the first stage of a comprehensive study.

### **Suggestions for future research**

The study will be carried out with a survey which will reach to a broader base of public relations professionals, and academic in Turkey. Then there will be also three focus groups conducted.

### **Practical and social implications**

The findings of the study after being endorsed by the public relations professional associations in Turkey and communicated widely in the academia as well can be used by practitioners and employers. The academia also has an action plan to incorporate these in the public relations programs.

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*Keywords: public relations capabilities, Turkey, Global Capability Framework, Global Alliance*

## The emotional toll of the Covid 19 pandemic on health communicators and its leadership effects


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The Covid 19 pandemic is an extended crisis. Its nature and longevity have challenged national health communication professionals on multiple fronts, requiring them to engage with broader, and often new, audiences, new ways and in a complex and rapidly changing environment. Significant emotional resilience has been demanded of them by their organisations and society in general. Drawing on qualitative interviews, this paper examines four dimensions of emotional impact on the crisis on health communicators: the specific triggers that generated an emotional reaction, the emotions these evoked, the support mechanisms communicators used and the differential effects it had on those communicators as leaders in their organisations.

In their extensive review of the public relations crisis literature Manias-Munoz, Jin & Reber, (2019) conclude that field is organisation-centric and focuses on reputation and image repair. Crises affecting whole populations are rarely covered. Outside the public relations field there is significantly more literature on pandemic communication with a number of reviews (Loud & Simpson, 2017; Infanti et al., 2013) and models and recommendations for effectiveness (Staupe-Delgado & Kruke, 2018; Amirkhani et al., 2016). Much of this literature mirrors principles outlined in the public relations crisis literature such as the importance and nature of

dialogue. The main purpose of pandemic outbreak communication is to influence behaviours at scale in order to affect health outcomes positively. However, there is a gap in both literatures about the lived experience of health communicators going through a pandemic and in particular, their emotional response to it.

This research addresses this gap by examining the individual emotional experiences of senior communications professionals in the UK National Health Service: the world's largest publicly funded health care system. Seventeen health communicators from across the NHS system, including hospitals, ambulance, mental health, commissioning and regulatory organisations, participated in a two stage qualitative data collection process. First each respondent independently made audio recordings which asked them to focus on three 'critical incidents' of their choice and which captured the strongest positive or negative emotional reactions the pandemic had caused. They were asked to reflect on those emotional reactions and articulate what they felt and why, what actions they took and why, how they would have liked things to be different, and what support they did/would have liked to have. They were also asked to reflect on what changes they would like for the future. Thematic analysis of these incidents revealed clear emotional 'triggers' as well as the types of emotions expe-



rienced. However, there were two clear tracks on the other topics covered in the recordings around reactions, actions taken and support recommendations. In the second stage of data collection, respondents were interviewed individually by the research team. Each of the themes was explored in depth and participants were given the opportunity to bring other perspectives which they believed to be pertinent.

The paper presents insights into the nature of the triggers to the emotional responses of health communicators, their responses to emotional experiences and their subsequent reflections. The findings also cover the effect on the leadership of these senior communicators, both positive and negative. Distinct differences between individuals in their response patterns were observed which the authors characterise as broadly compliant or commanding. The variables that have led to this are explored and explained. The impacts on health communicators as individuals, as well as broader implications for the communication function are also examined.

The research has led to policy recommendations for the NHS which will ensure that the emotional well-being of those who form the 'second front-line' of healthcare is factored in to emergency plans for the future.

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**Keywords:** Covid-19, emotion, emotional toll, health communication professionals, triggers

## Engaging Teachers through Effective Communication: Restarting the Government Communication in Education

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

The pandemic situation has uncovered and exposed many issues in communication between the government and its citizens, not only in the health sector, but also in education. During the pandemic, schools have been under many government restrictions, and they've had to follow many unprecedented rules – such as wearing masks, social distancing or even closed schools and online teaching. The governments had to communicate new rules and restrictions to various stakeholders in the education sector: to the founders of the schools (usually municipalities, private or religious organisations), to the directors of the schools and to the teachers, as well to the “recipients” of education: pupils, students, and their parents. In many cases, this communication did not go smoothly and soon many problems arose: the stakeholders, including teachers, were confused about the government regulations, they did not want to follow them, the disinformation and various Covid-related hoaxes spread quickly and the trust towards the government fell even lower. Teachers found themselves often in a difficult position: they were often the ones who were expected to understand the new

rules to their students and pupils, they were often fighting with lack of digital literacy and use of modern communication tools, such as online video teaching, instant messaging applications, or even emails. And in some cases, they were also in a double role of parents who shall have home educate their children too. The goal of this study is to bring new knowledge about the state of (strategic?) government communication in education, identify potential communication knots (problems) and draft managerial implications for strategic communication (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015). In this study, which is a part of a larger project examining the government communication of the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS), we have raised research questions:

- RQ1. How do the teachers perceive and trust the MEYS and its role in education?
- RQ2. Where do teachers gain information (concerning education or government measures) from? What information sources do the teachers use?
- RQ3. What opinions do teachers hold about specific stakeholders in education, such as



governmental and non-profit organisations?

- RQ4. Are there any communication or other barriers or problems in communication between the teachers and MEYS?

## Literature review

The field of government communication has emerged recently to analyse and understand the nature of communication of democratic governments with its citizens (Sanders and Canel, 2013). Public communication is represented with multifaceted and complicated interactions with various stakeholder groups. It's effectiveness is necessary for the functioning of the democratic society (Luoma-aho and Canel, 2020). The government communication in democratic societies is under media control, which is necessary to keep it under control (Liu and Horsley 2007, p. 378, Liu et al., 2010, p. 190, Gelders et al. 2007, p. 328, Fredriksson and Pallas, 2016, p.149).

## Methodology

We have used both qualitative (Creswell, 2007) and quantitative research methods (Bradburn, Sudman and Wansink, 2004; Berger, 2016) in this study. Concerning qualitative research, we have conducted 3 focus groups with teachers (pre-school, primary, secondary and high school teachers, excluding universities and higher education, mixed gender and age groups) in three regions of the Czech Republic (Praha, Ostrava and Hradec Králové), N=18 (3 FGDs per 6 teachers) in October – November 2020 (online). In quantitative research, we have conducted an online opinion research among teachers (N=530) in length about 28 minutes from April 16<sup>th</sup> until August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The qualitative researched helped us to get insight and draft the later quantitative questionnaire. Both quantitative and qualitative research was designed by the

research team but executed with the help of the IPSOS Czech Republic research agency.

## Results and conclusions

Our results show (RQ1) that the teachers have very low expectations from MEYS and their contact with this top government institution is very distant. 71 % of the respondents have never been in direct communication with MEYS, despite only about half of the teachers thinks that they are well informed about the news and important information in education. Most of the teachers don't value MEYS as the key leader in education nor as a trend-setter of innovation in communication. Teachers expect from MEYS support (22 %), precise directions (15 %) and punctual information on time (15 %). However, they don't meet these expectations – only 38 % of teachers state that the MEYS at least partially meets their expectations. Therefore, (RQ2) teachers don't even try to reach the MEYS for obtaining information – instead, they reach to their bosses (principals) (68 %) or they search internet in general (33 %). Only 14 % of teachers declare they follow social media of MEYS and this number is in reality probably even lower due to the low numbers of the MEYS's social media account followers. (RQ3) Teachers reach for different opinion leaders in education, but mostly they follow their principal. For the teachers, it's important to have not a vertical communication line, but horizontal – to have the possibility to share or discuss information with their peers or colleagues. They also cherish traditional media formats as a bulletin or fixed information board on the wall in their meeting room. There are many communication barriers between the MEYS and the teachers: only 13 % of teachers think that the government communication targeting teachers from MEYS is professional, transparent, or friendly to them. More importantly, they also think that the communication is not understandable (86 %) and even clear (83 %).

### Practical and social implications

Firstly, the MEYS must acknowledge the fact that one of their key and primary stakeholders, the teachers, don't have a very favourable view of them and don't perceive their communication as understandable, clear, or timely. Therefore, we have to recommend getting back to the very basics of the public relations theory, first drafted by Scott Cutlip and known as 4 Cs in communication and then later elaborated on by many communication scholars and practitioners (Grunig 2002; Baines and Frank 2011). The MEYS should develop a strategic government communication plan and re-engage with teachers through new communication approach (Sanders and Canel, 2013; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015; Falkheimer and Heide, 2018; Fredriksson and Pallas, 2016).


Secondly, the MEYS needs to establish a system for getting feedback and enabling the teachers to ask further questions, either on their website or easily searchable telephone numbers with clear competencies.

Thirdly, despite MEYS has invested large sums in social media and online communication, this form of communication does not reach the teachers. It needs to engage in teachers in a different communication mode, respecting them, creating more horizontal communication experiences, such as workshops or shared groups, where they can participate and engage more actively. The top-down communication, which resembles the army system, is paradoxically avoided and not respected by the teachers, despite the education system in the Czech Republic is still much based on the Habsburg's idea of top-down structure and "one size fits all" approach. To sum up, MEYS has to implement options for ritual communication (Carey, 2008) to regain trust and build relations with teachers, only then

in can mentor them and try to be perceived as an innovation leader. This requires a strategic communication plan, scenarios for social change and long-term implementation, with the respect to its democratic boundaries (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015, Sanders and Canel, 2013; Gelders and Ihlen, 2010).

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**Keywords:** *government communication; strategic communication; stakeholder management; education*



## Actions speak louder than words. Though we see the same world, we see it through different eyes (Woolf, 1938, p.18)

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This paper discusses transparency, trust, how we show up and whom do we serve and whether communicators are contractually obliged to behave in alignment with the messages they communicate on behalf of their employer. It accesses unpublished interview transcripts from the doctoral thesis “Communication at the Core: Exploring decision-making when communication is at the heart of an organisation’s strategy development.” In the study 34 international communication and organisations commented on how communicators are perceived in the board-room and at grassroots level. This topic has gained momentum in 2022 specifically relating to the behaviour and ethics of communication professionals in high profile government, international institutions and media outlets. It explores whether communication professionals act as a reflection of the organisations they represent, the mouth-piece of the CEO or trusted advisors offering counsel to organisations. Has the role of modern communicators shifted to intermediaries managing mistrust and the balance of power (Bourne, 2013, p. 72), sense-makers (Fiske, 1982, p. 19) or are they digitally dexterous technicians (Gartner, 2019, p. 11)?

The paper shares examples of communication best practise and questionable behaviours of actions not aligning with corporate messaging and points out that communicators are often taken for granted by internal and external stakeholders. For instance when a problem arises

leadership teams assume that “comms will fix it” (Hewson, 2021, p. 155). It explores what occurs when an organisation communicates a message and then behaves contrary to that message disengaging stakeholders. Moreover it possible to rebuild reputation, credibility and trust?

Two examples of globally recognisable organisations, and three country based organisations whose corporate behaviours do not match their mission, vision and values are examined.

Organisation leaders are on public record demonstrating this. The examples cited go on to explain and how social media platforms and activist communicators escalated the issue enabling public discourse and a commitment from the organisations concerned for independent analysis, transparency and to take on board any recommendations from formal enquiries. The examples cited also demonstrate that “the most impactful stakeholders, are employees who can communicate in their own right and act a reflection of the organisations they represent building trust through personal and professional networks” (Hewson, 2021, p. 149).

Can communicators act as intermediaries managing mistrust and the balance of power (Bourne, 2013, p. 72). Although communicators are well placed to address this issue, a number of high profile communicators have compromised public trust in the sector. The paper asks whether the




profession needs to (i) galvanise holding those who compromise the profession to account, (ii) regulate the sector to enable consistency of practise, standards, transparency and ethics or (iii) keep the status quo.

The paper concludes with a call to action to calibrate and standardise communication definitions, professional qualifications, ethical & professional standards and work flows; and to facilitate research to advance the profession and quantify the impact and value of communication in terms of transparency, process gains and levels of trustworthiness.

Transparency implies openness, communication, accountability and trustworthiness. Is that enough?

**Keywords:** *transparency, trust, mistrust, communication, public relations, power dynamics*



## Leading corporate communication practices for non-profit organisations in South Africa to reboot themselves and ensure purposeful communication with all stakeholders

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Holtzhausen, Lida, *North-West University (South Africa)*


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### Introduction and purpose of the study

South African Non-profit organisations have reached a crossroads and they need to reboot themselves. They are facing a tremendous funding crisis: many of these organisations have been forced to close their doors and most have had to cut back dramatically on welfare services they provide in their communities. This has worsened since the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. These organisations can no longer rely on the South-African developing nation status which has assisted in securing support from international partners. They need to rediscover communication with their internal and external stakeholders to secure support from donors and they need to become competitive, because their current funding crisis is already threatening critical services to poor and vulnerable communities. This situation can threaten and affect the capacity of poor communities to access critical survival services. This presentation aims to address the following research question: *What are the leading corporate communication best practices that should be applied in an attempt to address the NPO reboot phenomenon in South Africa to ensure purposeful communication with all internal and external stakeholders?*

### Literature review

From a corporate communication perspective, the turning point is all about creating trusting relationships, generating positive associations, maneuvering the organisations' operational needs, open and honest dialogue, stakeholder engagement, reaching out and accepting that when people understand the societal need as well as the benefit NPOs offer, making the leap to generating support is met with less pushback. As the NPO creates a culture of data collection, the process of collection, review and refining becomes second nature and aligns with organizational planning, providing valuable guidance as to the direction and activities that benefit the organization. Creating a strong reputation, built on trust, is essential to a communication plan. A trusted reputation generates a positive association with the organization. Earning trust through reputation management is important for managing day-to-day challenges, gaining buy-in of unpopular decisions and maneuvering the organization's operational needs. Brand management can be achieved through various activities, chief among them being open, honest and approachable in discussing the activities of the organization. Similar to brand and reputation



management, the nonprofit's communications strategy should include stakeholder engagement. Stakeholder engagement includes reaching out to diverse audiences, including staff, volunteers, the board, donors, competitors and the government and may require several different activities to successfully work with the interests and needs of these groups. NPOs should convene themselves to determine their agenda in the context of national development challenges and priorities and reclaim their role and space.

## Methodology

The research approach is qualitative in nature, drawing on corporate communication literature as applied in both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors as well as semi-structured interviews with 30 non-profit organizations spread across various sectors of the South African society. The chosen non-profit organizations range from large non-profit organizations with strategic communication departments responsible for the communication and marketing function of the organizations to small non-profit organizations who do not have any communication infrastructure to support their communication and marketing functions. The sampling methods was random sampling and various non-profits organizations were requested to take part in this exploratory study.

## Results and conclusions

NPOs can in an attempt to free themselves from these times of turmoil advance themselves through the integration of functions such as marketing, brand and reputation management, public relations, external relations, governance and fundraising so that they can work together to attract and maintain support for their strategies. From a corporate communication perspective, the turning point for NPOs is about creating trusting relationships, generating positive associations with the organizations, maneuver-

ing the organizations' operational needs, open and honest dialogue, stakeholder engagement, reaching out and generating support that affirms their ability to take on the future.

## Limitations and future research

The limitation of this study was the exploratory nature and including non-profit organizations who indicated their willingness to partake. Recommendations are made as they pertain to the NPO sector in general and not to a particular sector within the NPO context of SA. Future research would assist in purposefully including a specified number of NPOs in a particular context as well as ensuring that NPOs from different sizes reflect the context more accurately.

## Practical and social implications

As the NPOs create a culture of sustainability, it allows them to align stakeholders with the organization's planning and provides guidance as to the activities that benefit the organization, its stakeholders and the developing South African society. NPOs who succeed in this mission might ensure multiple and unrestricted funding year after year.

**Keywords:** *Non-profit organizations, developing country, stakeholders, communication, integration and re-alignment, South-Africa*



## Renewed interest in internal communication following the pandemic: How to consolidate its strategic role and meet the new demands of employees?

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While it sometimes seemed to suffer from a lack of visibility or recognition, the COVID-19 crisis has put internal communication in the spotlight. By transmitting operational information, reassuring employees, maintaining the social link and employee commitment, internal communication has demonstrated the importance of its role since the beginning of the pandemic and has consolidated its legitimacy within organizations. With the introduction of new work dynamics and the accelerated deployment of digital collaborative tools, internal communication has also undergone profound changes in its practices. At the same time, employees are making increasingly high demands for good internal communication.

Since the beginning of the crisis, we have successively conducted three quantitative and qualitative surveys to analyze the internal communication experience of employees working in organizations in Belgium. Each quantitative survey was built around a common structure measuring different dimensions of internal communication (access to information, team communication, channels and formats, managerial communication, etc.), employees' needs and relationship with their organization. The first survey was conducted in April 2020, at the time of the first lockdown in Belgium, among 515 em-

ployees. The second survey, carried out in February 2021, was administered to 550 respondents and also examined employee engagement and well-being. As a follow-up to these two studies, a third survey will be launched in February 2022 to analyze employees' current perceptions and expectations of internal communication. The data collected through these different surveys are particularly rich and offer us a transversal vision of the evolution of internal communication throughout the crisis.

The results of our surveys have highlighted the good practices of internal communication implemented at different stages of the crisis and invite us to reflect on the evolution of internal communication in a post-pandemic world. For example, in the first phase of the crisis, employees have appreciated a certain return to the "basics" of internal communication with regular and transparent communication, especially regarding the situation of the organization, the use of effective channels and relevant content adapted to their needs. Some factors, such as managerial communication, have been critical throughout the crisis.

Another key finding of our research is that employees no longer appreciate being treated as a homogeneous entity to which communication is addressed in a generalized way but expect communication that takes their reality into ac-



count. Our results have led to the identification of groups of employees with a distinctive level of satisfaction, specific needs and expectations regarding internal communication. This confirms the importance for communication professionals to develop a deep understanding of internal stakeholders in order to align internal communication with their needs. It should be noted, however, that the publics and the way of identifying them have changed at the different stages of the crisis. At the same time, we have observed a fluctuation in communication needs and expectations during the crisis.

These findings echo recent works and raise certain challenges for internal communication professionals. The workforce today appears to be increasingly diverse within organizations. For Welch (2012), employees should be considered as “a multi-dimensional set of diverse internal stakeholders”. Several authors have highlighted the importance for communication professionals to understand and manage the diversity of internal publics that exist within the organization (Men & Bowen, 2016 ; Suh & Lee, 2016 ; Welch, 2012) and to move into a more strategic role of managing internal relationships (Cardwell et al., 2017). And future research has been encouraged to explore how to segment internal stakeholders, understand their specific needs and the most effective way to reach them (Men & Bowen, 2016).

While this renewed interest in internal communication is intended to be positive, it also puts a strain on communication teams in terms of the efforts they have to make to maintain a high quality internal communication and to respond to fluctuating employee demands. Indeed, our results showed that not only the publics themselves, but also their needs and expectations, can change rapidly according to the changing context. This demonstrates the need to measure internal publics more regularly, to strengthen listening and dialogue with them, in order to

redeploy communication strategies. Moving to a more strategic role entails financial costs and human investments that teams must be able to support.

In this communication, we propose to review the main results of our surveys and to discuss their implications for the evolution of internal communication.

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**Keywords:** *internal communication, internal publics, internal communication needs*



## It's good for our reputation (?!) The impact of socio-political CEO communication on corporate reputation

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CEOs and top-tier executives are increasingly taking a public stance on controversial socio-political issues. That is also because in polarizing societies with polarizing public discourses, stakeholders are more and more expecting corporations to fulfill a societal and even moral responsibility that goes beyond the economic scope of profit-oriented organizations or classical CSR concepts (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). Even though recent publications from the field of communication science acknowledge this trend, it remains largely underexplored. Especially regarding the impact on corporate reputation, there is a lack of empirical findings. Therefore, the presented study aims to address this research gap by posing the question how socio-political CEO communication impacts the stakeholder's reputation assessment.

### Literature review

Dodd and Supa's approach of Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) can be applied to describe company representative's positioning towards socio-political issues that are being discussed controversially in the public sphere (e.g. mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations). Within the conceptualization of CSA, the authors acknowledge that due to the controversial nature, it remains questionable whether positive reputation effects can outweigh negative effects (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Looking at the state of research on

CSA, existing literature focuses on the impact on stakeholder behavior and attitudes. So far, reputation has barely been used as an operationalization of attitudes. However, several empirical findings indicate that CSA can positively affect stakeholder's perceptions of a company when they share the position and vice versa. Following a stakeholder-centric approach, Heider's Balance Theory adds further value to these findings in terms of providing a theoretical framework: It conceptualizes the relationship between CEO, stakeholder, and issue. Following the theory's assumptions, the direction of reputational effects depends on whether stakeholders share the CEO's socio-political position (Heider, 1946). Unlike previous studies with comparable scope, reputation is conceived as a multidimensional construct with an economic-functional, emotional-expressive as well as social dimension (Eisenegger, 2015).

### Methodology

To answer the research question raised, a fully standardized online survey with an experimental between-subject design and three groups was conducted (N=330). The participants were randomly assigned to read a fictional CEO Twitter statement that either (1) supports, (2) opposes or (3) remains neutral towards two different controversial socio-political issues (gender-neutral language, special rights for persons with



COVID-19 vaccination). Afterwards, the participants were asked to evaluate the reputation of the company and their own position towards the issue. Furthermore, various contextual factors were measured (cognitive/affective involvement, perceived credibility of the statement).

### Results and conclusions

Even though theoretical assumptions suggest that negative as well as positive effects can be expected, the results of this study indicate that socio-political CEO communication has solely negative effects on stakeholder's assessment of corporate reputation. Thus, the results are consistent with other studies that pinpoint a negativity bias when it comes to the impact of CSA on stakeholders' attitudes and behavior. For corporate communication practitioners this implies that socio-political CEO communication must be understood as a risky strategy (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021). While negative effects apply to the emotional-expressive and social dimension of reputation, they do not become evident regarding economic-functional reputation. It could therefore be assumed, that the reputational impact of taking a public stance on socio-political issues is limited to the stakeholder's evaluation of the social and emotional realm but does not extend to the economic perception of a company. In other words, you might deeply reject the values that a company and its CEO represent, but nonetheless you still acknowledge the quality of their products and services or their performance within the economic system.

From a practitioner's perspective, the empirical findings provoke a paradox: On the one hand, stakeholders increasingly expect companies to take part in the socio-political discourse. This underlines the politicization of corporations in polarized, modern societies (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). On the other hand, reputation effects seem to be predominantly negative. Regarding corporate communication practitioners this begs the question, whether or not to implement socio-political positioning as part of their communication strategy.

### Limitations

There are limitations on a theoretical as well as a methodical level: Within the concept of CSA it is not clearly defined whether or not socio-political positioning is limited to strategic dimension or also includes spontaneous communication. Furthermore, the presented setting refers to a dual communication process between company (representative) and stakeholder. Therefore, it neglects the role of other societal institutions (e.g. media). Apart from common methodological limitations (e.g. representativity of sample) it should be critically mentioned that a fictional company and CEO were used. The extent to which this represents a reliable basis for measuring corporate reputation should be viewed with caution.

**Keywords:** *Corporate Reputation, Corporate Social Advocacy, Corporate Social Responsibility, Balance Theory, Experimental Research*

## The Myth of Emotion-Focused Employee Crisis Communication: How Information-Focused Employee Crisis Communication Drives Post-Crisis Organization Commitment, Intent-to-Perform, and Organizational Trust in Hospitality Employees


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### Introduction

Nearly two years of the ongoing Covid pandemic have shifted the dynamics of the labor market. The US Labor Department reported the highest job turnover in the survey's history in November 2021. As possible reasons behind this unprecedented turnover rate in the US labor market, labor market experts have attributed to employees wanting to pursue better job opportunities with competitive pay, flexibility, job burnout, etc. Hospitality and service sectors have been particularly hit hard by this massive employee exit (aka, The Great Resignation), which spurred many employers to raise wages and offer generous cash bonuses to entice workers. Despite these efforts, the worker shortage continues to cripple these sectors, and fewer people seem to be willing to go back to their previous job despite higher wages and better perks in the hospitality and service sectors. Economically, The Great Resignation defies common sense and labor market logic.

### Literature

One of the plausible explanations for the unprecedented employee exit and labor shortage in hospitality and service sectors may be found in how employers were treated before and at the onset of the pandemic, which induced furloughs and layoffs. Change communication and employee crisis communication literature also suggests the crucial impact that internal communication during organizational change/crisis has on positive post-change/crisis organizational outcomes (Mazzei et al., 2012). Organizational communication scholars have been arguing for the seminal importance of internal communication in bringing out positive employee outcomes such as positive communication, loyalty intentions, job engagement, etc. (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2017), as well as preserving organizational reputation post-change/crisis via supportive employee communication (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Mainly, how organizations treat and communicate with their employees during organizational change/crisis can determine employees' attitude and willing-



ness to support their organizations and stay loyal during and after a significant organizational crisis/change such as the shutdown induced by the covid-19 pandemic.

## Scope

The scope of the current research is descriptive in that it aims to explore and describe how during-shutdown employee crisis communication has affected hospitality workers' commitment to their organizations, intention to return to work post-shutdown, and their intent to perform. Additionally, the current study examined how organizational justice (distributive, procedural, and interactive) was associated with during-shutdown crisis communication with employees.

## Methods

Survey with North American 412 employees (full-time and part-time) in the hospitality sector was conducted on Prolific in August 2020, when the pandemic shutdown was at its peak with many hospitality workers out of their job either furloughed or laid off.

Employee crisis communication was measured with 11 items from change communication literature. The 11-item scale of employee crisis communication was reliable, and the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) indicated the scale measured the concept in two distinctive dimensions, which dubbed as "Emotion-Focused (EF)" and "Information-focused (IF)" Seven items measured EF employee crisis communication (e.g., gave you individualized attention; helped you understand the crisis; helped to reduce your feelings of fear and uncertainty) and four items measured IF employee crisis communication (e.g., made sure to correct any false information; were effective in sharing messages about important issues; provided timely and continuous updates)

## Results

Partial correlations analysis (controlling for employees' need for employment and rehire competency) revealed that EF employee crisis communication was significantly associated with pre-shutdown leadership perception and pre-shutdown relationship quality. Meanwhile, IF employee crisis communication was significantly associated with post-shutdown intent-to-perform, trust in the organization, and organizational commitment (affective, normative, and continuance).


When the pre-shutdown leadership and LMX relationship quality were additionally controlled for in the partial correlation analysis, only IF employee crisis communication was significant across post-shutdown loyal intentions by employees in terms of intent-to-perform, intention to return to work post-shutdown, and organizational commitment.

## Conclusions

These findings suggest that IF employee crisis communication is more effective in maintaining organizational commitment, intent-to-perform, intent to return, and organizational trust post organizational change/crisis, compared to EF employee crisis communication, which may be limitedly influential. Limitations of the study included the limited scope of the industry represented in the study sample.

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**Keywords:** *Employee crisis communication; organizational commitment, intention to return, intent-to-perform.*

## Typifying Personal Reputations

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### Introduction, Purpose, and Rationale

There is little research in the communication field to discern the concept of *personal reputations* - or the reputations of individuals, which is the reason for little conceptual understanding of personal reputations. Literature that exists in personal reputations exists in the case study analyses that add little to this concept's conceptual and methodological advancement.

The motivation to expand this line of research comes from a realization that reputations are imperative to individuals' well-being, whether they are in the public eye or private citizens. Therefore, this research is carried out with a fundamental assumption that reputations are valuable assets of all individuals regardless of their social influence or public clout. Researchers must step away from emphasizing the reputations of public figures and pay attention to reputations as a concept critical to all individuals.

Thus, the purpose of advancing this research is to recognize that because reputations are a valuable asset of all people (Veh et al., 2018), their concerns and how these reputations are created are different from each other. Further, the study aims to fill some existing gaps by typifying personal reputations and how personal reputations are created.

### Literature Review

There is scant research on personal reputations in the public relations (PR) field; However, corporate reputation (CR) has captivated the attention of scholars in research areas, such as

PR, marketing, economics, business. Inevitably, multiple ways of theorizing and conceptualizing CR have emerged because the literature is embedded in different fields (Ali et al., 2015; Chun, 2005; Gerring 1999; Lange et al. 2011; Walker, 2010), lending little to advance personal reputations literature.

This research is one of several studies to advance the research topic of personal reputation management (PRM) in the communication field. This paper identifies the types of personal reputation; however, to achieve this, the author first looks at other important questions such as where threats to reputations emerge from and the threats to reputations.

### Methodology

The purpose of the research is to explore an unfamiliar concept through the participant's perspectives, experiences, and views. Thus, elite interviews are well-suited for exploratory research (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Hertz & Imber, 1995). The participants included in the elite group possessed a combination of three criteria: (1) they are professionals or academics who have experience with personal reputation management and reputation attacks; (2) they are prominent in their respective fields of study or profession or public figures; and (3) they are highly educated.

### Results and Conclusions

The analysis revealed that personal reputation threats could be examined based on three characteristics that fall on a continuum: (1) self-ini-



tiated (SI) or other-initiated (OI); (2) orchestrated threats or Unorchestrated threats, and; (3) threats based on factual or fictitious events. Concerning the threats, the analysis discovered that there are four significant threats to personal reputations; these are: (1) bad behavior; (2) vilification; (3) character assassination (CA), and; (4) scandals. Furthermore, personal reputations are of four types: (1) intrinsic reputations; (2) concurrent reputations; (3) legitimate reputations; (4) fabricated reputations.

### Limitations

This research takes one step toward conceptualizing personal reputations; however, many questions remain unanswered. For example, future researchers should focus on deeper inquiries, such as what motivates individuals to earn and maintain favorable reputations? How are reputations established in the public eye, and what role do the public perceptions play in perpetuating reputations? Also, little is known about what constitutes a bad reputation and what conditions define when a reputation crisis may have started and ended. Additionally, the majority of research focuses on Western perspectives, with little attention paid to diverse cultural norms that may dictate the construction and destruction of reputations.

### Practical and Social Implications

This study is significant as it closes several critical gaps in the PRM literature by conceptualizing the term personal reputations. Moreover, the study will help generate greater interest among communication scholars in personal reputations, contributing to public relations and crisis communication fields.

This research will help future public relations researchers advance theory-driven approaches to reputations management. Also, practitioners can benefit from these typologies by narrowing the segmenting audiences based on each type of reputational crisis.

**Keywords:** *Personal reputations, reputations management, typologies of reputations, reputation threats.*



## From a VUCA to a BANI world: Has the view and practice of internal communication changed through the pandemic?

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**Sutton, Lucinda B.**, *North-West University (South Africa)*

### Introduction and purpose of the study

Previously researchers argued that a volatile, uncertain, complicated, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment, together with the development of new technologies, were considered the great determinants of trends in the internal communication field.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic delivered even greater challenges to organisations, as it created a suddenly volatile situation. This new reality that was created can be explained by using Cascio's BANI acronym that describes the situation as brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible (MJV Team 2021). Interestingly, and in line with the strategic focus of internal communication, a BANI world requires a focus on soft skills and relational elements.

This makes it clear why internal communication suddenly became the lifeline for organisations during the pandemic, where employees were dispersedly working from home. Aspects like creating meaning, constructing emotion, and displaying leadership guidance – sometimes even more than sharing information – become crucially important in a consistently uncertain world. Internal communication rapidly became the representative of empathy, reassurance, and

sense giving to showcase organisation competence and resilience.

This study will aim to understand how the view and practice of internal communication has changed as we moved from a VUCA to a BANI world during the pandemic, by using South African internal communication information in a qualitative longitudinal study.

### Literature review

The study is conducted from a systems and reflective approach and will use a multi-dimensional theoretical framework to accommodate the complex research context. Elements from the following theories will be incorporated in the theoretical framework: stakeholder relationship management theory, strategic communication management theory, technological acceptance model, uses and gratification theory, and the gamification phenomenon. In particular, attention will be paid to the description of the BANI world.

The baseline study that would provide information to the research is Sutton's (2020) PhD in which she explored views on internal communication in South African organisations. Her main findings included:



- That although great efforts are made, South African organisations only meet some of the internal communication and relationship building requirements as set out in literature.
- That it is believed that the volatile and diverse South African environment is the major driver in impacting on how internal communication is executed and constantly developing.
- That the definition of internal stakeholders can vary depending on the VUCA circumstances and industry.
- That the internal communication channels used in this VUCA context, mostly reflect traditional routes and not stakeholder needs.

## Methodology

A qualitative, longitudinal view will be used by comparing the pre-pandemic data (gathered by Sutton in 2019) and comparing it to data gathered towards the end of the pandemic (in 2022). A qualitative longitudinal method was seen as appropriate to investigate the research question, as it provides rich information that explores the dynamic nature of respondents' views over time (Neale, 2021). Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to identify trends that might impact the internal communication field.

This qualitative study will follow on the data gathering technique of the Sutton's (2020) study and make use of in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten internal communication practitioners at the Top 500 companies in South Africa, as well as with eight internal communication consultants in South Africa that were purposively selected for their achievements and experience in corporate internal communication. These participants are responsible for internal communication management at large South African organisations in various sectors. The current study will target the same individuals to

participate in the study.


The study started in January 2022 and aim to conclude by May 2022.

## Results and conclusions

The expectation is to uncover a view of the renewed focus on internal communication answering to the BANI needs explained above. It is expected that the importance of internal communication as more than information sharing, will be highlighted by the South African example. It is also expected that the conflict between the strategic intent and operational realities will be emphasised. Although the information will focus on the South African context, it is expected that trends that are relevant globally, will be reflected in the findings.

## Practical and social implications

Lessons learnt from this research could include recommendations for internal communication practitioners on a practical and strategic level. On an academic level, future studies could build on this study's BANI context and combine global



information to build the post-pandemic internal communication discipline.

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Keywords: Internal Communication; Covid-19; VUCA; BANI

## Internal Communication for Positive Organisational Culture Change: A Case Study

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### Introduction

Effective internal communication is agreed as imperative for positive organisational culture. Both internal communication and organisational culture influence the antecedents of workforce productivity, which are broadly encapsulated by employee engagement and wellbeing. The widespread and costly need for improvement across these dimensions is consistently agreed; yet, definitive solutions are lacking.

### Literature Review

Despite wide and promising multi-disciplinary existent literature, there is a lack of clarity regarding their exact nature, interrelation and processes for improvement. To exacerbate disagreement, existent work evaluates the relevant constructs in relative isolation or employs relatively narrow foci and methods. Disparity is documented between leadership and workforce perceptions of culture (Hofstetter and Harpaz, 2015), further hindering organisationally driven effective change.

This research addresses these gaps through a holistic approach that considers and investigates the relevant phenomena as interrelated. Practical utility of the research outcomes was tangible, and successful change is expected to benefit both

the organisation and workforce.

### Methodology

A workforce-centric lens necessitated a collaborative, qualitatively led case study inquiry aimed at identifying informed actions for positive change. One participant SME was purposefully recruited as “an exemplar of the phenomena of interest” (Vissak et al., 2020) for a naturalistic, in-depth inquiry. A single punctuated longitudinal case study design (Soulsby and Clarke, 2011) provided a detailed, processual and longitudinal view of the role of internal communication in organisational culture change.

Data consisted of thirty-four activities characterised by knowledge-exchanges with key informants, a fifteen-day non-participant observation study and seven semi-structured interviews. The latter data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) that was complemented with a critical realist (Bhaskar, 2008) view of reality. The themes were mapped with a processual framework pertaining to the generation of workforce perceptual outcomes.

### Results

The phenomena were demonstrated as inter-dependent, complex and varied; yet, internal com-

munication provided the common explanatory factor.

Inadequate organisational knowledge regarding the role of internal communication in shaping and therefore changing organisational culture accounted for the lack of internal communication strategy and resource. This fostered a multitude of negative outcomes: positively intended organisational statements and actions caused negative consequences because of misaligned content and poor implementation. The lack of effective two-way communication exacerbated deleterious facets of climate, compromised employee voice and contributed to dissonant perceptions of culture between leadership and the workforce. The perceived dissonance between organisational value-laden statements and actions fostered mistrust within the workforce.

The advent of the pandemic (Covid-19) yielded opportunity for a quasi-experimental confirmation of the formative role of all internal communication for organisational culture. The pandemic accelerated the resolution of simple communication issues already underway. However, implementing new processes was hindered and dissonance increased between leadership and workforce views regarding the effectiveness of organisational communication. Technology for digital communication was considered as paradoxical.

## Conclusions

Communication was ubiquitous in generating organisational culture via climate, which shaped workforce outcomes related to productivity. Communication from leaders exerted the most salient effect on these phenomena. Therefore, all internal communication is proposed as the manifestation of culture.

Although generalisability is limited, a novel analytical framework demonstrated that increased solution-focussed insight can be gained from a


holistic approach to changing organisational culture through communication. The multi-faceted change process is theoretically modelled, including the role of expertise. Future work should evaluate the generalisability and utility of this theoretical model and research approach.

## Practical Implications

Internal communication should form the target of and vehicle for culture change, and the organisational and workforce constructs should be approached as interdependent. Further, implementation of change should be comprehensively considered and applied to prevent dissonance between leadership intentions and workforce perceptions. HRM and communication expertise appear integral for successful change.

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**Keywords:** *Organisational communication; organisational culture change; organisational climate; relational communication; workforce productivity.*

## Collecting Communicative Premium for Innovation: How Employees Re-compensate Innovative Organization for Legitimation, Innovation, and Reputation

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Employees and their communicative behaviors have been re-recognized as a most important organization's key public and for its impacts on organizational effectiveness. They are causes and consequences of management success (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Mishra et al., 2014). Today, the employees' thoughts about the organization are more crucial than in the past because of digital media. Employees are empowered to deliver opinionated information to the mass without any obstacles. Their voices could be accepted as reliable information for the other publics. Although the academic interest in employees' voicing outside of the workplace is growing (e.g., Lee, 2021), sufficient research is still not being conducted much compared to its importance (Cassinger & Thelander, 2020). This study will extend the previous studies' efforts on the employees' voicing behavior by examining the antecedents to affect the level of positive Employee Communication Behaviors (ECBs hereafter).

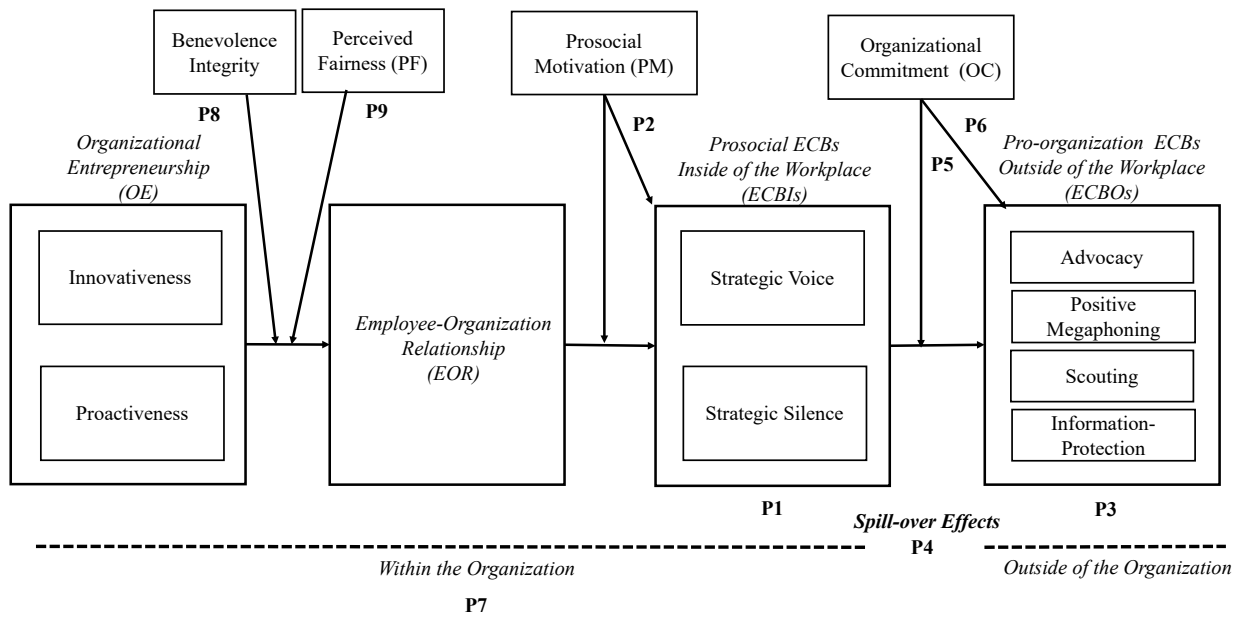
The current study extends the research idea about ECBs to find the antecedents of ECBs. It will try to configure the organizational antecedents and their relationship with ECBs. There could be many various organization-level factors

such as organization culture and perceived organization support (POS), but this paper adopts organizational entrepreneurship (OE) as a focal antecedent as it entails organizational culture and support together. To posit the concrete mechanism between organization entrepreneurship and ECBs, the paper also considers a mediator as well, which is an employee-organization relationship (EOR).

ECBs have been newly defined based on two types of behaviors (voice and silence) and location (inside and outside of the workplace), so that the paper will suggest its bidirectional interaction between inside ECBs (ECBIs) and outside ECBs (ECBOs). Lastly, the paper will propose two moderators to affect the linear relationship between OE, EOR, ECBIs, and ECBOs: prosocial motivation (PM), and organizational commitment (OC). Figure 1 depicts the detailed relationship among the concepts. Specifically, the model proposes that the higher perceived OE by employees will predict the more prosocial ECBIs via the more positive evaluation about EOR of employees and the more prosocial ECBIs will predict the more pro-organization ECBOs. The employees' prosocial motivation will increase

the positive relationship between EOR and EC-BIs and organization commitment will increase the positive relationship between ECBI and EC-BOs.

**FIGURE 1:** The Conceptual Model



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## Networked and engaged? Toward a critical framework for internal communication in the public sector

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### Introduction and purpose of the study


Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on organizations, transforming working routines and communication practices across the world. The national lockdowns and the need to reduce social distancing pushed organizations to switch or increase remote working or working from home. After the first phase, this working model was continuously adopted at different stages following the pandemic waves. Public sector organizations were fully immersed in these processes, and they were among the few organizations to be resilient and active to deliver public services. They use communication as a strategic leverage to coordinate and empower their collaborators, and to timely inform citizens.

In this context, the paper aims to describe the main dimensions of a new theoretical framework to investigate the evolution of internal and employee communication in the public sector, in an era characterized by a remotization of working activities and by a growing role of digital platforms. Within a public relations perspective, it proposes a critical analysis hybridizing three specific groups of theories: public sector communication (Canel & Luoma-aho 2019; Lovari et al. 2020); internal communication and employee engagement (Men & Bowen 2017; Mazzei 2010); social media logics and platformization (van dijck et al., 2018). The study will draw

a map of practices to analyze the evolving role of internal communication and employee engagement in the public sector.

### Literature review

Nowadays internal communication is recognized as one of the crucial leverages for the engagement of employees in companies, and in general in organizations. This role, if strategically conceived, managed, and planned, is not only useful for transferring information and instructions within the corporate context, with a functional aim. It has also a symbolic purpose, strengthening the sense of belonging, creating a shared culture of transparency between management and collaborators (Men & Bowen 2017), as well as encouraging identification of the values and the alignment of the objectives of the collaborators with those of the organizations (Mazzei et al., 2019). Internal communication impacts also on organizational cultures and influences the organizational climate. An organizational culture is thus strictly connected to the collaborators working for the organization, and it is shaped by employees' behaviors and attitudes (Grunig et al., 2002). Moreover, the quality of employees' relations is today considered strategic to increase the efficacy of the internal communication flows, but also to nurture organizational reputation with prosocial activities (Dalton, 2010), or enhancing positive megaphoning behaviors



(Kim & Rhee, 2011), also to improve the quality of product/service offered, as well as to mitigate possible crisis or emergencies (Mazzei et al., 2021). Digital platforms have broadened the spectrum of channels for internal communication's purposes. Indeed, they can strengthen the sense of belonging and enhance the exchange of information, thus making a concrete contribution to the development of good relationships and impacting on external relations with other stakeholders.

All these dynamics had an impact on the public sector during the pandemic, an emergency considered the world's 'largest work-from-home experiment' (Banjo et al., 2020). Before 2020, only a limited number of institutions have experienced flexible remote working practices. With the pandemic, administrations have been obliged to adopt such routines, experimenting new internal communication practices to inform, motivate and empower collaborators, thus redefining meanings and goals of their internal relationships. Digital platforms, with their logics and affordances (van dijck et al. 2018) represent today a new environment for managing relations with collaborators, opening new challenges for the public sector.

## Methodology

A review of the scientific literature related to the three groups of theories (public sector organizations; internal communication; platformization) will be carried out, to be framed into the specificities of public institutions.

## Results and conclusions

This is a conceptual, study in progress paper. At the conference the model will be presented, discussed, and operationalized. The map of practices will help researchers to identify the main dimensions for internal communication investigation and strategic planning.

## Practical and social implications

The ongoing Covid-19 emergency requires a deep understanding of those work-related factors that contribute to the redefinition of internal communication activities in the public sector. These critical insights could represent a useful framework for future empirical studies, highlighting communication behaviors, practices, and relational models that, arose during the pandemic, could be integrated into the "new normality".

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**Keywords:** internal communication, public sector communication, remote working, platforms



## Managing Diverse Stakeholder Expectations through Strategic Ambiguity: A Case Study of Public Sector Communication in Finland

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### Purpose

The increasing stakeholder expectation toward organizations societal role are leveraging a higher degree of required transparency in their communication. This implicates that disclosing exclusively financial information is no longer enough as companies need to be held accountable also for their impact on society in terms of environmental and societal activities (Moreno & Capriotti, 2009). To comply with this surging demand, companies have therefore begun to publish sustainability reports to communicate their activities and impacts.

Despite the fact that several standards are available, the reporting scenario remains still fragmented and unregulated regarding how companies should present their data (Lock & Arujo, 2020). Due to the volatile attention scarcity of the audience, companies need to implement engaging and timely data communication tactics. The emergence of the “visual turn” in CSR communication (Lock & Arujo, 2020) is exemplified by the increasing predominance of infographics and data visualization elements in sustainability reporting. The available visualization techniques have now transformed sustainability reports into

a powerful form of promotional content companies can embrace to fulfil multiple purposes and convey information to several publics. This has also implied an increase adoption of impression management techniques with the goal of delivering as much as possible positive information, to the point of distorting the graphs in the context of corporate reporting. Indeed, several studies analyzing the impression management techniques in annual report highlights how reports easily adapt to deliberately alter perception of the company’s performance (Beattie & Jhones, 2002). However, while extensive literature has been dedicated to the graphical distortion present in company’s reports, the focus has predominantly fallen on annual reports or financial reports. Sustainability reporting is an increasingly studied area of inquiry for communication scholarship. To contribute to the discussion by expanding the existing gaps, the present study fits in with the goal of studying under the lens of impression management techniques are deliberately conceived to alter the public perception of companies’ sustainability performance.



## Design/Methodology

In particular, in order to assess whether and to what extent companies use impression management techniques. We analyzed a sample of 65 companies listed in the Italian stock exchange, systematically collecting their reports and categorizing them by their market capitalization. This method of selection seems to be favorable for what concerns the industrial sectors of analysis. Indeed, selecting companies based on their market capitalization and not on industry specifics allows to gain an overview also on different aspects of different sectors. Hence, even though this sampling cannot be defined as purely randomized, at the same time it offers a good approximation of what the market is like.

## Findings

By using an analytical framework informed in the impression management theory, we found undeniable evidence of the adoption graphical distortion techniques by companies, supporting the idea that sustainability reports are employed not only to convey important and truthful information about the firms' sustainability performance, but also a favorable image of the company. Consistently with the studies on impression management (Cho et al., 2018), the results of the analysis confirmed that graphs are not only largely adopted forms of communication but also largely altered ones where selectivity, presentational enhancement, and measurement distortions convergently appear.

## Theoretical and practical contributions

Theoretically, the research problematizes and extends studies on the impression management techniques deployed in CSR reporting. Practically the research informs the sustainable reporting sector by providing evidence on the actual stage of CSR impression management and possible avenues to increment and regulated

unified standard for a more transparent communication. On the other side, the research raises awareness on the issue of graph literacy among corporate report publics as an antecedent of correct data consumption and misuse identification.

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**Keywords:** *CSR reporting, impression management, data visualization, transparency*



## The Full-Stack Public Relations: Future-proofing communication management for stakeholder experience delivery and the digital transformation era

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Communication management has long claimed responsibility for stakeholder relationships and enshrined the function as part of the definitional identity for practitioners and academics. During an era of unprecedented digital transformation and shrinking stakeholder proximity, the author interviewed c-suite executives at ten publicly traded companies operating in Canada to explore the role for strategic communication/public relations in the growing field of experience delivery.


These conversations were augmented by ten interviews with experience management (XM) experts and practitioners – those who monitor employee, customer, product and brand perceptions using predictive behavior data – to give the organization a robust understanding of all relationships impacting business performance.

Underscored by an integrative literature review, the applicability of communication management is examined through communication, organization-public relationships (OPR) and brand/image reputation activities. However, communication management continues to struggle with delivering measurement and evaluation (M&E) for their programs and responsibilities. Meanwhile, organizations have increased their appetite for actionable insights that will cause behavior change in important relationships. Meeting

this expectation, Experience management (XM) applies agile design processes and mines digital connectivity to deliver robust business intelligence tools and an intimate understanding of the stakeholder journey.

### **Literature Review**

Broadly examining the landscape of organizational transformation in the 21st century, Holtz (2002), Castells (2000) and Hax (2010) highlight how social and digital ecosystems are altering how stakeholders interact with brands and are shifting business strategies from product differentiation to service experience. In order to explore shifting priorities of senior leaders, communication management as a strategic function is explored in literature. Mcnamara (2015) evidenced a long history of difficulty measuring and evaluating (M&E) programs and responsibilities for communication practitioners and academics. Supporting this finding Huang and Zhang (2013) thoroughly critique organization-public relationship measurement scales to similarly find outcomes are elusive. The major communication activities such as the tactic of communicating (Hutton, 1999; Macnamara, 2018; van Ruler, 2018), organization-public relationships (OPR) (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Finne and Grönroos, 2009; Macnamara, 2015) and image/reputation monitor-



ing through crisis and issues management (Bunting & Lipski, 2000; Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Macnamara, 2020; Murray & White, 2005) are given as context for the role of communication practitioners in organizations. In contrast, the new field of experience delivery (Macik, 2017) is explored through computer sciences literature including the Internet of Things (IoT) (Amodu et al., 2019) and human to computer connectivity (Fletcher, 2015) showing that senior leaders are looking for analytics to identify gaps in the perception that stakeholders have of a brand/organization (Grannan & Geoffroy, 2016) and that indicate behavioral intention as well (Qualtrics, 2021; Palmer, 2010).

## Methodology

This is an exploratory, qualitative research study to introduce experience (XM) management into communication management literature. The sample size consisted of twenty in-depth interviews: ten senior leaders who had authority in operational and strategic decisions and ten experts and practitioners in the experience delivery ecosystem at publicly traded companies operating in Canada and undergoing digital transformation. Three broad interview questions discussed experience delivery, stakeholder relationship management and strategic communication activities. The qualitative synthesis focused on words, descriptions, concepts, perceptions and sentiments expressed by participants. Narrative analysis revealed mindsets and perspectives of interview participants while thematic analysis revealed similarities and differences that could be grouped together for deeper interpretations.

## Results and conclusions

The results of this study are expected to be completed by March 2022 as part of a master's thesis defence. Early analysis shows the activity of communication, as message sending and

message clarifying for strategic priorities, is the tactical function most needed at a program level and senior executive level in organizations. Other insights found: strategic communicators could play a role in determining the mission of analytics and data collection as ethical advisors; letting go of managerial ownership with stakeholder relationships; find influence with chief technology and strategy officers; overwrite traditional communication plans to incorporate design-thinking principles of empathy and feedback loops; and finally, improving data and analytics fluency as it relates to experience delivery.

The author submits that communication management is poised for an upgrade. The modern practitioner should be “full-stack” much like that of a software developer who can solve customer-facing aspects of design and diagnose internal system-related issues as well.

## Practical and Social Implications

To ensure relevance after digital transformation, communication management must find a place for communication, crisis and issues management as well as reputation activities within the agile, cross-functional ecosystem of today's modern, data-informed organizations who are using experience delivery models.

The findings are instructive for professionals performing communication activities and researchers studying them, as well as institutions offering academic study in strategic communication and public relations.

**Keywords:** *public relations theory, communication theory, experience management, relationship management, organization-public relationships*

## The voice behavior of employees: How can their voice be the supervisors' favorite sound

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### Introduction and Purpose of the Study

According to Berkovich (2014) leaders assume the behavior of promoting dialogue more in flexible structures than in rigid structures. It is known that there is a specific performance appraisal named "360-degree evaluation" that is more applied in organizational contexts of greater power sharing. In this sense, this study seeks to understand if there is a relationship between this type of evaluation and the communication that supervisors have with their subordinates. In this way, we have the hypothesis:

The application of 360° performance evaluation is positively related to the voice behavior of employees, when mediated by the communication climate.

### Literature Review

The voice behaviors have been a topic of interest in the past decade (Mowbray, Wilkinson & Herman, 2015). The notion of voice behavior emerged with Hirschman (1970), who found that when employees were not satisfied with their working conditions, they tended to leave the organization or remain, but revealing their concerns.

The author Morrisson (2014), in turn, divided voice behaviors into two types: promotional voice behaviors and prohibitive voice behaviors.

The promotional voice conceptualized by Van Dyne and LePine (1998) is related to the expression of new ideas or suggestions to improve the functioning of the work or the organization. Is promotive in the sense that it focuses on an ideal future state. It is challenging because it suggests change. The prohibitive voice describes expressions of concerns regarding employee work practices, incidents, or behavior. Furthermore, this serves an important function for the health of the organization, mainly because these alarming messages put problems previously not detected in the collective agenda, to be solved, avoiding some problems in the organization. In some cases, this type of voice can even be beneficial, since it involves less time than the promotional voice and, currently, organizations operate at great speed.

According to some studies, the voice behaviors may be beneficial to the organization, with people tending to evaluate organizational actors more positively when they have more voice behaviors (Whitning, Maynes, Podsakoff & Podsakoff, 2012).

Since the 21<sup>st</sup> century the perception of leaders as the people who has the power has been changing, and this notion been replaced by the concepts of coach, mentor and facilitator (Johansson, 2018). For this reason, the more recent companies have been searching an organizational democracy in which it occurs the involvement of



all members in decision making (Cunha & Rego, 2005). This organizational democracy may be related to 360-degree evaluation and the support communication. This is a type of evaluation that promotes an active voice of employees when compared to a top-down performance appraisal. In this way, it is important to find out if the employees have more voice behaviors when there is a trust, opening and support communication.

## Methodology

The main objective of this study was to understand if the application of 360-degree evaluation may be positively related to the adoption of voice behaviors by employees, when it is mediated by the climate of communication of trust, openness and support. For this, a theoretical model with three variables was created: the independent variable (application of the 360-degree evaluation); the communication climate-related mediator variable of the original Communication Measurement Scale (Smidts, Pruyn & Van Riel, 2001) and the type of voice (defensive voice and prosocial voice) – dependent variable, derived from the original Scale of EVLN Model (“Exit”; “Voice”; “Loyalty” and “Neglect”, by Dyne, Ang & Botero 2003). These scales were evaluated by applying a questionnaire to a sample (non-probabilistic) convenience and snowball sample, consisting of a total of 704 individuals (managers and / or subordinates), inserted in the Portuguese Labor Market, during the year 2019.

## Results and Conclusions

The analysis of the results allowed the creation of a theoretical model of mediation in which it was found that the application of the 360-degree evaluation was positively related to the defensive and prosocial voice of employees, when mediated by climate of communication of trust, openness and support.

These results are in line with previous studies, as it is known that more and more companies have been seeking to promote an organizational democracy in which all organizational actors can be involved in decision-making (Cunha & Rego, 2005), this kind of democracy is promoted, many times, by the application of 360-degree evaluation (Mamatoglu, 2008).

This study is innovative, since the majority of the studies in this context focus only on direct relationships between variables, not considering mediations and moderations. Considering the leaders ‘and followers’ views also becomes innovative, as the most studies take into account only one view (the view of the employees). Furthermore, there are few national studies linking the 360-degree evaluation and the communication climate.

## Practical and Social Implications

In practical terms, this study may be useful to the development and application of an innovative type of performance evaluation, namely, the 360° performance evaluation, enabling communication of greater dialogue between supervisors and subordinates. Furthermore, this study allows training supervisors with regard to communication and evaluation processes, contributing to a better organizational effectiveness.

**Key-words:** *Voice behaviors; Employees; Organizations; 360-degree Feedback*



## Try before you buy: examining the relationship between communication organisations, higher education, and public relations students undertaking WIL

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### Introduction

The pandemic necessitated a shift in how industry, higher education, and students collaborate via internships. Traditionally a capstone offering in undergraduate programs, many institutions had to suspend their internship programs, or strike a balance across remote, onsite, or blended modes. What lessons can be learned from this necessity?

### Purpose

This study examines student experiences of work integrated learning, specifically internships, during the pandemic. It will explore how such experiences differed, whether the experience was taken onsite, remotely, or a combination of both (“blended”). The study will seek to identify implications for higher education institutions and whether such WIL experiences – and the relationships which underpin them – need recalibrating in the “new normal” post-pandemic conditions.

The following research questions (RQ) guided the study:

- RQ1: How did the pandemic impact student experiences when undertaking WIL in either onsite, remote, or blended contexts?

- RQ2: How did the pandemic impact host organisation experiences of students undertaking WIL?
- RQ3: What implications does this have for higher education institutions?

### Literature review

The study is situated in the crosshairs of a few research agendas in work-integrated learning (“WIL”): the role of industry as a primary stakeholder in higher education (Naqvi 2021); the push for collaboration across higher education institutions (Cameron et al 2020) to operate sustainable models under government policy directives; and, a need for research which goes beyond the ‘outputs’ of WIL, and looks at the strategy of WIL for three stakeholders namely industry, academia, and the student (Cooper et al. 2010).

### Methodology

A critical realism paradigm underpins the exploration of the study. Critical realism’s subjectivist epistemology recognises that some reality – in this study, the internship experience – cannot be objectively measured (Stolz 2020). Studies with a subjectivist epistemology are well-suited to a qualitative design, and that of phenomenology (Blundel 2007).



The purpose of phenomenology is to describe a phenomenon as the lived experience of individuals (Speziale et al. 2011). As an inductive approach to research, the lived experience gives a subjective meaning to an individual's perception of the stated phenomenon. A common form of phenomenology in education research is the descriptive approach, which is used in this study.

The study implemented the phenomenological approach through a quasi-field experiment design, with three data collection components:

- a reflective journal maintained by student participants in the study during their internship. Moon (2006) cites six key factors in how students learn from reflective journals. Of specific relevance to this study, the role of emotion in a student's learning as they experience their internship under one of three modes (dependent variables);
- a survey completed by students at the end of the internship; and,
- a survey completed by a host organisation representative.

Quantitative surveys provide a complementary data point to the qualitative reflective journals, ensuring the student has an opportunity to reflect upon their experiences in real-time, as well as to look back once it is complete. Descriptive statistics were used to bring the raw data into due form.

Sample sizes:

- Reflective journals:  $n = 6$
- Survey 1 (student):  $n = 25$
- Survey 2 (industry):  $n = 15$

## Results and conclusions

This study is continuing at the time of writing, however initial indications are that students undertaking WIL remotely experience similar out-

comes in terms of workplace task productivity. However, most noticeable, was a lack of social engagement and exposure to workplace culture. The findings amongst host organisations suggest that whilst students completed set tasks to a satisfactory level, supervision was problematic for internships having any remote component. Allocated tasks also differed significantly across the three internship modes. Also, there may be an emerging reduction in willingness for organisations to extend ongoing offers of employment to participating students, post-WIL. This has implications for the tripartite relationship between student, university, and industry, as one of the primary motivators for organisations participating in such programs is to access a pipeline of future talent.

## Limitations

This study focuses on one higher education institution and thus is not representative of all public relations students nor all higher education institutions.

## Suggestions for further research

Further study into the perspectives of communication organisations and their intake of students for internships conducted onsite, online, or a blend of both, would be suggested.

Possible areas of contribution – now and as future exploration – are in the areas of work-integrated learning pedagogical practices in higher education. In addition, there is a possible contribution in evolving the role of industry, alongside academia as well as government, in developing the next generation workforce. Further research will also explore the development of an industry engagement framework for use across higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** *Work-integrated learning; Industry engagement; Higher education; Public relations; Stakeholder relations*

## Turnover Intentions among Millennial Public Relations Professionals in Latin America

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### Introduction

The topic of the Millennial Generation in the workplace has gained momentum since the retention and turnover of younger employees have become a challenge for companies around the world (Sujansky & Ferri-Reed, 2009). Expectations of acceptable workplace behavior and performance differ across generational cohorts (Stewart, Oliver, Cravens, & Oishi, 2017). Understanding these differences could have major implications for the way organizations recruit, hire, train, reward, promote, and terminate their employees (Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, & Gade, 2012). This is even more critical for the Public Relations industry, a knowledge-intensive field characterized by their focus on intellectual or human capital to produce their products and services. This paper focuses on six research questions:


- RQ1: What is the strength of the relationship between Millennial PR professionals and their employers in terms of relationship outcomes (job satisfaction, trust, job engagement, and employee retention)?
- RQ2: Do additional sociodemographic factors, particularly gender, hierarchical levels and salary, affect the relationship outcomes of Millennial PR professionals?

- RQ3. Does job satisfaction have positive impact on Millennials employee retention?
- RQ4. Does trust have positive impact on Millennials employee retention?
- RQ5. Does job engagement have positive impact on Millennials employee retention?
- RQ6. Does excellent leader performance has a positive impact on Millennials employee retention?

### Literature review

Empirical research on generations' work attitudes is sparse and mixed. In accordance with the past literature, seven factors encourage employee retention among employees: challenging work, opportunities to learn, positive relationships with colleagues, compensation and appreciation of the work performed, recognition of capabilities, work-life balance and good communication. Research on Millennial employees working in full-service communication firms (Gallicano, Curtin, & Matthews, 2012) depicts a generation that enjoys positive relationships with their agencies but also expresses their frustration of a lack of empowerment, significant hierarchy, and distance from managers.

Factors affecting employee turnover have received significant attention from academia and



practitioners during the last decades. Through a meta-analytic review of organizational literature Cotton and Tuttle (1986) identified 24 variables impacting employee retention and classified them into three correlates: external, work-related, and personal characteristics. Meng and Berger (2019) also confirmed the strong impact that organizational culture and leader performance could have on public relations professionals' work engagement, trust, and job satisfaction.

## Method

The data used for the study were gathered using an online survey designed in Qualtrics. The questionnaire was active from April to August of 2019 and was available in both Spanish and Portuguese. A total of 2,575 professionals from 19 countries started the survey and 1,229 of them completed. The final evaluation is then based on the completed responses of 1,165 public relations professionals.

## Findings

Results show that Latin American Millennials present significant lower levels of job satisfaction, engagement, and trust in the organization than Gen Xers and Boomers ( $p \leq .05$ ). When asked about their plans for the further development of their career, 45.3 percent of the respondents want to leave his or her current employer, compared with 35.4% of Gen X and 28.1% of Baby Boomers. Almost half of the participants in the survey (46.7%) show little engagement or even a complete disengagement. X-Gers and Boomers practitioners report a significantly higher work engagement ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Similarly, findings indicate significant differences across generational cohorts regarding trust in the organization. 12.7 percent of the Millennials respondents report a low level of trust, compared to 10.3 percent of Generation X and 3.5 percent of the Boomers. Salary was a statistically significant predictor us-

ing t- tests ( $p < 0.05$ ) of overall job satisfaction, and turnover intentions, but did not influence on engagement and trust. Moreover, practitioners working in excellent departments report statistically higher levels of job satisfaction (90.2 percent,  $p \leq 0.05$ ), engagement (88.7 percent,  $p \leq 0.05$ ), organizational trust (85.5 percent),  $p \leq 0.05$ , and lower turnover intentions (32.2 percent,  $p \leq 0.05$ ).


There is a strong correlation between job satisfaction and the willingness to leave. Professionals that want to move out of communications and change employers are the less satisfied with their job (19.6 percent,  $p \leq 0.05$ ). Strong association between perceived trust in the organization and Latin American Millennials turnover intentions was also found. In fact, one-third practitioners reporting low level of organizational trust want to change employer, comparing with 20.6 percent ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) of those with a high level of organizational trust.

## Practical Implications

This research not only informs supervisors about what they can do to motivate workers and provide for job satisfaction and retention but gives them insight into what type of leader's Millennials may become based on what is important to them. Overall, this study can be used to teach organizations to facilitate trainings, develop better leaders, create a culture that promotes job satisfaction, and increase the retention of good public relations Latin American Millennial employees.

## Limitations

The study has several limitations that require consideration when interpreting the findings. First, a large sample of professionals was approached, but a much small number initiated and completed the online survey. Second, because of the possible systematic bias in the convenience sample as used here, the results of this



research should be seen as a pilot study giving an indication of the distribution of the results in the entire population. Third, as in any study using self-report measures, the results may have been influenced by participants' acquiescence and need for social desirability.

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**Keywords:** *Employee retention, Employee engagement, job satisfaction, Millennials, Latin America, Public relations.*

## New challenges for the countries in external communications due to fake news blossoming


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The wide spreading of fake news in recent years, especially in Covid19 period, has been caused by the rise of social media worldwide as nowadays this medium have become the main source of getting information. Therefore, fake news detection has become an emerging topic, and more and more technical giant companies are seeking future solutions for recognizing online fake information. However, accurate fake news detection, is still challenging, due to the dynamic nature of the social media, and the complexity and diversity of online communication data. As well as, it is not clear if the detection of fake news may limit the sharing process made by users. As a time when research shows that 75 per cent of American adults who were familiar with a fake news headline viewed the story as accurate (Silverman and Singer-Vine, 2016), and facts are less important the emotional desire in high spreading of fake news (BBC research), consumers are more likely than ever to pass along “news” that is inaccurate and potentially even harmful.

By conveying biased and false information, fake news can destroy folk’s faith and beliefs in authorities, experts and the government. Although the unprecedented scale of fake news has brought more scholarly attention in recent years, most studies focused on the public policy and political communication perspectives (Jang et

Kim, 2018; Vargo et al., 2017). Relatively little research has investigated fake news in the context of brand management and communication and there is absolutely no research in the context of country brand or country of origin product brand. Berthon and Pitt (2018), one of the first researchers who has analyzed different situations in which brands come in touch with fake news and the potential negative outcomes of such relationships and highlighted the symbiotic relationship between fake news and brands. It was empirically examined & results showed there was indeed a chain of effect from fake news on consumers’ trust toward brands that appeared next to fake news, and such effects were mediated by the credibility of the news and sources (Visentin et al., 2019).

Some scientists have proposed Antecedents and outcomes and persuasion knowledge toward a fake news post regarding a brand (Chen & Cheng, 2019), whereas, others discusses how consumers process fake news and its relevance to marketing communications (Nyilasy, 2019, De Regt and al. 2019) have identified seven denialistic marketing tactics that contribute to the diffusion of fake news in the health and beauty industry and Weidner and al. (2019) present a framework to examine the different impact of fake news, taking consumers’ confirmation bias into account.



According to hypothesis of this study, the impact of fake news is especially notable in the case of country image since knowledge about other countries is often limited, it is reasonable to assume that the media significantly influence the thoughts on which people rely in order to judge countries or its products.

Thus, this study is going to shed the light on consequences and further challenges for country brand or country-of-origin product brand occurred after reading fake news. So, the question which is going to be answered: Does fake news influence country brand or brand of specific product category from that country what way?

The distinction between projected and perceived image is applied as useful approach for analyzing the contribution of fake news on country and product brand from a methodological point of view and country brand equity approached is used as a theory to measure brand.

In other words, if projected images by fake news are evaluated on changes in country and product perceived brand and how it is, in its turn, relates with country or product awareness, associations, quality and loyalty. Higher education was chosen as a foreign product because the impact of fake news may vary significantly.

China and Chinese Universities as a product category from that country were chosen and 290 Russian students respondents took place in the survey. The survey questionnaire incorporated four sections. In the first section, respondents were asked to provide the general characteristics and the atmosphere or mood and measurement of categories of country brand equity before reading fake news. In the second component, respondents were given created by us fake news messages which had negative connotation concerning this country and after reading fake news, participants were asked to indicate their attitude toward the truthfulness of the news on three items anchored with a 7-point scale and further section again was devoted to measure country brand equity categories.

The results of this survey were obtained in the middle of January and in the process of analyzing and more detailed results will be presented at the conference. However, already now we may see the decrease of country brand and even stronger damage to country-of-origin product brand in the category of higher education.

These results will identify the weakest points in the fight of fake news consequences that would give a ground for further proposing different response strategies for governments or organizations in the work of improving crises situation.

**Keywords:** *fake news, country brand, China, country-of-origin product brand, Chinese Universities.*

## The Key to Improving ‘Team Virtuality’: Defining Internal and External Distractors of Virtual Meetings

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

As part of a wider research on virtual communication patterns and practices in large companies, the study focuses on employees’ requirements towards their managers/employers to improve the technical aspects of using collaborative platforms for internal and external virtual meetings. It defines the most common technical and personal distractors which influence employees and thus affect the quality of virtual meetings and e-collaboration in large companies. The study will provide qualitative insight into areas of corporate virtual communication and the use of collaborative platforms that can be improved by implementing the ‘team virtuality’ concept, which, according to Kirkman & Mathieu (2005), consists of three dimensions: the degree that on-line teams use virtual tools to coordinate and communicate (the reliance on virtual tools and the extent to which teams use virtual technologies to coordinate work activities); information value (communication and data that is valuable to a team’s effectiveness, such as the technology’s capability to transmit cognizable information); and synchronicity (how well employees are able to support simultaneous communication through video conferencing).


### Literature review

Numerous books and papers, including Kirkman & Mathieu (2005), Anderson et al. (2007), Kock (2008), Salmons & Wilson (2009), Mayadas & Hultin (2010), Chudoba et al. (2011), Amcoff Nyström & Asproth (2013), Kurtzberg (2014), Abrahamsson Lindeblad et al. (2016), Kolbaek (2018), Frisch & Greene (2020), Handke et al. (2020), Afflerbach (2020), Baker & Murphy (2021), Swartz et al. (2021), and Dumitru (2022), explored the communication practices developed by remote virtual teams in periods before the COVID-19 pandemic and during the pandemic, as a sudden and unexpected event that provoked a certain response. Numerous recent scientific and practical research studies, including LaBerge et al. (2020), Lifesize (2020), Twillio Inc. (2020), Buffer.com (2021), Microsoft (2021), Statista.com (2021), and Zerfass et al. (2021), are also available to identify communication procedures in order to make virtual meetings as effective as possible in the ever-evolving ‘new normal’.

### Methodology

The authors of this paper conducted a survey on employees (N=188) from communication, marketing, and human resources departments in medium-sized and large companies of var-





ious businesses in Croatia ranked in the TOP 505 companies based on the report by Bisnode Dun & Bradstreet on revenues in 2017 and 2018, with the aim of gathering quantitative data concerning employees' views on distractors in virtual meetings, which limit their effectiveness in internal and external communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will be qualitatively supplemented by the semi-structured interview method conducted through 10 semi-structured interviews focusing on CCOs who are in charge of communications in Croatian medium-sized and large companies of various businesses that have introduced virtual communication and/or remote work in the last two years. Using mixed methods research, the authors of this study will conduct a comparative analysis of employees' requirements and expectations towards their employers and vice versa in order to improve the technical aspects of using collaborative platforms for internal and external virtual meetings.

### Results and conclusions


A review of various global studies on virtual meetings, as well as empirical research among employees in medium and large companies in Croatia show that there are no significant differences in the way employees in Croatia approach the organization and conduct team communication in a virtual environment. Although we are witnessing a change in the communication paradigm in the last two years, numerous similarities which appear in communication patterns during virtual meetings can be noted, especially when distractors of virtual meetings are observed. In most cases, these distractors, which affect the quality of internal and external communication, are the result of lack of understanding between employees and employers in companies in terms of acceptance of communication requirements, or in other words, a discrepancy between communication practices and expectations. The research will provide valuable insights into the

most common internal and external distractors of virtual meetings and help raise the level of understanding of requirements and expectations regarding personal and technical aspects of internal virtual communication. The conclusion of the research could be a step closer to a new corporate culture model which is more adapted to the new conditions of internal communication in the virtual world.

### Practical and social implications

Besides contributing to the practical and academic thought of internal virtual communication, this study will help companies to conceptualize and better understand personal and technical restrictions and interferences that affect the quality of internal virtual communication. Managers in organizations, aware of the limiting circumstances in which employees participate in the process of internal virtual communication, will be able to develop a new set of tools, communication training programmes or expertise to optimize and upgrade the personal and technical aspects of internal virtual communication.

**Keywords:** *team virtuality, e-collaboration, internal communication, virtual meetings, remote work*



## Rethinking Internal Communication between “New Normal” and “Next Normal”: An Overview of current and emerging practices

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### Introduction and purpose

Among the key conference subthemes and current challenges for organizations, there is internal communication and the profound changes it has undergone during the Covid-19 pandemic. Social distancing and remote working, fast become the routine for millions of workers worldwide, have deeply impacted employee sense of security, identification, socialization, engagement, and organizational culture at large. In the face of an ever-evolving health and work context, organizations need to constantly redesign new ways of working and communicating. The purpose of this study is to scrutinize internal communication practices, focusing on the role of internal communication for rebooting and revitalizing organizations in the “new normal” and in the “next normal” following the crisis.

### Literature review

The study builds on research related to internal communication practices relevant to capture and make sense of this evolving context, such as those aimed at ensuring closeness to employees despite physical distance and work digitalization (Mazzei, Quaratino & Ravazzani, 2021), building up resilience through internal sense-


making, facilitating learning through sharing new insights out of the crisis (Heide & Simonsson, 2019). For this purpose, literature within internal communication, internal crisis communication, and employee relations in Covid-19 times is drawn upon.

### Methodology

The study presents an empirical research based on the perceptions and experiences of 29 internal communication managers and professionals working in 15 Italian companies. Qualitative data were collected from 3 focus groups carried out throughout 2021, when the “new normal” was gradually established in organizations and the “next normal” began to make its way into management discussions and priorities for the near future.

### Results and conclusions

Focus groups results help delineate the evolution of internal communication objectives, tools, and contents. In addition, the analysis reveals three key themes: the “new way of working”, the “digital workplace”, and the “leadership for transition”.



Participants' experiences highlight, first, the experimentation of a new way of communicating, emerged from the effort to cope with the "new way of working" that became somehow established after the first phases of the pandemic (the "new normal"). Main endeavours regard effective ways to communicate in a still uncertain health and legal context, and in hybrid environments with employees working partly in presence and partly from home. These unprecedented working conditions bring with them the risks of isolation and burnout of employees, and of losing a common sense of purpose and belonging, which internal communication must prevent. Internal communication finds itself increasingly engaged also in key organizational processes such as socialization, onboarding of newcomers, and cultural change.

Linked to this is the "digital workplace" theme. Internal communication reinvents itself to continue sustaining motivation and engagement of those employees who have been working remotely for months, most of them with no prior experience of virtual work and home office. Both employees and internal communicators across the studied organizations have approached this drastic cultural and technological change from a learning-by-doing perspective. A digital workplace is also a matter of technological infrastructures: in this sense, the internal communication function has helped develop these new platforms, designing communication flows and communication areas that efficiently sustained business processes and employee interactions.

Finally, "leadership for transition" emerges as a central theme especially when envisioning the post-pandemic scenario of the "next normal". Results stress the critical role of organizational leaders in anticipating and mastering change, and enacting the emerging values of perseverance, transparency, sustainability. Internal communication must do its part in training leaders, facilitating the development of new leadership

competencies, as well as ensuring continuous alignment between leaders' sensegiving and employees' sensemaking.

Given the constantly evolving context and subsequent impact on employee needs and work routines, additional research is in the pipeline to delve further into the "next normal" and forthcoming internal communication practices. This would also allow to enlarge the number of companies and perspectives involved in the current study.

### Practical implications

Insights from this study have implications for internal communication practitioners when rethinking work and communication models and experiencing the adaptive learning processes initiated by the current pandemic. While showing how internal communication has changed so far in the way it is conceived and practiced, this study also offers reflections useful for handling the "next normal". This will pose the questions of getting remote employees back to office work and reboot, once again, personal relationships and collaboration routines; and/or maintaining hybrid solutions for individual and organizational sustainability finding the balance between office time and remote work.

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**Keywords:** *internal communication, remote working, hybrid workplace, leadership for transition, new normal, next normal*

## Mediated Scandals as Show Trials: The Case Study of the COVID-19 Controversy with Serbian tennis player Novak Djokovic

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

In April 2020, Serbian professional tennis player Novak Djokovic indicated in a Facebook live stream that he would not wish to be forced to take a vaccine to attend tennis tournaments. Djokovic's views on vaccination came under increased scrutiny in late 2021, in the run-up to the 2022 Australian Open, which stipulated COVID-19 vaccinations. The issue escalated in January 2022 when Djokovic was detained at Melbourne Airport by Australian Border Force officials for failing to produce the necessary paperwork to enter the country. Later, Djokovic was deported after losing an appeal to stay and play at the Australian Open. This case study discusses a celebrity detained and labelled by the media as an anti-vaxxer amid growing hostility towards people who appear to be unvaccinated. The whole time, the media across the world capitalized on his downfall by publishing scandalous content about Djokovic and his past transgressions.

### Literature review

A multitude of political scandals is coming to public attention in recent years across the world. A cause for the number of political scandals in

the last decades can be attributed to the overall transformations of media and journalism in the digital age (Haller & Michael, 2022).

The creation of scandal news and partisanship in reporting contributes to the slant in the news. The 24/7 news cycle supports a Twitter cycle that requires a constant supply of news fodder. Public interest in some personalities is constantly high and can thus be monetized by various media retailers through positive or negative coverage. Naturally, negativity is quite profitable in times of social media (Samoilenko & Miroshnichenko, 2019). Essentially, the media's focus on capitalizing on and monetizing scandals affects their ability to cover basic news, much less undertake nonpartisan investigative journalism.

Klicperová-Baker (2019) defines show trials as staged spectacles that conveniently combine public shaming and prosecution. A defamation media campaign precedes the actual trial. During a public trial, targets are often forced to discredit their characters through widely publicized public confessions before an official verdict.



## Methodology

The case study of the COVID-19 Controversy with Novak Djokovic is analyzed according to the framework of character assassination typology. This framework assumes that a social event produced by character assassination is multidimensional and thus should be examined in terms of five contributing elements (Icks, et al., 2020). This interdisciplinary framework pays attention to how the attacker, target, audience, media and context intersect to determine the effectiveness and longevity of attacks. These puzzle pieces should be considered in relation to each other while assessing the probability of reputational crisis and public outrage following an attack on character.

## Results and conclusions

The document analysis of media content reviewed as a part of this case study supports the notion of *mediatization* as “the growing intrusion of media logic as an institutional rule into fields where other rules of defining appropriate behaviour prevailed” (Esser & Matthes, 2013, p. 177). One critical impact of mediatization is that the production of news content has become ever more dictated by commercial imperatives and consumers’ expectations. Online platforms seek to deliver edgy click-bait content to niche audiences who are eager to demonstrate their moral and intellectual superiority in online battles. As a result, today’s mass media provide a conducive environment for character attacks amplified by the negative effects of mediatization, such as simplification of content, personalization and infotainment favouring conflict, drama and negative representation of social and political life (Esser, 2013).

## Practical and social implications

The complex nature of highly mediated events often impedes crisis managers from controlling for multiple reputational risks and responding to new emergencies. This case is a *scansis* situation that involves a character assassination attempt of a celebrity figure via a mediated scandal. *Scansis* represents the intersection of a scandal and crisis, essentially when a reputational crisis becomes a scandal (Coombs & Tachkova, 2019). This case is illustrative of how mediated scandals involving celebrities can be used as show trials to ensure compliance gaining and conformity with health regulations.

**Keywords:** *character assassination, crisis communication, reputation management, public relations, Novak Djokovic*



## Designing an investor focused communication framework based on dialogic theory: An interpretative qualitative study of publicly listed companies in South Africa

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### Introduction and Purpose

In recent times, the South African capital market has been plagued by a myriad of corporate scandals, with the likes of Steinhoff, Tongaat Hulett, and EOH being amongst the latest transgressors. These corporate scandals served as a reminder that all too many organisations take a myopic view of their business, considering financial bottom lines as the be-all and the end-all. As a result, stakeholders are understandably more sceptical about the accuracy and transparency of information being communicated to them.

An integral stakeholder group which forms part in the success of an organisation is its investors (Hoffmann and Fieseler, 2018:405, Laskin, 2018:75). Since investors have increasing demands and specific information needs, it is essential that organisations communicate relevant and useful information by means of investor relations.

However, despite its importance, academic research in the field of investor relations, specifically in terms of communication, is lacking and does not correlate with the importance of the function in corporate practice (Hoffmann et al., 2018:299, Laskin, 2014).

The aim of this study was to propose an investor focused communication framework based on dialogic theory, for South Africa organisations listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. This was done by investigating investor relations theory within the broader context of dialogic theory and crystallising the most critical constructs to include in a communication strategy.

### Methodology

The research design employed in this study was an interpretive multiple case study qualitative inquiry which included an investigation of current investor relations regulations that publicly listed organisations have to adhere to and engage in.

The research took place in three phases, consisting of both an empirical and non-empirical component. The three phases of the research conducted in this study were as follows; research phase one, the non-empirical component, consisted of an extensive literature review of the key concepts of this research, showcasing various conceptualisations and relationships. Ultimately the literature review crystallised the conceptual framework for this study, against which communicative products were assessed, and which assisted in the development of the initial inter-



view schedule utilised in research phase three of the research.

The empirical component consisted of two parts; research phase two, a qualitative content analysis of the Case Organisation's communicative products; including SENS announcements, annual integrated reports, and websites. The aim of this analysis was to assess the status of the communicative products against the conceptual framework put forth in research phase one, and hence assist in the refining of the interview schedule developed in research phase one.

During the second part of the empirical component of the research, research phase three, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the IR officers of each of the Case Organisations whose communicative products were analysed. These interviews were mainly confirmatory, the results of these interviews were used to substantiate, and where necessary adapt the final framework put forth.

### Proposed Framework

The proposed framework is the culmination and outcome of a synthesis of an in-depth literature review, a content analysis of communicative products- and semi-structured interviews with the investor relations officers of the case organisation. Propositions informing the proposed framework is put forth and the proposed framework serves as the original contribution of this study.

The proposed framework consists of intricate elements represented in three spheres that are influenced by, and in turn, exert influence on each other; (i) the communication process, (ii) IR, and (iii) the regulatory environment. In order for engagement with investors, as per the proposed framework, to be successful, these three spheres cannot be considered in isolation, but rather in a holistic all-encompassing manner.

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**Keywords:** dialogic communication management theory; investor relations; publicly listed organisations; South Africa

## Rebooting for the “New Normal” while “Working from Home”? Results from a long-term interview study concerning and Internal Social Media among up to 500 German companies 2013-2022

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

According to the Call for Paper for this conference, the pandemic had demonstrated the fragility of humans and the societies we inhabit. As stated there, “[a]tomized employees were asked to work from home, and the very definition of the workplace seems to have been redefined” (Call for Paper). Internal Social Media and Enterprise Social Networks play an important role during this process, because a “rapid expansion of ESN use and its significant role in the ‘new normal’ have combined to create a substantial change to the context of work” (Dickinson 2020). To analyse current changes linked to these developments, a long-term perspective might be helpful to distinguish Covid-19 related developments from other, even more fundamental effects. Therefore, this paper will use a general stakeholder approach on internal communication and apply it to analyse some data from a long-term interview study concerning the use of internal social media among up to 500 German companies 2013-2022.

### Literature Review

As a general theoretical framework for this pa-

per, the stakeholder theory based “Internal communication matrix” from Welch and Jackson (2007) will be used. It differentiates between internal line management communication, internal team peer communication, internal project peer communication and internal corporate communication – four dimensions which are also crucial for the use of internal social media within companies since all these levels should be part of it. Especially the two mentioned peer levels were heavily concerned during the Covid-19 pandemic when suddenly if ‘working from home’ (WFH) became the ‘new normal’. Following Ipsen et al. 2021, most knowledge workers in Europe had a more positive rather than negative experience of WFH during lockdown, but work uncertainties (which normally can be dealt with through intensive peer dialogue) and inadequate tools had been identified among the three most negative factors. Based on this, the vast majority seems to wish to continue to work flexibly on a remote basis, at least to some extent (Kunze et al. 2020). Looking at Internal Social Media and following Huck & Sandhu (2015), social media applications open up new possibilities for collaboration, participation and – above all – dialogue communication in organisations.





## Methodology

The survey studies were conducted in 2013, 2016, 2019 and 2022, in each case in January, with 579, 555, 352 and 421 respondents respectively. The online questionnaire was distributed to company representatives (mainly in the areas of communications, human resources and general management) via address lists and editorial references. While this study is, like many company studies, not really representative, it does, however, entail a good selection of companies in the country, roughly corresponding to official statistics. Above all, however, it is highly comparable in terms of developments over time since there is a very similar composition of distributors and participants for all four surveys.

## First results and conclusion

Since this study was realised in January 2022, only some results have been analysed so far. What is interesting to observe in a first place, is the development of the preferred working place over the timeframe as well as its linkage to the own experiences with internal social media. In 2013 and 2016, the office workplace with flexible working hours was with 41 and 37.4 percent by far the most preferred solution among employees interviewed concerning internal social media. On the either side, a flexible workplace with flexible times was only preferred by 2 or 3.2 percent nine and six years ago, compared to 27.1 percent at the beginning of 2022. However, WFH has even been reduced as preferable solution from 5.0 percent in 2013 (with fixed working hours) to 1.9 percent in 2022 (with flexible hours). Overall mixed forms are currently most preferred (40.6 percent).

The findings show quite clearly WFH from a stakeholder perspective: since spontaneous peer communication is getting quite difficult in mainly WFH based model, this is even more rejected than 9 years ago and mixed forms are preferred.


However, also these mixed forms are only possible using an appropriate technology as well as having an adapted meeting and company culture. More results on this are part of the survey and will be analysed for the conference and the full paper.

## Practical and Social Implications

The practical implication of this study should be quite evident: Only if internal social media communication do take into account the specific stakeholder dimension of international communication in general, it can be successful. And only if internal social media communication is successful, the digital side of a flexible workplace with flexible working hours can be realised appropriately – and organizations might be able to rediscover communication with internal stakeholders.

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**Keywords:** *Stakeholder Approach, Internal Communication, Internal Social Media, Enterprise Social Networks*

## Mind the gap: Reconnecting employees and organizations after remote work during a crisis

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### Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic necessitated organizations to adopt various short- and medium-term operating models that had a direct impact on interpersonal interactions. This included implementing remote work to reduce the physical proximity between employees (Lund *et al.*, 2021). While these measures had to be taken during the onset and height of the pandemic, survey data from the United Kingdom suggest that organizations plan to adopt hybrid work models that allow employees to work from home at least some of the time after the pandemic (YouGov, 2021). Another study highlighted the consequences of pivoting from in-person work to hybrid/online interactions during the pandemic. For example, employees' hours worked increased, including outside normal business hours; communication and task coordination costs increased while at the same time employees communicated with fewer individuals and departments both internally and externally; and employees received less coaching and fewer one-on-one meetings with supervisors (Gibbs *et al.*, 2021).

It is in this context that employees and organizations had to navigate employee-organization relationships (EOR). Although EOR have been theorized robustly within public relations scholarship, little research has explored the antecedents, states, and outcomes of EOR, particular-

ly when employees work remotely and have to re-engage with the organization on returning to the workplace.

This study, therefore, aims to examine changes in relationships between employers and their employees over the course of remote work.

The pandemic has also amplified various tensions and paradoxes in the workplace. In the context of EOR, employees were confronted with notions such as being connected/disconnected, dealing with flexibility/inflexibility, standing together while being apart; and navigating the blurred boundaries between work-life and private life. A dialectical approach (Mumby, 2005; Tracy, 2004) provides a useful lens through which these tensions in organizational life and the renegotiation of the boundaries spanning relationships can be studied.

### Literature review

Employee-organization relationships (EOR)

The relational outcomes of EOR are trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality, while effective relationship maintenance strategies include access, openness, positivity, networking, and sharing of tasks (Hon & Grunig, 1999). However, existing models of EOR, including antecedents, states, and consequences

call for a re-examination especially when the employee-organization relationship moves on-line and back, such as in the case of remote and in-person work during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Relational dialectics theory

Relationships are maintained through communication, but these relationships are often characterized by contradictions and tensions as relationships grow and develop (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). Communication scholars have called for a nuanced, multilayered approach to investigate the dualities and contradictions that underlie organizational interactions as well (Mumby, 2005; Tracy, 2004). Following Mumby's (2005) assertion that organizational behavior can be understood through discourses, a dialectical approach is used to examine the communicative utterances used by employers to construct new understandings of their relationship with employees during remote work. The research questions posed to guide the study are:

- **RQ1:** Did employee-organization relationships (EOR) change over the course of remote work during the pandemic? If yes, then how did they change?
- **RQ2:** What were some of the factors that led to the changes, if any? Were there differences due to antecedents of EOR such as openness, access, networking, and positivity?
- **RQ3:** What are the short term and long-term outcomes of the changed relationships?

## Methodology

The methodological approach is qualitative and will employ in-depth interviews with senior managerial employees (representing employers/organizations) who worked remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic in the United Arab Emirates. This is regarded as a suitable approach for

exploring employers' perceptions of their relationships with employees during remote work conditions. The researchers will employ purposeful sampling to recruit participants with some experience of remote working. The population will be employees working in organizations listed in the *Fortune 500 100 best companies to work for* and/or *Great place to work in the UAE* indexes. Interview data will be analyzed by means of qualitative thematic analysis.

## Implications

Theoretically, the findings of this study will add to emergent empirical insights into relationship management in the context of remote work in turbulent contexts. The study aims to demonstrate the impact of remote work on EOR and provide future research directions for the successful management of EOR in times of crises.

**Keywords:** *employee engagement, remote work, employee-organization relationships, relational dialectics, public relations, UAE*

## Role perceptions and challenges of internal communication practitioners in facilitating the shift toward a more flexible work environment

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### Introduction and purpose


As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations are experiencing fundamental changes in their daily operations. Above all, the unprecedented shift to homeworking or mobile working is driving virtualization which requires the implementation of new digital tools and ways of how work is organized. It also initiated a change towards more flexibility, which causes challenges for most organizations, particularly for those who had a pronounced culture of presence prior to the pandemic. Internal communication assumes a key role in addressing these challenges in that it is to strategically guide this change process and fulfill its function as facilitator of the organization-employee relationship. This raises the question how internal communication practitioners experience the change and evaluate their roles in this process:

- RQ1: How do internal communication professionals perceive their role in the pandemic-driven shift toward a more flexible work environment?
- RQ2: Which challenges do internal communication professionals perceive in the pandemic-driven shift toward a more flexible work environment?

### Literature review

Various scholars examined the roles and functions of internal communication in different organizational contexts, which Men (2021) categorized as follows: Internal communication professionals must keep employees informed, listen to their perspectives, concerns and ideas, and help build relationships within the organization. In addition, internal communication is responsible for inspiring and acculturating employees as well as helping them to make sense of the situation. Finally, they play an important role in motivating and engaging employees. “Overall, the role and function of internal communication can be summarized as informational (to inform), relational (to listen, connect), motivational (to acculturate, inspire, motivate), and behavioral (to engage)” (Men, 2021, p. 6).

Especially during crisis-induced changes, employees benefit from internal communication that reduces situational uncertainties, misunderstandings, rumors, and negative communication behaviors. A lack of employee-centered, two-way symmetrical communication would enhance negative outcomes during these times. As emphasized by Heide and Simonsson (2021), we investigate whether communication professionals use a process approach to internal crisis



communication as it helps to reduce negative outcomes and motivate employees to actively support the organization.

## Methodology

Since gaining insights into the reflections of internal communication professionals is required to answer the research questions, a qualitative research approach was chosen. Between March and May 2021, 16 qualitative, semi-structured, problem-centered interviews were conducted with internal communication professionals from large, globally operating organizations in German-speaking countries. The selection of suitable interview partners was based on a convenience sampling strategy. In order to test the quality of the interview guide, two pretest interviews were conducted. All interviews were conducted via MS Teams or Zoom. The analysis of the material is based on a deductive and inductive structural content analysis and supported by the software program MaxQDA18.

## Results and implications

The results show that the shift toward a “culture of flexibility” requires that communication professionals deepen their knowledge of employee needs, concerns, and habits in order to develop targeted communication strategies and promote participatory employee behaviors. Fostering employees’ commitment to the organization is one of the biggest challenges named by practitioners. The situation has strengthened the role of communication professionals as enablers who actively support leaders and employees to adapt and enhance their own communication behavior. Furthermore, communication that addresses the relationship with employees is key to engender employees’ support during the change. This requires listening and being transparent, appreciative and supportive. Organizations with a high proportion of employees working in production on-site face a particular challenge of reaching

everyone equally and preventing on-site workers to feel left out. With regard to home workers, the challenge is to intensify the exchange between managers, supervisors and employees and find appropriate communicative strategies to motivate and engage employees.

Research results imply that virtualization of work enlarges professionals’ functions by enabling, and broadens their radius of action. At the same time, they have more responsibility and a higher risk of losing employees – increasing, for example, their frustration or disengagement. In order to overcome the challenges, professionals must adapt their existing workflows, and need to learn and experiment with novel formats and messages.

Future studies could use case studies to further examine different perspectives during the transitioning from a culture of presence to a culture of flexibility. In addition, it would be valuable to capture employees’ perspectives on their perceptions of internal communication during the change to deepen findings on communication challenges.

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*Keywords: internal communication, change, flexibility, qualitative research*

## Organizational purpose and public relations in hybrid organizations

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Organizational purpose is the reason for an organization to exist and the essence of its identity. Most organizations strive to define and communicate their unique purpose as a particular way of satisfying stakeholders' expectations and contributing to society.

This study seeks to explore how hybrid organizations reconcile and communicate multiple organizational purposes, more specifically in private universities as hybrid institutions with elements from the logics of education and business. The following research question is raised:

- RQ1: How do hybrid organizations communicate multiple purposes?

Hybrid organizations emerge out of public-private partnerships or a combination of non-profit/for-profit components, comprising elements from at least two different sectors with their institutional logics, values or rationalities, hence paving the way to multiple organizational purposes (Schmitz and Glänzel, 2016). Due to the hybrid nature, such organizations may not be entirely and exclusively assigned to either sector, which may raise tensions and pose the challenge to handle the communication of multiple logics and purposes and balancing claims from different sectors.

And since hybrids are typically more complex to govern, hybridization calls for new management paradigms and new ways of accountability to-

ward multiple stakeholders (Jongbloed, 2015). It can be also claimed that, in turn, the particular communication concerns of hybrids partly institutionalize these emerging forms so as to position them in one or another sector (Birkholz, C., 2015); (Buhmann and Schoeneborn, 2021).

**Methodology:** in order to answer the research question, qualitative data were collected through mini-Delphi with public relations and communication experts (N=15) and in-depth interviews (N=40) personally held on campus with university executives, communication specialists and academics from three countries.

**Results and conclusions:** findings show that private universities tend to declare a single organizational purpose as a mission statement blending their particular commitment with specific groups of stakeholders. In some cases, the organizational purpose has already changed since foundation (which may entail a different essence or identity), while in others it has remained unwavering, strategically blended, disseminated and integrated as the backbone and centre of all decisions. Contrastingly, double narratives and mismatches between internal and external messaging reveal mission drift leaning towards one dominant logic at the expense of another, also leading to legitimacy deficit.

This study further develops the incipient conceptualization of hybrid organizations as actors combining different logics and provides a typol-



ogy enriched with private universities as hybrid institutional forms in the Higher Education sector.

Purpose emerges as an essential governance mechanism of hybrid organizations to avoid mission drifts and maintain hybridity (Mair, Mayer and Lutz, 2015). Hence, the vital role of public relations in aligning multiple institutional pressures (Wolf and Mair, 2019), activating favourable behaviours and generating identification and adherence to the organizational values declared in the organizational purpose. To achieve this, the conceptualization of purpose-driven public relations is suggested, whereby the purpose and values are defined *with* the stakeholders and not just *for* the stakeholders (Fontán, Alloza and Rey, 2019, p. 110). The upheld values should then be reflected in the communication practices, contents and decisions (Siwale, Kimmitt and Amankwah-Amoah, 2021). Organizational purpose then becomes the departure and destination point in the strategic loop to evaluate communication performance.

An acknowledged limitation of this research is that the phenomenon of hybridization has been empirically explored only in private universities as explicitly *de iure* hybrid institutions in the Higher Education sector, where state-owned institutions are gradually becoming *de facto* hybrid forms (Jongbloed, 2015).

**Keywords:** *organizational purpose, public relations, hybrid organization, university, mission drift, Higher Education Institutions.*





## Graphical distortion and Impression Management techniques in Corporate sustainable reporting: An investigation of the sustainability reports in the top 100 companies in Italy

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### Purpose

The increasing stakeholder expectation toward organizations societal role are leveraging a higher degree of required transparency in their communication. This implicates that disclosing exclusively financial information is no longer enough as companies need to be held accountable also for their impact on society in terms of environmental and societal activities (Moreno & Capriotti, 2009). To comply with this surging demand, companies have therefore begun to publish sustainability reports to communicate their activities and impacts.

Despite the fact that several standards are available, the reporting scenario remains still fragmented and unregulated regarding how companies should present their data (Lock & Arujo, 2020). Due to the volatile attention scarcity of the audience, companies need to implement engaging and timely data communication tactics. The emergence of the “visual turn” in CSR communication (Lock & Arujo, 2020) is exemplified by the increasing predominance of infographics

and data visualization elements in sustainability reporting. The available visualization techniques have now transformed sustainability reports into a powerful form of promotional content companies can embrace to fulfil multiple purposes and convey information to several publics. This has also implied an increase adoption of impression management techniques with the goal of delivering as much as possible positive information, to the point of distorting the graphs in the context of corporate reporting. Indeed, several studies analyzing the impression management techniques in annual report highlights how reports easily adapt to deliberately alter perception of the company’s performance (Beattie & Jhones, 2002). However, while extensive literature has been dedicated to the graphical distortion present in company’s reports, the focus has predominantly fallen on annual reports or financial reports. Sustainability reporting is an increasingly studied area of inquiry for communication scholarship. To contribute to the discussion by expanding the existing gaps, the present study fits in with the goal of studying under the lens of

impression management techniques are deliberately conceived to alter the public perception of companies' sustainability performance.

### Design/Methodology

In particular, in order to assess whether and to what extent companies use impression management techniques. We analyzed a sample of 65 companies listed in the Italian stock exchange, systematically collecting their reports and categorizing them by their market capitalization. This method of selection seems to be favorable for what concerns the industrial sectors of analysis. Indeed, selecting companies based on their market capitalization and not on industry specifics allows to gain an overview also on different aspects of different sectors. Hence, even though this sampling cannot be defined as purely randomized, at the same time it offers a good approximation of what the market is like.

### Findings

By using an analytical framework informed in the impression management theory, we found undeniable evidence of the adoption graphical distortion techniques by companies, supporting the idea that sustainability reports are employed not only to convey important and truthful information about the firms' sustainability performance, but also a favorable image of the company. Consistently with the studies on impression management (Cho et al., 2018), the results of the analysis confirmed that graphs are not only largely adopted forms of communication but also largely altered ones where selectivity, presentational enhancement, and measurement distortions convergently appear.

### Theoretical and practical contributions

Theoretically, the research problematizes and extends studies on the impression management techniques deployed in CSR reporting. Practically the research informs the sustainable report-

ing sector by providing evidence on the actual stage of CSR impression management and possible avenues to increment and regulated unified standard for a more transparent communication. On the other side, the research raises awareness on the issue of graph literacy among corporate report publics as an antecedent of correct data consumption and misuse identification.

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**Keywords:** CSR reporting, impression management, data visualization, transparency

## How internal communication contributes to organizational success conditions

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

Internal communication was previously recognized for its considerable contribution to organizations (Špoljarić & Tkalac Verčić, 2021). Its significance within organizations has recently grown even further. Due to the current global crisis, which caused most employees working from home, internal communication suddenly became critical for everyone. In our study we test the extent of internal communication's influence on job attitudes and its contribution to perception of the organization among both internal and external publics. Within our research we turned to employee engagement, perceived organizational support and psychological contract fulfillment in order to portray employees' job attitudes. Internal perception of the organization is displayed by internal employer attractiveness, while reputation and external employer attractiveness demonstrate external perception of the organization. Additionally, we explore the potential effect internal communication has on overall organizational success caused by indirect effects through reputation.


### Literature review

Internal communication and level of satisfaction with it have a great impact on employees' attitudes and perception of their employers (Tkalac Verčić et al., 2021). Research has shown that employees that are satisfied with the communi-

cation within their organizations feel motivated and display higher levels of engagement at work. At the same time, clear communication helps organizations manage perceptions and expectations. This reflects in higher perception of organizational support, psychological contract fulfillment (Špoljarić & Verčić, 2022; Tkalac Verčić et al., 2021) and internal employer attractiveness (Tkalac Verčić et al., 2021). These positive practices within organizations lead to positive recognition among external publics, which is made up of corporate reputation and external employer brand perception. However, the relationship between these internal and external contributors to organizational success has never been fully established (Tkalac Verčić & Sinčić Ćorić, 2018).

### Methodology

In order to analyze internal communication's contribution to organizational behavior and perception of organizations among employees, we applied predesigned measurement instruments. This part of the research was done as a large communication survey among 1805 employees from 12 companies. The communication survey was a part of a four-year national scientific project to map out internal communication. The choice of organizations that were approached within the project was based on the typical unit criteria. In selecting the organizations for the sample, the project team reached a consensus on what is considered typical and which criteria



should be typical. Number of employees range from 60 up to 10 000. Within each company, significant effort was made to include representative samples of employees. Additionally, among organizations' external publics, an analysis of reputation and external employer attractiveness was conducted.

### Results and conclusion

We are still in the process of data collection among organizations' external publics. We will complete our research and conduct appropriate analysis before July 2022.

### Practical and social implications

The global crisis that occurred after the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic further established the importance of internal communication for organizational success. With this research we aim to show just how important internal communication is to organizations. We expect to show its influence on several organizational outcomes, which include employee engagement, perceived organizational support, psychological contract fulfillment, internal employer attractiveness, organizational reputation, external employer attractiveness, and ultimately, profit.

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**Keywords:** *Internal communication, employer brand, organizational reputation, employee engagement, job attitudes.*

## From Situational Appraisals to Collective Action: An examination on Asian Americans' Engagement in Collective Action during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Introduction and Purpose of the Study


The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a global health crisis but has also uncovered many underlying societal issues of disparity, inequity, and injustice. In the United States, along with the vast spread of COVID-19 is the uptick of hate incidents, discrimination, and racist attacks against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). According to Stop AAPI Hate, a total of 10,370 hate incidents were reported from March 19, 2020 to September 30, 2021 in the United States. These hate incidents took place in various forms that ranged from individual acts of verbal harassment, shunning, physical assaults, to civil rights violations such as workplace discrimination and refusal of service. This study, in this regard, sets out to examine the factors and mechanisms that drive Asian Americans' engagement in collective action in combating anti-Asian discrimination and racism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Literature review

Scholars from various fields have conducted studies that examined the anti-Asian rhetoric

during political campaigns, the use of social media on Asian Americans' well-being, mental health issues among Asian Americans, and so on (e.g., Lee & Waters, 2021; Yang et al., 2020). Apart from addressing the immediate impact during the pandemic, scholars have also noted that the uptick of hate incidents against Asian Americans has its historical roots. The portrayal of Asians as the "Yellow Peril" and "perpetual foreigners," along with the pervasive "model minority" myth, has resulted in Asian Americans' voices on their experiences of discrimination being delegitimized and silenced. This has further led to limited empirical research evidence on the impact of racial discrimination among Asian Americans, especially when it comes to activism and collective action (Lee & Waters, 2021). The knowledge on collective action—the action that aims at changing the status of a disadvantaged group—could be especially instrumental as community members, activists, and scholars continue exploring viable measures to combat anti-Asian discrimination and racism at individual, institutional, and societal levels.

Drawing on insights from the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) (Kim & Grunig,



2011), societal risk reduction motivation model (SRRM) (Cho & Kuang, 2014), and collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2008), this study proposes a model that comprises perceptual, cognitive, emotive, and motivational factors that could drive Asian Americans' online and offline collective action in combating anti-Asian discrimination and racism.

## Methodology

An online survey was conducted in August 2021 among 505 Asian Americans residing in the U.S. at the time of the study. Participants were recruited via Dynata survey panel, representing diverse ethnic backgrounds among the Asian American communities spanning across 41 states in the U.S.

## Results and Conclusions

Results revealed the perceptual, cognitive, emotive, and motivational factors that drove Asian Americans' online and offline collective action. Perceptual factors including Asian Americans' involvement recognition, their perceptions of self-efficacy, group efficacy, and governmental efficacy fostered situational motivation to combat anti-Asian discrimination and racism. The emotive factor of discrimination-inflicted arousal also generated Asian Americans' situational motivation. Asian Americans' motivational state, in turn, facilitated their online and offline collective action in combating discrimination and racism. Given that this study particularly pertains to the context of anti-Asian discrimination and racism during COVID-19, future research could further test our model among other marginalized communities and in different sociocultural contexts to enhance its theoretical and practical utility.

## Practical and Social Implications

For public relations professionals, activists, policy makers, and the society at large, findings from

this study suggested a multi-facet approach that encompasses consideration at perceptual, cognitive, and emotive levels in gauging Asian Americans' online and offline collective action. By providing an integrated framework that delineates the process from situational appraisals to collective action, this study helps shed insights on the role public relations could play in advocating for social change and creating a more humane and just world.

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**Keywords:** *Racial Discrimination, Collective Action, Asian Americans, Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), COVID-19*

## Increasing employee advocacy through supervisor motivating language: The mediating role of psychological conditions

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### Introduction and purpose of the study


Research on leadership has attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners for decades. The positive impact that leaders can exert on a wide range of individual and organizational outcomes, such as commitment, trust, and performance, have contributed to this widespread interest. However, leadership and leadership communication are broad terms that apply to an extensive range of communication behaviors. As noted by Mayfield and Mayfield (2017), studies examining leader communication behaviors need to focus on specific aspects. Therefore, the current study analyzed leadership communication through the lens of motivating language (ML), a framework of leader-to-follower speech (Sullivan, 1988). More specifically, we examined ML's relationship with employee advocacy, a type of organizational citizenship behavior in which employees voluntarily support, recommend, or defend an organization to internal or external publics (Thelen, 2020).

In addition to examining the relationship between ML and employee advocacy, insights on the mechanisms through which ML impacts advocacy behaviors are needed. In his seminal study, Kahn (1990) identified three specific psychological conditions that help determine whether and how people engage in their roles: psycholog-

ical safety, job meaningfulness, and psychological availability. To fill the research gap and expand the body of knowledge on leadership communication and internal communication, this study focuses on the psychological conditions of employees and looks at how supervisor ML influences employee advocacy behaviors through the mediating mechanisms of safety, meaningfulness, and availability.

### Literature review

When employees feel psychological safety, find work worthwhile, and can channel their physical, emotional, and psychological resources for focused tasks, they are inclined to do more for their organizations (Kahn, 1990). The mediating role of work meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability have been studied in various settings, including work relationships, career adaptability, and performance (Jannesari & Sullivan, 2019). Overall, when employees perceive a supportive environment, inclusive leadership, and communication that addresses their physical, cognitive, and emotional needs, they are more likely to advocate for the organization. When leader communication includes motivating language, it builds confidence, reduces stress, and encourages staff to experiment in a safe environment. When motivating language is an ongoing priority for leaders, it



helps staff view work as meaningful and increases their likelihood to speak up (Sullivan, 1988) and potentially advocate for their organization.

## Methodology

We administered an online survey on Qualtrics and used quota sampling to obtain samples from the U.S. and India. These samples provide an opportunity to compare the proposed model across varied settings that differ vastly in cultural and economic environments. Data collection was conducted on Amazon's Mechanical Turk in August 2021. Our sample consisted of 354 participants from India and 441 participants from the U.S.

## Results and conclusions

The results from the current investigation confirmed that leader motivating language was positively correlated with psychological safety, work meaningfulness, and psychological availability in India and the U.S. The study also provided empirical evidence for the effectiveness of supervisor motivating language in nurturing employee advocacy behaviors.

Additionally, the study looked at the relationship that psychological safety, work meaningfulness, and psychological availability have with employee advocacy. Among these three variables, only work meaningfulness had a positive relationship with advocacy behaviors in both countries. The positive relationship between psychological safety and advocacy was only significant among U.S. workers. The Indian system is profoundly hierarchical, and employees are highly status-conscious. Therefore, a plausible explanation for the nonsignificant relationship could result from the higher levels of power distance that exist in India. The current study also found a positive relationship between psychological availability and employee advocacy in India. Surprisingly, psychological availability did not have a significant relationship with employee advocacy among em-

ployees in the United States. This result suggests that feeling confident about their work abilities is not enough for employees in the United States to feel an intrinsic desire to advocate for their organization. Finally, our study indicated that work meaningfulness mediated the relationship between motivating language and employee advocacy in India and the U.S.

## Practical and social implications

This study impacts the profession and society in several ways. First, internal communicators and leaders need to understand the impact of cultural differences while investing in employee advocacy programs. There is no one-size-fits-all model. Second, a supervisor's role in, for example, emphasizing a program's goals and focusing on employees' collective and individual aspirations is crucial in shaping employees' actions. Third, infusing meaningfulness at work by helping employees understand how their work is important, worthwhile, and significant can generate the conditions that will encourage employees to advocate on behalf of their organization.

**Keywords:** *supervisor motivating language, employee advocacy, psychological safety, work meaningfulness, psychological availability*



## Organizational culture and remote working in public relations agencies in Greece

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought significant changes in the workplace environment with remote working being one of the major challenges for organizations. The pandemic also transformed existing organizational cultures by shifting and replacing deep-rooted values, rituals, and shared practices among employees. The aim of the present study is to explore the post-covid organizational culture of public relations agencies in Greece. Towards this end the following research questions will be addressed: What are the main types of organizational culture that emerged in public relations agencies in Greece as a response to the Covid-19? How did public relations agencies try to communicate their organizational cultures to their employees and other stakeholders during the pandemic? What engagement practices were utilized by agencies (e.g., employees, customers) during the lockdowns? What are the perceived benefits or disadvantages of remote working for public relations executives? How leadership was exercised in virtual teams? and whether remote work is here to stay, replacing face-to-face meetings with employees or customers?

### Literature review

While teleworking was not a new practice for public relations professionals, Covid-19 caused agencies to urgently switch almost all their ac-

tivities to a work-from-home style. Teleworking has been associated with several benefits such as greater employee autonomy, better work-life balance, reduced stress, and greater job satisfaction. On the other hand, work-from-home can cause social isolation, work overload, family-work conflict, employees' alienation, and weak relationships between employees (Contreras et al., 2020). Under these new working conditions, organizational culture can be weakened (Chatman and Gino, 2020) or transformed as new digital norms arise. Organizational culture has been defined as the shared values, beliefs, assumptions, rituals, symbols, and practices of organizations (Schein, 2004). Thus, in a remote working situation, the shared aspect of culture can be jeopardized (Ranghuram, 2021) if not communicated effectively.

### Methodology

To answer the research questions an online survey will be conducted directed to executives working in public relations agencies in Greece. Open-ended as well as close-ended questions will be used regarding the types of culture that exist or the new forms that arose; the practices and channels for communicating organizational culture; the stakeholder engagement tactics; the leadership style in virtual teams; as well as the benefits and challenges associated with remote working.



## Results and conclusions

Due to the characteristics of the public relations industry in Greece that is comprised of small-sized agencies, it is suggested a clan culture will be favored after the occurrence of Covid-19 due to its flexibility and internal focus. Moreover, it is expected that hybrid modes of communication practices and channels (online as well as offline) will be utilized by agencies given that the public relations industry in Greece is still dominated by a clientelist approach that focuses on the cultivation of personal relationships with customers, media, politicians, etc (Garcia, 2015). However, it is also expected that in a feminized public relations industry the “work-from-home” will be preferred along with a team leadership.

## Practical and social implications

This present study will be among the first to map the changes in organizational culture, working, virtual leadership, and communication practices that the public relations industry in Greece has undergone due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, important managerial implications will be suggested for effective communication of organizational culture.

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**Keywords:** *organizational culture, public relations agencies, virtual leadership, remote working, communication practices, employee engagement.*

## The Four Realms of Digital Visual Experience: A Theoretical Framework

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Communication management has long claimed responsibility for stakeholder relationships and enshrined the function as part of the definitional identity for practitioners and academics. During an era of unprecedented digital transformation and shrinking stakeholder proximity, the author interviewed c-suite executives at ten publicly traded companies operating in Canada to explore the role for strategic communication/public relations in the growing field of experience delivery.


These conversations were augmented by ten interviews with experience management (XM) experts and practitioners – those who monitor employee, customer, product and brand perceptions using predictive behavior data – to give the organization a robust understanding of all relationships impacting business performance.

Underscored by an integrative literature review, the applicability of communication management is examined through communication, organization-public relationships (OPR) and brand/image reputation activities. However, communication management continues to struggle with delivering measurement and evaluation (M&E) for their programs and responsibilities. Meanwhile, organizations have increased their appetite for actionable insights that will cause behavior change in important relationships. Meeting this expectation, Experience management (XM)

applies agile design processes and mines digital connectivity to deliver robust business intelligence tools and an intimate understanding of the stakeholder journey.

### Literature Review

Broadly examining the landscape of organizational transformation in the 21st century, Holtz (2002), Castells (2000) and Hax (2010) highlight how social and digital ecosystems are altering how stakeholders interact with brands and are shifting business strategies from product differentiation to service experience. In order to explore shifting priorities of senior leaders, communication management as a strategic function is explored in literature. Mcnamara (2015) evidenced a long history of difficulty measuring and evaluating (M&E) programs and responsibilities for communication practitioners and academics. Supporting this finding Huang and Zhang (2013) thoroughly critique organization-public relationship measurement scales to similarly find outcomes are elusive. The major communication activities such as the tactic of communicating (Hutton, 1999; Macnamara, 2018; van Ruler, 2018), organization-public relationships (OPR) (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Finne and Grönroos, 2009; Macnamara, 2015) and image/reputation monitoring through crisis and issues management (Bunting & Lipski, 2000; Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Macnamara, 2020; mur-



ray & White, 2005) are given as context for the role of communication practitioners in organizations. In contrast, the new field of experience delivery (Macik, 2017) is explored through computer sciences literature including the Internet of Things (IoT) (Amodu et al., 2019) and human to computer connectivity (Fletcher, 2015) showing that senior leaders are looking for analytics to identify gaps in the perception that stakeholders have of a brand/organization (Grannan & Geoffroy, 2016) and that indicate behavioral intention as well (Qualtrics, 2021; Palmer, 2010).

## Methodology

This is an exploratory, qualitative research study to introduce experience (XM) management into communication management literature. The sample size consisted of twenty in-depth interviews: ten senior leaders who had authority in operational and strategic decisions and ten experts and practitioners in the experience delivery ecosystem at publicly traded companies operating in Canada and undergoing digital transformation. Three broad interview questions discussed experience delivery, stakeholder relationship management and strategic communication activities. The qualitative synthesis focused on words, descriptions, concepts, perceptions and sentiments expressed by participants. Narrative analysis revealed mindsets and perspectives of interview participants while thematic analysis revealed similarities and differences that could be grouped together for deeper interpretations.

## Results and conclusions

The results of this study are expected to be completed by March 2022 as part of a master's thesis defence. Early analysis shows the activity of communication, as message sending and message clarifying for strategic priorities, is the tactical function most needed at a program level and senior executive level in organizations. Oth-

er insights found: strategic communicators could play a role in determining the mission of analytics and data collection as ethical advisors; letting go of managerial ownership with stakeholder relationships; find influence with chief technology and strategy officers; overwrite traditional communication plans to incorporate design-thinking principles of empathy and feedback loops; and finally, improving data and analytics fluency as it relates to experience delivery.

The author submits that communication management is poised for an upgrade. The modern practitioner should be “full-stack” much like that of a software developer who can solve customer-facing aspects of design and diagnose internal system-related issues as well.

## Practical and Social Implications

To ensure relevance after digital transformation, communication management must find a place for communication, crisis and issues management as well as reputation activities within the agile, cross-functional ecosystem of today's modern, data-informed organizations who are using experience delivery models.

The findings are instructive for professionals performing communication activities and researchers studying them, as well as institutions offering academic study in strategic communication and public relations.

**Keywords:** *public relations theory, communication theory, experience management, relationship management, organization-public relationships*

## Employee satisfaction with internal communication in private companies during the first lockdown

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Internal public relations, ie internal communication, includes communication within the organization that can flow from superiors to employees, from employees to superiors and between employees. Quality internal communication in times of crisis is the key to the company's survival in the future, so in March, April and May 2020 many Croatian companies found themselves in an uncertain situation where they had to adapt internal communication and organizational culture to new circumstances. The COVID-19 crisis hit the whole world in 2020, and it is still inconceivable what and how many consequences it will leave behind. Its effects are clearly visible in the day-to-day operations of most companies. In the most challenging period during March, April and May 2020, companies had to show how they cope with the crisis and how much they are ready for it in all aspects of their business and management. Why is employee satisfaction with internal communication important? The reason is very simple, satisfied and motivated employees and successful communication with internal stakeholders will create satisfied customers, users and successful communication with all external stakeholders.

The subject of this paper is the internal communication of Croatian companies during the COVID-19 crisis and the first lockdown with

special emphasis on organizational culture and relations with employees and employee satisfaction with internal communication during the first lockdown. The period of the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia includes March, April and May 2020. For the purposes of this paper, an anonymous questionnaire was conducted on a sample of 84 respondents. The questionnaire sought to examine the satisfaction of respondents with internal communication and communication channels in their companies with an emphasis on organizational culture and relationships with employees during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia. The results of the survey indicated that respondents were satisfied with the communication processes in their organizations during the first lockdown, and that the COVID-19 crisis did not significantly change the attitude of employees towards employers, but the results showed that there is room for improvement in internal communication management culture.

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- Keywords:** *internal communication, lockdown, COVID-19 crisis, employees, organizational culture*

## To Trust or Not to Trust: Consumer Perceptions of Brand Activism in Times of the Black Lives Matter Movement

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

The salience of socio-political issues on social media has led to increasing pressure on companies to engage in corporate social advocacy (CSA), referring to them taking a stance on these issues (Austin et al., 2019; Edrington and Lee, 2018; Gaither et al., 2018). CSA may include taking actions such as contributing to a certain cause financially, creating advertising campaigns related to the issue, lobbying local and state governments, making donations and engaging in philanthropic efforts known to the public, or using the company's large platform to raise awareness, for instance through social media (Waymer and Logan, 2021). Despite this new phenomenon, the research on CSA is limited in literature, and CSA has often been classified as a subset of corporate social responsibility rather than its own category of corporate action. This paper aims to understand to what extent perceived corporate motives of engaging in CSA affect consumer skepticism and brand equity. We also examine whether a consumer's social issue involvement moderates the proposed relationship.

### Methodology

An online survey was conducted ( $N=375$ ). Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method through Amazon Mechanical Turk.

### Results and conclusions


The results revealed that values-driven motives and egoistic-driven motives were significant predictors of consumer skepticism. However, no significant impact of strategic-driven motives and stakeholder-driven motives was discovered on consumer skepticism. In addition, consumer skepticism was found to be a significant mediator of the relationship between egoistic-driven motives and brand equity. The results however did not reveal any significant moderation effect of social issue involvement.

### Practical and social implications

The findings imply that companies need to develop a good understanding of the consumers' attributions when engaging in CSA as the latter can result in consumer skepticism and negative impact on brand equity.

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**Keywords:** *Corporate Social Advocacy, Black Lives Matter, Rebranding, Corporate Motives, Consumer Skepticism, Brand Equity*



## Re-Framing Sustainability in a Pandemic. Understanding Sustainability Attitudes, Behaviors, Visions and Responsibilities for a Post-Covid Future

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There is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic means much more than a health challenge and more than a potential economic catastrophe. It is the beginning of a social change process and a test for our civilization on how we deal with transformation. It is also time for asking for the moral principles that will guide transformation. Our response as society as a whole, as collectives and communities, as institutions and individuals will highlight our capability to deal with and manage cultural and social change in the future. Staying at home and away from travelling, consumption, and playgrounds have changed our behavior and lifestyle, with positive and negative effects. It also changed our attitudes from preferences to moral imperatives, from being driven by conventions and habits to moral convictions and new perceptions of our very individual responsibility in these societal transformation processes (Weder et al., 2021). During the first year of the pandemic, people did not only return to their local structures and developed a solidary “we-culture” (Zukunftsinstitut, 2020) and a new consumer sentiment (Kittel et al., 2020). Much more, organizations sketching the future picture the future as the opportunity for a new

kind of globalization and climate change-related transformation (reduction of fossil fuels, less air and car travel, shift to a meatless diet, some form of basic income (Moriarty & Honnery, 2020; Goffman, 2020)).

With the study at hand, we aimed at understanding people’s visions for a “new normal” and what role sustainability as a moral principle might play in this process of change and redefinition of “normal”.

Theoretically, we first conceptualize how sustainability is defined and a sustainable future possibly envisioned by organizations and individuals. Second, we introduce the concept of moral agency to better understand how individuals perceive their responsibility when it comes to sustainable development and social transformation processes – or how much they allocate the responsibility to “others,” mainly political institutions, “the government,” but also corporates.

With empirical data from a quantitative survey with complementary qualitative elements (n = 264; 2020, Austria), we can not only show



that people increasingly use sustainability as a principle to evaluate their behavior (“during the Corona-restrictions, but I was also much more sustainable because I didn’t travel”). Much more, we can see that this is not necessarily related to the willingness or readiness to change and the commitment to keep the changed and more sustainable practices in the future (taking agency for the future, feeling responsible).

The insights gained from the survey show that people tend to use three narratives for the future, which are related to a certain degree of morality, the perception of being a change agent, and, therefore, the willingness to take responsibility as an individual: they range from rather fear- or concern-driven resignation (Type A), to guilt-driven resilience (Type B) and to an anger-driven, courageous responsibility (Type C). Limitations of the study and future research potential will be also presented and discussed at the conference.

## Development of an optimal reputation quantifier for the reboot of communication after Covid-19

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

To reorganize communication with internal and external stakeholders after a drastic event such as a pandemic, and to check whether changes are necessary, a sound orientation is required. In this context, reputation measurement is becoming increasingly important for companies, because eruptive shifts in stakeholder perception may have occurred. This measurement of reputation as an important control variable for the communication management of companies is made more difficult by the digitalisation of communication on the internet – with significantly increased speed and frequency of interaction as well as with a greatly increased number of senders. At the same time, this digitalised communication makes it technically easier to be recorded and analysed, for example with the help of artificial intelligence. So far, there is no known instrument with which the overall reputation of a company can be precisely quantified when the reputation of partial aspects is known. The aim of this study, therefore, is to find a quantification mechanism with which the reputation of a company can be precisely calculated. The basic approach is to apply a dimensional reduction procedure to a set of known reputation dimensions to obtain a single value representing the overall


reputation of a company. The formula resulting from this reduction can then be used as an ‘optimal reputation quantifier’.

### Literature review

The authors reviewed existing literature and empirical research concerning different concepts of reputation, then consider especially the model developed by Charles J. Fombrun et al. (2000) and the functional dimensions (sustainability, economic performance, employer performance, products & services, management performance) defined in this model, focusing primarily on research dealing with the question of how far the different dimensions interact and influence each other. Furthermore, the literature review identified and discussed existing research analysing in what way external events which are beyond the control of the organisation, such as the coronavirus pandemic, can influence a reputation.

### Methodology

The authors combined two data sources for their research: market research data was used for the long-term adjustment of the optimal reputation quantifier. This was combined with social listening data for the short-term adjustment of the reputation measurement. Social listening collects



data via the analysis of internet sources with respect to statements concerning the different reputation dimensions. These statements are then analysed with the help of artificial intelligence, i.e. with specially trained algorithms which can identify and categorise the linguistic content of written statements.

### Results and conclusions

The data show that due to the high correlation of the different reputation dimensions in relation to one another, the basic idea of using a process of dimensional reduction to achieve a quantification for an overall reputation works basically well. The results of the dimensional reduction further imply that although each reputation dimension does have a significant influence on a total reputation, the strengths of the individual influences differ. The interaction of the reputation dimensions is likely to vary from industry to industry and possibly from company to company; this study explores the general approach.

### Practical and social implications

Nevertheless, the study is suitable for providing cross-sectoral orientation as to which reputation dimensions deserve greater attention in order to improve corporate reputation in a targeted manner. Two levers are relevant here: In which reputation dimension is the company strong or should it strengthen itself? In which reputation dimension should communication be intensified to influence the public's perception?

With this approach, it is possible to put external communication to the test and – in terms of corporate reputation – to optimise it. Changes in the reputation quantifier, for example because of a pandemic, can also be recorded in a structured manner and transferred into modified communication accordingly.

### Literature

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**Keywords:** *reputation management, interaction of reputation dimensions, social listening, big data*

## Corporate Philanthropic Behavior and The Construction of Public Affective Trust. Shopping Spree After Hongxing ERKE Group's Donation for the 2021 Henan Floods in China

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### Introduction and purpose

The 2021 Henan Floods in China have triggered a wave of public donations among Chinese enterprises. In July 2021, Hongxing ERKE Group (ERKE), a Chinese domestic trendy sports brand, donated CNY 50 million in materials for disaster relief, even facing its poor business performance. Then, topics related to ERKE rushed to the trending topic and became the hot search. Securities Times reported that relevant public opinions reached 39,684 posts one week after the ERKE donation, with 75% positive and 24% negative emotions. Also, ERKE's donation has set off 'crazy consumption' that consumers spontaneously rushed into the online and offline stores to buy products crazily.

As a typical case of earning public affective trust with corporate social responsibility (CSR), this study will explore the public opinions about the ERKE's donation and how ERKE gained public trust, solidarity, and support with its philanthropic behavior from the perspective of emotions.

### Literature review

Trust contains two major forms in social sciences: cognition-based trust and affect-based trust (McAllister, 1995). Affective trust is the confidence one places in another and the willingness to open up to another, including the dimensions of integrity and dependability (Hon & Grunig, 1999). ERKE's philanthropy awakens public affective trust and support. However, researchers have found that crowd-sourced CSR does not always produce positive results. The CSR will create positive outcomes when the company has established positive feelings or trust and the public infers that the behaviors are consistent with motives (Rim, Park & Song, 2018).

### Methodology

We collected data from the official Weibo account of ERKE and conducted a content analysis with the comments left on ERKE's posts.



## Results and conclusions

According to the content analysis of their comments on ERKE's posts, the study revealed Weibo users' strong solidarity and support for ERKE, mainly including affective support and behavioral support. Affective support takes the domain and involves three types of performance: public expression of positive feelings and attitudes such as recognition, love, support, and trust; affective empathy and sympathy for ERKE's philanthropy; and defense and support for ERKE through a crusade against its 'opponents.' Behavioral support in this case contains three types of behaviors: expressing purchase intentions; providing consultation and suggestions on the products; and call for rational consumption to support ERKE.

ERKE still donated even with a business dilemma. The charity behavior is also in line with the Chinese traditional cultural values of "help those in distress," "help people for happiness," and "uphold virtues and kindness," gaining widespread public affective recognition and empathy. The public affective and behavioral support to ERKE reflected that the public migrates their affective identification to the company and brand. Also, the public satisfies their own patriotic and social feelings through supporting ERKE. The common affective connection is further diffused and sublimated through the communication between social media users and the enterprise, presenting new features of constructing public trust with corporate philanthropic behavior on social media.

## Limitations

There is a certain limitation of this study that evaluating public opinion only from social media users' comments but still provides a perspective for public affective trust research.

**Keywords:** *CSR; corporate philanthropic behavior; public affective trust; social media users*



## How does the motivation of watching live streaming commerce affect online purchase intention?

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### Introduction and Purpose of the Study

Live streaming from various social media networks offers users news, production information, entertainment, and shopping functions. Live streaming commerce has become an uprising trend with the utilization of live streaming for commercial purposes (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2021; Cai & Wohn, 2019; Hamilton et al., 2014), commonly seen selling apparel, fashion, beauty, food, consumer electronics, furnishing, home décor, and automobiles (McKinsey Digital, 2021). Originated from China, live streaming commerce has been expanding rapidly and adopted by dominant e-commerce platforms such as Amazon and Taobao, to enhance customer engagement and boost revenue. Live streaming commerce provides product demonstration, product information, and excitement to consumers (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2021).

This study adopted both the consumption value theory that has not been widely discussed in the context of live streaming commerce, and the uses and gratifications theory, to investigate the motivations of people watching live streaming commerce and the motivations' relationship with online grocery purchase intention. HKTVmall, a leading e-commerce platform with a huge pro-

portion selling groceries (53.8%) in Hong Kong, is the targeted platform for this study.

### Literature Review

Live streaming commerce is defined as a subset of e-commerce embedded with real-time social interaction, including real-time video and text-based chat (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2021; Cai & Wohn, 2019; Hamilton et al., 2014). It is predicted that people are motivated to watch live streaming commerce by the perceived functional value (capacity for functional, utilitarian, or physical performance), epistemic value (capacity to arouse curiosity, provide novelty, and satisfy a desire for knowledge), and conditional value (specific situation facing the choice maker), and the values are positively related to online purchase intention. In addition, under the theory of uses and gratifications, the gratifications of social interaction, enjoyment, and pass time, are also expected to be the motivations for people to watch live streaming commerce, and positively affect people's purchase intention online.

### Methodology

Online quantitative survey using the snowball-sampling technique was adopted for the study and conducted from Nov 5 to Nov 19,



2021. HKTVmall users were the targets. Only the respondents who had watched live streaming in HKTVmall before were appropriate. 149 questionnaires out of the total of 257 questionnaires collected were valid for analysis. The qualitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS.

## Results & Conclusion

All the consumption values: function value (Mean= 3.54, SD= 0.68), epistemic value (Mean= 3.65, SD= 0.68), conditional value (Mean= 3.66, SD= 0.96), are regarded to be the motivations to watch live streaming. In regards to the gratifications, only enjoyment (Mean= 3.35, SD= 0.83) is the motivation for people to watch live streaming commerce, while social interaction (Mean=2.37, SD= 1.08), and passing time (Mean=2.71, SD= 0.11) are not. At the bivariate level, all the factors are correlated with respondents' purchase intention online. However, from the regression model, only the gratifications of social interaction (coefficient = .209,  $p \leq .05$ ) and enjoyment (coefficient = .457,  $p \leq .001$ ), are proven to have a significant effect on online purchase intention.

From the result, despite the consumption values are proven to be the motivation for people to watch live streaming commerce, still, it is unable to predict consumers' online grocery purchase intention in the context of live streaming commerce. In terms of the effect on purchase intention online, social interaction and enjoyment are proven to have a significant effect on online groceries purchase intention.

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

The results imply that people still regard live streaming commerce as media products, that they are searching for enjoyment and social interaction from consuming live streaming commerce, treating and selecting live streaming commerce more as a media when coming to consumption choice-making, hence making the gratifications

significant reasons affecting purchase intention online.

As the enjoyment perceived by live streaming has the most strong and positive influence on purchase intention online. While even the consumption values did not directly affect consumers' online purchase intention, they are proven motivations for people to watch live streaming on groceries or household goods. These imply the feasibility of taking a content-based approach when performing live streaming commerce, which includes product-related and non-product-related content, to arouse consumers' interest and possibly increase their purchase intention online (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2020).

Future studies can be expanded to other categories of online products for more understanding.

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**Keywords:** *live streaming commerce, uses and gratifications theory, consumption value theory, online purchase intention*



## A study of Memes, Conformity and Watching Intention: Squid Game as an example

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

According to Shifman (2014), meme has become an important element in internet culture and has been defined as a form of digital content, such as “me and the boys...,” “HACKERMAN,” etc., that is generated by different users in the digital world. In 2021, the Korean thriller series “Squid Game” had quickly become the most-watched TV series on Netflix, with more than 142 million viewers during its first 28 days of launch (Nolan, 2021). Upon its launch on the streaming platform, the buzz around the plot continued non-stop and therefore, a lot of memes were created, echoing the series’ phenomenal spread around the globe through social media which have drawn our attention to examine the relationship between meme and watching intention of Squid Game. Furthermore, conformity, the bandwagon effect, and the Uses & Gratifications Theory (U&G), would be relevant factors in attracting more people to watch Squid Game.

The aim of this study is to find out the relationship among meme, conformity, U&G and watching intention.

### Literature review

Meme includes 4 key viral elements, i.e., positiv-

ity/humor (people tend to share positive content online), whimsical Content/participation (people reproduce the content and share), evoking emotions (stories that evokes more positive emotions would be shared more) and simplicity/language (content with simple meaning is easier to be shared) (Shifman, 2014).

Conformity refers to consumers’ feedback, rating, purchase intention and behaviour will be affected by the group’s feedback, and they would use others’ suggestions as reference to change themselves to fit the group expectation or get accepted by the group (Lascu & Zinkhan, 1999). The framework of Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) developed by Ajzen (1991) is adopted in the study which includes three constructs: Attitude, Perceived Control of Behaviour and Subjective Norms which can be linked to Conformity.

U&G is a well-utilized framework in defining motives behind the use of any given medium (Gan, 2017). With reference to the prior research, six U&G factors are selected in order to create a relationship study on watching intention of Squid Game, which includes: Exposure, Social Sharing, Entertainment, Information Seeking, Escape and Affection (Gan, 2017).



## Methodology

Two runs of data collection were carried out with the general public in Hong Kong, during the period of 24th to 27th November 2021 and 1st to 3rd December 2021 respectively. A total of 226 adults have participated, with 71 adults joining in the second run of study. Participants had watched Squid Game the TV series and seen memes on their social media. Data collection was carried out by snowball sampling through internet. A five-point Likert

Scale was adopted for respondents to evaluate the different measures of our research models where Extremely Disagree = one and Extremely Agree = five. Data analysis with Pearson Correlation was computed in SPSS to assess the relationship between the variables of this study.

## Results and conclusion

The results of statistical analysis indicate that there is a weak correlation between Meme and Watching intention. Specifically, among four meme virality factors, Evoking Emotions has the most powerful impacts ( $R = .314$ ,  $p = .001$ ), followed by Participation ( $R = .259$ ,  $p = .007$ ) and Positivity ( $R = .208$ ,  $p = .032$ ). Simplicity, as one of meme virality factors, is not found having significant relationship with Watching intention ( $R = .087$ ,  $p = .372$ ). In testing the relationship between Conformity and Watching intention, both two variables, Attributions about group behavior ( $\beta = .624$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Informational influence ( $\beta = .581$ ,  $p < .001$ ), have positive impact on Watching intention. Furthermore, U&G, which is measured by six factors in this study, is tested as positively related with Watching intention at a moderate level. In details, Entertainment is most predictive ( $r = .525$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by Exposure ( $r = .507$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Social Sharing ( $r = .505$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Escape ( $r = .459$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Information Seeking ( $r = .410$ ,  $p = .002$ ) and Affection ( $r = .290$ ,  $p = .03$ ).

## Practical and theoretical implications

As shown in the findings, conformity and U&G are both positively related to consumers' watching intention, which implies that both collective and individual factors would stimulate the audience's intention to consume cultural products. Furthermore, the predictive power of conformity is stronger than factors of U&G, which suggests that streaming platforms and production companies could concentrate on manufacturing the trend at the collective level and not forget to create chances for the audience to feel entertained, to be exposed to the cultural product, to share with family and friends, to be escaped from reality, to get access to much more information and to fulfill the affective demands.

The findings also show that meme does not explain the change in consumers' watching intention. One of the possible explanations is that most memes are created after the release of the TV series, with content that is closely related to TV series' plots. This characteristic makes it difficult for consumers to understand and be attracted by memes if they haven't watched the TV series. Consumers tend to participate in spreading memes only after they have watched the TV series, rather than watching this cultural product with the aim to understand memes. This finding suggests that it is necessary for streaming platforms and production companies to create memes that are understandable to consumers.

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**Keywords:** meme(s), conformity, Uses & Gratifications theory, watching intention

## The state of internal communication in Latin America: An international Delphi

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### Introduction and purpose of the study:

Internal communication is a fast-growing specialization in public relations and communication management that has emerged as a critical function for organizations (Tkalac Verčič et al., 2012). Not surprisingly, the amount of internal communication research has flourished during the past decade, and scholars have examined the role that internal communication plays in employee behaviors, leadership, organizational culture, organizational crises, reputation, and employee social media communication. Despite the increasing literature, researchers have recognized the need to increase the documentation and the perspectives of public relations and internal communication in underrepresented regions (Molleda et al., 2017). Latin America is the least researched region globally, and there is a strong need to further explore how internal communication is practiced and understood in this region (Thelen, 2021).

To fill in the research gap and diversify the body of knowledge in internal communication, the current study aimed to explore internal communication in Latin America, specifically how seasoned internal communication practitioners understand and practice internal communication in Latin America. We provided answers that tap into different aspects of Latin American internal communication practice, including how internal communication is defined and understood, the skills and knowledge needed in internal communication practice, the value of internal communi-

cation, and the state of internal communication practice.

### Literature review

Latin America, comprising 20 countries and one territory, accounts for 64% of the population of the Western Hemisphere and 8% of the global population (Statista, 2021). Despite its cultural diversity and growing political and economic force, public relations scholars have not extensively explored this region (Molleda et al., 2017; Thelen, 2021). A quantitative content analysis examining 223 internal communication articles published in public relations and communication journals between 1970 and 2019 found that none of the articles focused on Latin American countries (Lee & Yue, 2020). This reality prompted us to explore internal communication within this region.

Given the lack of research on internal communication in Latin America and the importance of enriching and diversifying our existing body of knowledge that is U.S. and European centered, the current study explored four overarching research questions: (1) How is internal communication defined and understood by practitioners in Latin America? (2) What are the skills and knowledge needed in internal communication practice in Latin America? (3) What is the value of internal communication? (4) What is the state of internal communication practice in Latin America?



## Methodology

Although there are several means to examine the uncharted territory in internal communication, the current study used the Delphi technique. This method gathers data from selected individuals within their domain of expertise via an iterative process that continues until there is some degree of consensus among participants or until researchers believe that no extra rounds of questions will provide new insights (Wakefield & Watson, 2014). Twenty internal communication experts from Latin America with at least ten years of experience completed the first and the second round of the data collection from September to November 2021. The participants were from Argentina (n = 4), Chile (n = 4), Colombia (n = 3), Guatemala (n = 2), Mexico (n = 1), Panama (n = 1), Peru (n = 3), Uruguay (n = 1), and Venezuela (n = 1).

## Results and conclusions

Participants agreed that formal internal communication encompasses (1) top-down, bottom-up, and diagonal information, (2) communication between team members, (3) communication between members of a specific project, and (4) communication of messages between an organization and all of its members. Regarding the primary role of internal communication, the findings suggested that the function should manage information, facilitate relationships within an organization, and ensure that employees are connected to their organization's mission, vision, and values.

In addition to understanding internal communication and its role within an organization, all participants agreed that practitioners should be knowledgeable about organizational culture and crisis communication. It is noteworthy that skills like listening, empathy, and interpersonal communication were underscored by the participants.

Latin American practitioners have a mature understanding of the strategic value of internal

communication. They also suggested that the influence of internal communication has substantially increased within the past decade. Nevertheless, one of their main challenges is to position themselves as strategic partners and to be seen as a critical area for organizational growth, employee retention, and innovation.

## Practical and social implications

This study impacts the profession in several ways. First, it analyzes the specific knowledge and skills that practitioners need to be successful in their careers. Second, it highlights how internal communication practitioners currently measure the impact of their efforts and addresses the major challenges they encounter in measurement and evaluation. Third, the study provides insights regarding the future direction of the practice in Latin America.

*Keywords:* internal communication, public relations, Latin America, Delphi study

## Should we follow this advice? Introducing and testing a framework for assessing quality in communication consulting

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

Communication leaders in organizations of any kind have to tackle several challenges at the same time. Right now, they need to find new ways of engaging with stakeholders in a rapidly changing economic and political landscape with a wide range of innovate media channels and instruments. They also need to future-proof their functions and departments: Objectives, services, operations, and resources must be regularly reviewed and optimized to ensure efficiency and effectiveness.

This increases the need for external help from consultants. *Communication consulting* can be defined as the process by which consultants help or enable organizations to solve challenges related to their communication activities and/or their structures and processes for communication. A look into practice shows that the need for external consulting and the range of available consulting services is increasing. The communication consulting industry is becoming more and more diversified and complex. Many consultants claim to be competent and trustworthy advisers for multiple challenges ranging from designing creative campaigns to introducing digital tools or agile ways of working. However, these claims are hard to substantiate or evaluate. Existing certification procedures in the profession (e.g.,

the CMS III Communications Management Standard used by communication consultancies associations like ICCO, PRCA, GPRA, etc.) are limited to managing agency business and campaigns, but do not cover consulting processes (ICCO, 2022).

It is therefore quite important to develop a comprehensive understanding of the *quality of consulting*. This will help clients assess the relevance of advice and whether to follow it, consultants focus their services on the most important aspects, and both parties develop measures to enhance their interaction.

The aim of the study is to close this gap by developing a comprehensive *conceptual quality model for communication consulting* on a conceptual level and by using this model to *empirically research how consultants and clients evaluate key quality dimensions* in practice with three research questions:

- RQ1: How can quality be defined and systematized in the communication consulting process?
- RQ2: At what stage of the consulting process do conflicts most often occur?
- RQ3: What is important to secure the quality of communication consulting?

### Literature review

An interdisciplinary literature review was conducted to develop a comprehensive quality model for communication consulting. Interestingly, consulting is hardly the subject of scientific studies in communication management research. This also applies to quality of communication consulting. The few studies and articles identified either deal with individual aspects of the consulting process (e.g., the requirements for a high-quality briefing) or take a one-sided view of the topic (e.g., from the client's point of view, without including the consultant's perspective). A comprehensive model does not yet exist.

However, a number of quality models from management, health care, or education research (e.g., Donabedian, 1980; Schiersmann & Weber, 2017) were identified and combined with existing knowledge from the field of communication management to construct a novel, comprehensive model for communication consulting quality (see figure). The model maps the consulting process from input to output and outcome, taking into account the interaction between consultants and clients at each stage of the process. The overall quality can be assessed and secured on two different and intertwined levels: A functional level and a relationship level. The individual components can be further broken down into quality attributes such as the consultant's industry knowledge in the domain of 'structures, processes and people' or a sound briefing at the beginning of the 'realization' phase of consulting activities.

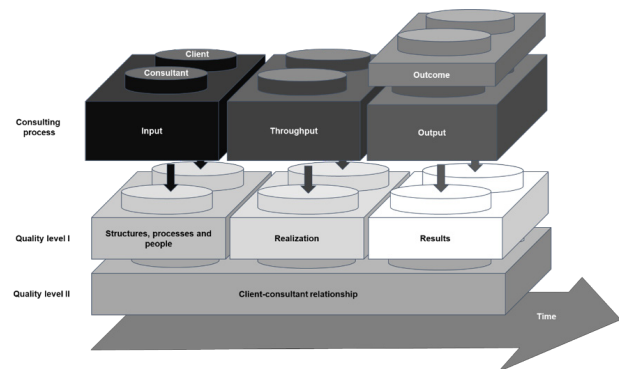


Figure 1. A comprehensive model for communication consulting quality.

### Empirical study

The newly developed framework will be tested in a quantitative survey of practitioners working in communication departments of for-profit, non-profit, and governmental organizations (clients) and in agencies, consulting firms, or as freelance consultants (consultants) across Europe. To answer the research questions, the model was operationalized based on the findings of the literature review. For example, in order to identify quality conflicts and measures to leverage quality, the input–throughput–output–outcome dimensions and the relationship level were operationalized on the basis of two items each. Respondents are asked to assess the importance on a 5-point Likert scale. The study has been pre-tested. Data collection takes place in February and March 2022. A sample size of  $n > 1,000$  is expected. Results cannot be reported yet, but will be shown at the conference.

### Practical and social implications

The comprehensive model of communication consulting quality developed in this study offers a variety of starting points for further research. The model can be used to examine the quality of consulting from the perspective of clients and consultants in order to find out what is particularly important for each actor involved. Approaches to ensure this quality can be explored



in detail. A practical added value is that clients and consultants will be enabled to review their processes. The model and its findings could also serve as a blueprint for the development of quality standards for communication consulting that could be integrated into existing certification procedures in the industry.

**Keywords:** *Communication consulting – quality model – client-consultant relationship – consulting process*

## Virtual stakeholder dialogues: Challenges and opportunities of moving face-to-face formats to online environments

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### Introduction and purpose of the study

The global pandemic has affected the relationships between companies and their stakeholders in many ways. Most communications professionals have found it comparatively easy to shift interactions with employees, consumers, investors or journalists to online formats – although the learning curve has often been hard and steep for all involved.

At the same time, it has been much more difficult than in the past to build or maintain relationships with stakeholders who are neither bound by self-interest nor formally connected to organizations. Many companies, especially in much-criticized industries (energy, fashion, food, infrastructure, etc.), have long conducted stakeholder dialogues as closed and in-person platforms to engage with activists, local communities, policymakers, researchers, and other critical stakeholders or opinion leaders. Typical goals are to understand different perspectives, build personal relationships and trust, and identify common ground without having to play by the rules of the mass media. Most stakeholder dialogues were canceled or postponed during the pandemic. Conducting them virtually was seen as difficult at first glance because of the importance of personal exchanges, confidentiality, authenticity, and informality.

Nevertheless, it is important to continue interacting with all types of stakeholders, especially in times of social division in many societies. This raises the questions of whether and how stakeholder dialogs can be virtualized, what experiences of pioneers can be identified in corporate practice, and what factors should be considered when introducing virtual stakeholder dialogues as a new format of corporate communication. The research questions of the study are therefore:

- RQ1: What are the advantages and disadvantages of virtual stakeholder dialogues compared to face-to-face settings?
- RQ2: What factors must be taken into account for the successful implementation of virtual stakeholder dialogues?

### Literature review

Through an interdisciplinary literature review on *stakeholder dialogues*, four research directions could be identified. They can be conceptualized a) as a specific form of events, b) as instruments in the field of corporate social responsibility (CSR), c) from a strategic perspective, and d) from a consensus-oriented perspective. However, it is not appropriate to speak of clearly defined perspectives, as the levels of abstraction in the literature vary. There is little explanatory potential





for multi-layered topics and settings.

This is also true for *virtualization* as a trend in corporate communications. The conceptual understanding of what virtual means varies widely. In this study, “virtual” is used in the sense of a) geographically separated, b) technology mediated, c) structurally dynamic, or d) nationally diverse.

By combining both strands of literature, the following *conceptual definition* was developed:

Virtual stakeholder dialogues are symmetrically designed, dialogue-oriented communication instruments for face-to-face, confidential, and issue-centered exchange between an organization and critical stakeholders on problems of various origins, supported by digital technologies so that all or some of the participants are not located in the same place. They take place primarily synchronously, although asynchronous elements are conceivable. The goal of the participants is mutual understanding, whereby in each case strategic considerations as well as collaborative problem solving and participation can form the foundation.

### Empirical study

Since it was not possible to build on existing evidence, a qualitative design with expert interviews was chosen to explore the field. An interview guide was developed from the literature review. It maps the key steps and drivers in planning and conducting stakeholder dialogues and addresses the opportunities, prerequisites and barriers to virtualization in individual cases. Communication professionals in Germany with proven experience in planning or conducting stakeholder dialogues were interviewed. The final sample (n = 39) consisted of 27 communications directors from large international and national companies and 12 managing directors from consulting firms specializing in this topic. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a grounded the-

ory approach.

### Results and conclusions

The study identified and systematized the small body of practical knowledge about virtual stakeholder dialogues. Advantages and disadvantages of the format can be illustrated in a SWOT matrix. The strengths (e.g., low participation requirements) point to clear advantages of virtual over face-to-face settings, while the weaknesses list clear disadvantages (e.g., less interaction). However, a majority of the identified features are both opportunities *and* threats (e.g., technology can make dialogues more engaging, efficient, and effective *or* lead to frustration due to technical problems) – these features unfold their potential depending on the situation and require sound decisions and preparations by communication professionals in charge of the formats.

To realize the full potential of virtual stakeholder dialogues, several success factors were derived from the interviews: Alignment of the chosen format with strategy and goals, targeted use of technology and optimal timing, knowledge of participants’ needs and requirements, rigorous facilitation and moderation activation of all stakeholders, demonstration of appreciation and respect as hosts, and respect for privacy and confidentiality.

### Practical and social implications

The study shows that virtual stakeholder dialogues are an instrument that can offer numerous advantages for rediscovering the potential of corporate communications with external stakeholders. The illustration of strengths and weaknesses as well as success factors provides guidance for practitioners who canceled face-to-face meetings with these stakeholders during the pandemic. Engaging in dialogues on socially relevant topics such as sustainability of products and critical infrastructure is always important – whether in person or virtually.



**Keywords:** *Virtuality; Stakeholder dialogue; Corporate communications; Corporate social responsibility; Business ethics*



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## Establishing ‘tacit’ support as ‘CSR risk’: The case study of Boohoo and Black Lives Matter

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### Introduction

Growing pressure, particularly from consumers and employees, on corporates to take specific public stands over a variety of social, cultural and economic issues (Chatterji and Toffel, 2015, 2018 and 2019), has led to a wider range of risks for corporations and organisations.


Support offered can be short-term, opportunistic, and well-intended but can also cause adverse reactions, especially if it is not aligned with pre-existing CSR programmes or the values and purpose of an organisation. Scholars have suggested that CEOs (Chief Executive Officers) can have a significant role in this type of activism (Chatterji and Toffel, 2019; Dahan, Hadani and Schuler, 2013; and Hadani, Bonardi and Dahn, 2017; and Eesley and Lennox, 2006). Others argue that corporates and other organisations will take up positions in either an ad hoc or accidental manner (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). Alternatively, they may have well intended and considered plans, which have been labelled as corporate advocacy (Heath, 1980). Another emergent trend is where corporates are encouraged to remain silent on issues and not offer any support to causes.

Positions taken can involve taking a ‘non-neutral’ stance around a controversial issue. For instance, Ben and Jerry’s withdrew their products

from Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. In a statement, they said that the occupied territories were “inconsistent with our values” (BBC, 2021). Additionally, Nike showed support for Colin Kaepernick, an American football player, after he refused to stand for the national anthem for police killings of African Americans and was subsequently out-cast from the sport (Kelner, 2018).

Whilst understanding the risks associated with embarking on CSR programmes is well developed (Coombs and Holladay, 2015a, 2015b; Lange and Washburn, 2012), the existing literature does not look at the risks associated with a corporate, or other organisations, offering support for a cause on a short term, transient or one-off basis.

The range of concerns includes taking follower positions, offering opinions with insufficient understanding, absence of credibility and authenticity (Holt, 2002) and a lack of foresight on how to support an initial position. In addition, support can be at arms-length, whereby donations are made to a cause without any further involvement. As such, these donations can be seen to fit into a wider group of ‘neo-philanthropic’ actions (Villadsen, 2011). Equally, there is little research looking at when stakeholders seek to scrutinise or critically evaluate support positions taken by corporates.



When corporations take public stands, such as Boohoo's support of Black Lives Matter (BLM), following the murder of George Floyd, new risks can arise as stakeholders scrutinise the authenticity, sincerity and consistency (Cuypers et.al., 2016) of newly stated opinions. Linkage or otherwise, to previously stated policies and CSR actions, are likely to be considered, as are the motivations of a corporate (Moorman, 2020; Nalick et.al., 2016), especially whether they link to stated values and their purpose.

This paper takes a case study approach with specific reference to Boohoo and its support for BLM, post the murder of George Floyd. Boohoo's approach is considered separately from similar action over issues publicly contested by other corporations including Ben and Jerry's, Starbucks, Pepsi and Chipotle in relation to BLM and LGBTQAI+ issues (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et. al., 2020).

Specifically, it looks at the lexicon of risks for corporates, including the CEOs who may lead them, and who show public support for causes or issues. This support may, among other reasons, arise from employee demands or consumer activism. We suggest that such actions can be referred to as acts of 'tacit support' and we provide an initial working definition.

However, we also examine the risks, particularly associated with 'novel' actions that can stimulate close examination of support for causes and campaigns. We specifically focus on employee, consumer and activist engagement. This phenomenon is described as 'tacit CSR risk'.

Finally, drawing upon content analysis of social media activity following Boohoo's initial support for BLM, we explore the extent to which scrutiny of supportive social posts varies according to the issue around which the support is given. Our approach builds on research that suggests that: the level of controversy can vary on a top-

ic-by-issue basis (Vahdati and Voss, 2019); intensity around issues can vary over time (Bhagwat et. al., 2020) and opinions and responses are mediated by specific contextual factors. (Atanga et.al., 2022).

## Literature Review


### CSR Origins

Whilst the term CSR (corporate social responsibility) was coined in the 1920s by Oliver Sheldon, it was not widely discussed until the 1950s (Murphy, 1978). There are many definitions (Sarker and Searcy, 2016) and as a term, corpus of thinking and a collective term for many corporate actions, it is under attack from those pursuing environmental and sustainable and pioneers and promoters of ESG (environmental, social and corporate governance) thinking (MacNeil and Esser, 2022).

Early CSR debates focused on what the wider responsibilities of business should be and were usually seen as voluntary (Carroll 1979; 1991). Counter criticisms questioned whether businesses have such obligations (Freidman, 2007). Others focused on the need to move concerns away from shareholders toward a wider set of stakeholder groups (Post, 2003).

From the 1950s onwards, more corporations were ready to consider and act upon what they felt their responsibilities were (Davis, 1960). A growing trend to wider involvement of the state in the everyday running of people's lives in the 1970s both tackled a wider range of social issues including race relations and women's rights. This widening role of the state was perhaps also a precursor to stronger, practical thinking on how corporations could widen their responsibilities from the narrow shareholders to a wider cross-section of stakeholders (Committee for Economic Development, 1971).

By the end of the 1970s thought had gone to



exactly what types of obligations firms were facing and what action they should consider taking. Carroll's widely cited CSR pyramid – set out distinct spheres of activity – legal, economic, ethical and philanthropic (Carroll, 1977, 1991). Later models looked more closely at the interaction between each element and developed more dynamic thinking (Chufama et al., 2021), dropping the initial hierarchy. At the same time, there was a growing corporate sympathy to pursue CSR programmes despite the fact they were typically influenced by pre-existing corporate values and behaviours, and there was no consistent way of measuring impact – a problem still in existence today.

The establishment of a growing need for CSR programmes to be assembled, managed and directed at stakeholder needs was also typically based on a voluntary, self-governed approach, with boards often taking diverse courses (Carroll, 2008). From the 1980s onwards corporations steadily increased their CSR involvement and diversity of activities. Some areas, such as philanthropic behaviour were contested and different models were developed according to whether the organisation was looking through a social, economic or political lens (Sulek, 2010; Muller, 2006).

Organisationally, CSR programmes were often delivered by specialist teams, and initially had a strong focus on looking at the outputs and impacts achieved. Sometimes activities were covered in annual reports, but the lack of clear metrics meant they often sat rather awkwardly. In many cases, this has now been eclipsed by the modern corporate practice of supplying separate CSR reviews. However, the growth in reporting and activity also prompted questions about what corporate and social activity were truly responsible, and in recent times there has been a major shift to ensuring governance and a practical focus on sustainability. Furthermore, perhaps as a precursor to 'greenwashing' critiques, scholars


began examining how CSR could be judged as to whether it was responsible or irresponsible (Lange and Washburn, 2012).

Armstrong and Green (2013) suggested that CSR can be viewed as either responsible or irresponsible behaviour. The establishment of the idea that CSR could indeed be irresponsible opened-up the corporate world's eyes to the idea that there may indeed be distinct risks involved in pursuing CSR programmes. Furthermore, the emergence of distinct activist programmes targeted at corporates further highlights the risk of engaging with specific issues or in some cases not tackling harmful corporate behaviours (de Bakker, 2012). A growing participation, and awareness of the impact of CSR, meant that an approach to responsibility was gathering major pace but at the same time required greater levels of organisation, promotion and critical management. Specifically, the management of risk.

#### CSR Risks

Coombs and Holladay look closely at how the dimensions of risk and CSR can be viewed, arguing for CSR's increasing role in reputation management and specifically that any organisation seen to act irresponsibly can have a direct and harmful impact on its reputation (Coombs and Holladay, 2015a). This analysis moves beyond previous scholarship which talk of how an effective CSR programme can act as a protective asset when a crisis emerges (Barton, 2001, Eisenegger and Schranz, 2011) and generally cultivate positive reputational benefits (Fombrun, 2005).

Coombs's seminal paper also raises the issue of specific CSR-based challenges from stakeholder groups. A rise in the level of challenges having previously shown by King (2011). In other words, "publicly engaging in CSR efforts to enhance the organisation, managers can be creating new crisis risks." (King, 2011:145). This is not a self-inflicted challenge that may arise from gre-



enwashing (Delmas and Burbano, 2011) – typically, the deliberate misleading, or overstating, to stakeholders of environmental actions. Instead, it refers to CSR actions that are being redefined by stakeholders as irresponsible and which may progress into a crisis. Such crises may also be precipitated by organisations not including in their CSR programmes concerns that are important to their stakeholders (Coombs and Holiday 2015, p148). Simply, corporations are just not doing enough.

Attribution theory has been used (Lange and Washburn, 2012) to help explain why people make judgements about whether corporations are acting responsibly with their CSR programmes; the mere act of doing something is no longer accepted as a positive action. Their model hinges on stakeholders perceiving an undesirable societal action; feeling the personal impact of the intended programme and not being able to limit the undesirable impact.

Other well-established factors may also cause an organisation's reputation to falter following the planning and execution of a CSR programme. Typically, occasions occur where a programme is poorly executed. Equally, an initiative may not fit well with an organisation's mission or purpose (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001), and tensions and difficulties in planning and execution may arise with an ill-fitting partner (Read and Diehl, 2019).

However, whilst the risks of pursuing CSR programmes are well defined, there are also a new set of risks that have emerged as stakeholders, especially employers, consumers and 'agitators' have placed pressure on corporations to take high profile social, economic and political stances around causes. Such pressures often result in causes being supported, often outside pre-existing CSR programmes. Additionally, scholars have tended to promote the pivotal role of CEOs as activists (Chatterji and Toffel, 2019) and the

impact on consumers when causes are supported (Atanga et al., 2022).

Chatterji and Toffel (2019) argue that CEOs increasingly support social and economic issues that do not relate to their company's core business. In other words, their interventions lie outside an organisation's traditional corporate social responsibility programmes. They may also not align with existing values and the purpose of the business. Such thinking builds on earlier work highlighting the role that consumers can play to influence the behaviour of corporations (Loader et al, 2014). It also echoes wider calls from consumers, employees and activists to take public stances on issues. The authors will contend that such pressures can lead to corporates offering support for causes without reference to their pre-existing CSR programmes – and are hitherto defined as acts of tacit support.

#### Emergence of Tacit Support

Pursuance of tacit support, especially when poorly planned and unconnected to existing plans can quickly become CSR risk to a corporation. This may occur because stakeholders are affected by the 'novel' nature of new public positions (Atanga et al., 2022). They look to understand why a position has been taken, and in turn they may wish to investigate a corporation's motivations, and whether it is behaving consistently and authentically.

Henceforth, evidence of these actions will cause initial tacit support being subject to tacit CSR risk. The existence of tactic CSR risk itself can act as a precursor to a full-blown crisis for a corporation.

Whilst tacit support and tacit risk are newly explored areas for research, it is important to recognise that earlier research has already highlighted that not all risks can be considered equal. Previous studies have suggested that the nature of the cause (Barton et al., 2018), previous CSR

activity (Friestad and Wright, 1994), a firm's motivation (Yoon et al., 2006) and the specific context (Vredenburg et al., 2020) can influence the level of risk.

### Background to Boohoo's support for BLM

On 25th May 2020 in the USA, George Floyd, a Black man, was murdered by a White police officer who suffocated Floyd with his knee on his throat (BBC 2020). The tragic words 'I can't breathe' echoed around the world. From this abhorrent injustice emerged fresh collective determination to fight against injustice and for equality. There were traditional protests that spread across 60 countries. Social media was also a crucial point of activism (Anderson et al., 2020). Indeed, 11 days after Floyd's murder, #BlackLivesMatter had been used roughly 47.8 million times on Twitter, an average of just under 3.7 million times per day (Anderson et al., 2020).

Boohoo joined in with this support and posted on social media with messages of outrage and support for the BAME community. Six weeks later, in August, The Sunday Times published an article titled: 'Boohoo: fashion giant faces 'slavery' investigation' (Bassey et al., 2020). Through their investigative journalism, The Sunday Times found that Boohoo was paying workers only £3.50 per hour at their Leicester factory. These illegalities found in Boohoo's payment of workers were a dichotomous act compared to their posts of support for the BAME community. This triggered stakeholder activists to look at Boohoo's support and highlighted what we define as tacit CSR risks.

### Methodology

This exploratory case study uses an interpretivist and multi-method approach. This allows for individual perceptions to be used to help create new thinking around how we can understand a brand's support for causes not linked to their CSR programmes (Saunders et al., 2016). Spe-

cifically, by drawing on microanalysis techniques, it focuses on looking at how Boohoo interacted with the BLM movement and the reactions of a variety of stakeholders.

Firstly, it examines Boohoo's tacit support for the BLM movement and explores its corporate motivation for offering support. Second, it chronicles how stakeholder responses shifted from initial support to significant negative activist reactions. Thirdly, it analyses how activist groups used power, legitimacy and urgency to mount their challenge. Finally, it reflects on whether different topics of support cause different activist reactions.

The research is framed around four research questions.

- Research Question 1: Did Boohoo initiate tacit support for the BLM movement which was not linked to their pre-existing CSR programmes or a specific Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policies?
- Research Question 2: How did stakeholder attitudes shift from Boohoo's initial support for the BLM movement through to when a support gap was highlighted in The Sunday Times article?
- Research Question 3: To what extent were the inconsistencies between Boohoo's tacit support and its earlier CSR programme stimulated by a hostile media article and a desire of activists to intervene?
- Research Question 4: To what extent did the subject of Boohoo's tacit support stimulate activist behaviour?

The study looks at the circumstances of Boohoo providing tacit support for the BLM movement. It suggests that tacit support for causes can be a crisis risk. The key focal point being whether Boohoo had the moral legitimacy to support BLM when they had failed to ensure that those





producing their high street garments received the National Minimum Wage, and more widely whether a tacit claim decoupled from pre-existing CSR activity led to hostile stakeholder reactions. The speed and intensity of the consumer activists' threats are highlighted along with an exploration of the notion that race was a greater stimulus than other themes.

To assess these factors, the study draws upon a content analysis of 180 tweets from consumer activists. Archival research was conducted as tweets that used the word 'Boohoo' and 'Leicester' were assessed retrospectively during a two-week period between the 4th and 19th July 2020. These dates were selected as it follows The Sunday Times' exposé article being published on the 5th of July 2020 and a 16-day period was decided to be a suitable period to assess the crisis using Saunders' framework (Saunders, 2016, p.294). The content analysis coded various themes including the account holder, engagement rate, primary theme and external links.

The data was examined using Microsoft Excel. This platform was chosen for its capabilities to sort a large quantity of coded data and to analyse quickly, with the use of pivot tables, and multiple variables. As Bree and Gallagher note, this is a cost-effective approach which can be used to aid the thematic analysis and triangulation of qualitative data collected (Bree, R. and Gallagher, G., 2016). The categories interrogated were; follower count, main theme, hashtags, links tagged, the target of criticism, newspaper articles, number of likes, number of retweets and number of comments. Together these provided a holistic understanding of the tweets and their users' power, urgency and legitimacy.

It is important to address the limitations of the study. Due to the nature of Twitter, the tweets analysed were from a specific demographic of individual, as 38.5% of users are between 25-

34 years and 17.1% are 18-24 years (Dixon, 2022). Consequently, this limits the representation of opinion. Furthermore, the time period selected was set at 16 days placing limitations on what point this research assesses tacit CSR risk.

Equally, because categories were used to codify tweets, the nuances of language could have been diminished. Despite a range of categories having been created, making qualitative data into quantitative data has its limitations which are important to acknowledge. The data analysed solely focuses on the consumer activists' perspective and does not assess in detail how the corporate mediated Twitter. In this way, the research is limited to how stakeholder criticism affected tacit CSR risk as opposed to the reaction, or lack thereof, from the corporation.

This case study uses the exposé article as a trigger point for tacit CSR risk which is a unique situation and may have disproportionately affected the scale of the risk. Overall, these limitations are acknowledged by the researchers and the framework is presented with the knowledge that further research needs to be carried out to confirm the findings.

### Research Findings

This research presents four key findings. The initial finding provides evidence of Boohoo's tacit support for BLM, giving clarity to what triggered consumer reactions. These consumer reactions are then accounted for, and the findings present evidence of the shift in lexicon on Twitter before and after the exposé article was published. The third finding moves into the detail of activist behaviour and how they created power, urgency and legitimacy (Mitchell et al., 1997), to create what we define as a tacit CSR risk. The final finding hints at how different issues create varied levels of scrutiny. From these findings, a new framework emerges.

The first finding outlines Boohoo's support for

the BLM movement. Boohoo shared support on socials which was both organisationally and socially led. Boohoo was amongst thousands of organisations that showed support for the BLM movement, suggesting that their support was socially led. It was also organisationally led as they also showed elements of neophilanthropy, whereby they shared an undisclosed donation to the NAACP, a civil rights organisation in the UK, without a specific remit on how it should be spent. However, their support was not linked to their pre-existing CSR programmes which largely concentrated on sustainability and body positivity.

Following Boohoo exposing themselves to activities beyond their existing CSR programmes, an exposé article was published by The Sunday Times on the 5th July 2020. This was titled “Boohoo: fashion giant faces ‘slavery’ investigation”. The combination of the article plus the growing anxiety amongst stakeholders on the inconsistencies of Boohoo’s support created an

online storm.

The second finding outlines the shift in stakeholder activists’ support for Boohoo’s support. Within the space of 5 weeks, consumers went from admiration for Boohoo’s support to hostile responses. Prior to The Sunday Times exposé article, Boohoo received comments such as “Major respect” on their socials, as seen in Figure 2. After the article was posted, comments shifted to hostile responses including “You should be ashamed of yourselves”, as seen in Figure 3. There was a shift in public opinion of Boohoo which was stimulated because of the contradictions between their tacit support for BLM and the treatment of their employees.

The third finding outlines how the exposé article stimulated a change in stakeholder activists’ use of Twitter. It triggered stakeholder activists to look at Boohoo’s inconsistencies between Boohoo’s tactical support for BLM, their existing CSR programmes and how their workers were being treated. In this study, it was found that

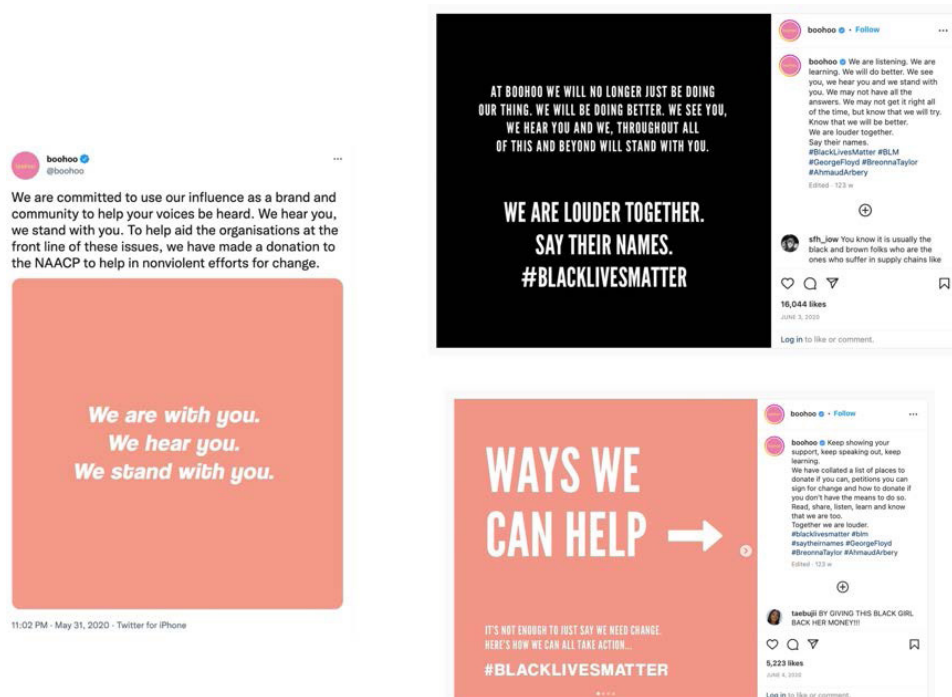


Figure 1. Boohoo’s social media posts between 31st May and 4th June 2020.



Figure 2. Consumer comments on Boohoo's post on 1st June 2020.

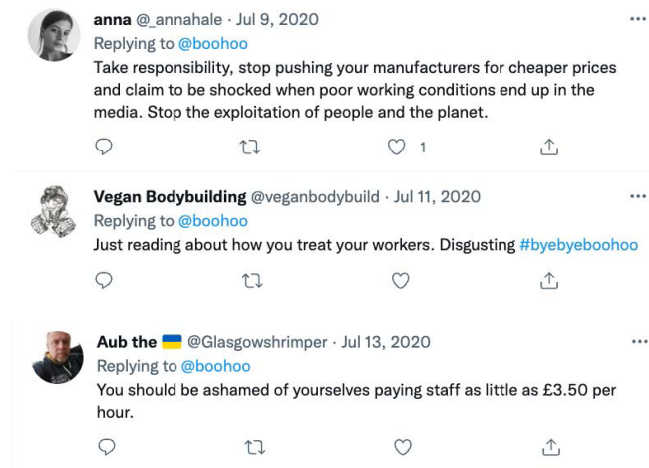


Figure 3. Consumer comments on Boohoo's post between 9th and 11th June 2020.

consumers used Twitter to progress their power, urgency and legitimacy (Mitchell et al., 1997 and developed by Coombs et al., 2015a). In this way, this research supports Triantafyllidou and Yannas' work which found that Twitter is the most used social platform in a crisis (2020).

Consumers had varying levels of power. The research categorised this depending on the individuals' follower count. The researcher defined these as either macro influencers, micro influencers or minor individuals. When coding data, minor individuals were defined as those with 1000 or less followers, micro influencers were those with 1000 - 2000 followers and macro influencers were those with more than 2000 followers. The total number of tweets categorised as consumer accounts was 132 tweets; 87 by macro influencers, 13 by micro influencers

and 32 by minor individuals. This illustrates that consumers, and specifically macro influencers had the most engagement with the Boohoo/Leicester crisis and can therefore be attributed as having the most power when triggering tacit CSR risk.

Urgency is illustrated through consumers' demands of wanting accountability now. This can be viewed as effective as Boohoo sought out a member of the Queen's Counsel to investigate their manufacturing plant. Finally, consumers asserted legitimacy to their claim through the investigation of The Sunday Times article which found wrongful working conditions. Consumers also began demanding for change in behaviours and started using the hashtag #boycottboohoo. In a brief period, Boohoo's tacit support for BLM was challenged and major inconsistencies

found by a variety of stakeholders, prompting a specific trading crisis for the company. Consumers displayed a social concern that a social good (Mitchell et al 2017) p.875) voiced through tacit support was unfulfilled. Deep inconsistencies led to a crisis rather than ‘greenwashing’ or accusations for irresponsibly supporting a cause.

Once the inconsistencies had been shown, many targeted comments strongly focused on modern slavery and race; this leads to the fourth research question of whether these subject areas were more likely to stimulate risks and stimulate crises among stakeholders. In other words, we asked whether all tacit support is equal. Over the 2-week period it was found that the theme of modern slavery was the most salient. It received the highest number of comments, likes and retweets suggesting this theme was at the heart of the tacit CSR risks that Boohoo faced.

Race-themed tweets received over half the engagements received by modern slavery. This suggests that race has a major impact on engagement. In turn, this hints that racial issues have a high stimulatory effect.

It needs to be acknowledged that this is an initial study and is not designed to present a complete framework for understanding tacit support as a CSR risk. Further research is needed in relation to other circumstances where tacit support has promoted a hostile reaction. Equally, further work is needed to help develop a classification of risk. Potential corporate reactions also need to

be studied further. Whilst acknowledging these limitations, the core findings outline that there are risks associated with ‘novel’ actions (Atanga, 2022), this is described as ‘tacit CSR risk’. Additionally, the level of scrutiny of supportive social posts varies according to the issue around which the support is given.

### Discussion

The authors use the core research findings to suggest a new framework that explores when corporates provide positive support for a cause that is not linked to existing CSR programmes. The framework goes onto explore specific risks that may arise and in turn emerge as an unintended crisis.

#### The rise of tacit support

Many organisations are now offering support to causes without any direct intention for this to form part of a structured CSR programme of activity or to be connected to it. As discussed by Chatterji and Toffel (2019) and Atanga et al., (2022) such actions are becoming more frequent but do not fit into classic definitions of corporate advocacy. Equally, it seems inappropriate to label the support as irresponsible, or suggest it can be viewed as an act of greenwashing.

We propose that the term ‘tacit support’ should be used explicitly to explain when a corporate offers support or encouragement for a cause out-

Row Labels	Count of Main theme	Sum of No of likes	Sum of No of comments	Sum of No of retweets
Boohoo reputation damage	35	690	61	374
Boohoo shares	22	402	32	250
Government	13	260	20	161
Issues of fast fashion	20	193	9	107
<b>Modern slavery</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>51520</b>	<b>1694</b>	<b>19603</b>
Other	1	7	0	2
<b>Race</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>29247</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>11802</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>82319</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>32299</b>

Figure 4. Count of primary themes and the sum number of likes, comments and retweets these themes had.



side of a pre-existing programme. By tacit we are not saying support for the cause has not been expressed.

Rather that the support has been expressed (often clearly and publicly) but sits in isolation from a wider CSR programme. Equally we argue that when ‘tacit support’ is offered, especially around global causes, and based around genuine values, it should not be viewed as ‘irresponsible’. As in the case of Boohoo’s initial support for BLM it was not the organisation’s motives or values that initially came into question.

#### Tacit support and CSR Linkage

The case study of Boohoo and the BLM movement presents one illustration of how a corporate offered tacit support to BLM. It also clearly showed how in Boohoo’s case considerable risks were associated with offering support. Content analysis showed that various stakeholders were not content with Boohoo providing support in isolation.

This caused a closer examination of why Boohoo’s support did not link with a wider CSR programme, and ultimately The Sunday Times working practices exposure revealed not just a poor link but a fundamental inconsistency. Whilst a corporate entity does not make a connection between supporting a cause and its wider CSR programme, stakeholders may choose to examine the link. Such examination may lead to specific linkage with prior CSR activity. When these linkages are either looked for, or proved, it is necessary to redefine the term tacit support.

Our working definition is to suggest that there is a shift from isolated tacit support to tacit CSR support. Its defined as:

*“When positive corporate support for a specific cause or set of actions is not directly linked to existing CSR programmes, values or purpose but nevertheless, affords the opportunity for internal and external stake-*

*holders to scrutinise whether the stated support does connect, or contradict, with pre-existing CSR programmes or other relevant corporate programmes.”*

#### Risks arising from tacit CSR support


Once tacit CSR support is acknowledged by the public the range of risks are far higher than when tacit support is initially offered. When examining the risks arising from connecting tacit support to CSR, the authors refer to the term tacit CSR risk. This is defined as:

*“A risk that arises for corporates amongst stakeholder groups, typically including, employees, consumers and activists, when tacit support for a cause is implicitly or explicitly linked, or in some cases distanced, to an organisation’s CSR programmes.”*

From our study of Boohoo, and wider considerations, we contend that the risk to the organisation rises if the organisation concerned:

- Does not develop concrete programmes of action concerning the causes supported (Boohoo did not look to link its tacit support to a wider programme)
- If the acknowledged tacit support proves incompatible with existing CSR commitments (not relevant to the Boohoo case)
- If other corporate behaviours or policies are inconsistent with the stated tacit support (The Sunday Times Modern Slavery accusation evidences high profile inconsistencies with tacit support)

Today, there is pressure on corporations to show support for causes. However, consumers are becoming more aware of corporations seemingly showing support for causes whilst other aspects of their activity are dichotomous to their support. We provided the BLM movement as one example of this but there are many examples of support including for LGBTQAI+ and International Women’s Day and criticism of the over-



turning of Roe vs Wade and Ukrainian crisis, to be studied.

As the pressure increases for corporates to show support for emerging issues so too does the risk of showing tacit support. This is because corporates rush into showing support without considering how they align with the cause in other aspects of their operation. If this is done, consumers can create risks for corporations which this study has illustrated. Stakeholder attitudes shifted from admiration for Boohoo showing support to hostile responses.

Moreover, as this study also hints, the risk around tacit support varies depending on the theme. Our findings from the Boohoo study suggest that themes of race are rightly sensitive, however, further research needs to be done to substantiate this finding.

Overall, organisations must carefully select the causes which they show support for to avoid being subject to tacit CSR risks. Contradictory support can be damaging to their reputation and cause more damage than not showing support in the first instance.

### Summary

The need for a corporation to show that it can act in a responsible manner has shifted from being a voluntary act to one that is now de rigueur (Tench, 2017). However, as businesses have grappled with how to move beyond statutory and legal requirements to embrace a wider understanding of their impacts on their employees and the communities they relate to, greater care has been taken to ensure CSR activity is authentic and ethical. Such actions have prompted both activism for consumer activists and wider stakeholders to challenge irresponsible behaviour and call out greenwashing, rainbow-washing, or similar acts. In turn, the risk of pursuing CSR activity has been carefully examined and the need for carefully considered and consistent programmes

has come to the fore. Equally, we've seen the growth of consumers and stakeholders demanding that corporates take opinions and action on political, economic and social issues. The risks, specifically associated with providing public support (or as the authors suggest tacit support) for such causes, especially when they link awkwardly with pre-existing CSR programmes or jar with pre-existing values, have not hitherto, been considered.

The findings from the Boohoo case study suggest that support for a public cause can stimulate an initial level of support from multiple stakeholders. However, initial support can also stimulate scrutiny from consumers and activists as to whether it is authentic and prompt consideration of whether this support is consistent with other CSR programmes. In other words, ill-considered, inconsistent support for a cause can represent a risk to the corporation.

In the case of Boohoo, the tacit CSR risk rapidly rose as a national newspaper exposé showing that the company was not paying their highly diverse workforce the minimum wage in their factories, stimulated deep questions about the motives for supporting BLM and raised questions about what kind of employer they were. The study also raises questions about the extent to which consumer or activist behaviour can be stimulated by the specific type of issue that a corporation takes a stand on. More research needs to be done in this area.

The use of a single study is insufficient to build a clear model of what corporates should do when supporting causes, especially if they are ill-fitting with existing CSR activity. However, it is possible to conclude, that when considering offering tacit support the panoply of associated risks needs to be considered. Furthermore, if or when critical concerns are raised with stakeholders, these need to be treated very seriously and be considered within the wider framework of requiring a suitable crisis response.

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## Figures

Figure 1: Boohoo. 2020. We are committed to use our influence..., [Twitter]. 31st May 2020. Available at: <https://twitter.com/boohoo/status/1267214787399888896>. [Accessed 12th May 2021]; Boohoo. 2020. We are listening. We are learning..., [Instagram]. 3rd June 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CA-H0TinnRm/>. [Accessed 12th May 2021]; Ways we can help..., [Instagram]. 4th June 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBA-hVHnuJn/>. [Accessed 12th May 2021].



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# Dear COVID-19, Message from Employee Diaries: Reformulating Employee Communication with the Pandemic

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## Introduction


It is a universal fact that any institution relies upon its employees and the employees constitute the foundation of any institution. Without their employees, it is impossible for institutions to bring their strategies into reality (Constantin & Baias, 2015). Excellent employee communication is essential if any institution is to survive and thrive (Chen, 2008). However, it is not enough for an institution to have a well-defined mission, an excellent internal set of rules, solid values, or a perfect strategy. Employees should be informed about these since it is essential that people working for the institution are aware of them, recognize them and comprehend them in the same way (Constantin & Baias, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a global shock which disrupted the way people work. Institutions have had to rapidly implement new working methods such as remote working and organize workflow and interactions within the institution (Mihalache & Mihalache, 2022). COVID-19 has also changed the way consumers, employees and institutions interact in a very short span of time. Individuals, employees, and institutions have stumbled in order to deal with health risks and regulations that conduct routines which have not been previously structured.

(Voorhees, 2020). Institutions and employees had to transform their operational routines almost overnight, resulting in unprecedented demands for employers to make decisions upon in such uncertain circumstances (Sanders et al., 2020).

## Employee Communication and COVID-19 Pandemic

Communication for people is crucial within business life and plays a prominent role on the studies carried out by the institution to achieve their goals (Celikdemir & Paker, 2019). Therefore, it is important for institutions to be aware of the importance of employee communication and the use of appropriate channels in employee communication (Ean, 2010). “No communication ever falls into a vacuum in people’s heads” (Davenport & Barrow, 2009, p. 21). Institutions need to work to develop and nurture commitment that requires two-way relationships (Robinson et al., 2004). “Employees are seeking to be informed, reassured, and encouraged” (DuFrene & Lehman, 2014, p. 444). Employees desire to be involved in processes and to feel that they are a part of the process and to understand their role (Baron, 2006). As employees do their jobs, interact with customers and other employees, they always face problems, inefficiencies, inappropri-



ate activities, opportunities for improvement, strategic issues, and many more (Morrison, 2014). Communication is important in terms of keeping employees well informed about the vision and strategy of the institutions, as well as helping each person in the institution work together for a shared purpose (Ean, 2010).

Effective communication in an organizational environment has a critical role in shaping employee perceptions and the institution's strategy (Abugre, 2011). Employee communication is often seen as a key element of an institutional strategy for employee engagement (Thornhill et al., 1996). One of the important purposes of employee communication is to mobilize employees to support corporate goals (O'Neil, 2008). A highly committed employee may need more information to sustain a sense of belonging to the organization (Juholin et al., 2015). Employee communication responds to these needs by allowing all employees to stay in touch with what is going on within their institution and thus, they accept communication as an indicator of their values in their institutions (Krishnan & Wesley, 2013).

The way in which employers and employees communicate is crucial in the improvement of business performance and thus overall organizational success (Abugre, 2011). Good communication is a necessary tool for achieving high performance and maintaining strong working relationships within the institution since effective communication increases employee productivity and connects employees (Hee et al., 2019). Employee communication plays the most vital role in maintaining a good relationship between employees, and consistent and honest communication is an important management tool for employee engagement (Krishna & Wesley, 2013). "Employees' responses to organizational policies, practices and structures affect their potential to experience engagement" (Leiter & Bakker, 2010, p. 2). Moreover, internal communication

satisfaction has an important role in employee engagement (Verčič & Vokić, 2017). Thus, as effective employee communication contributes to the identification of employees with their institutions, it benefits the performance and success of the institution (Smidts et al., 2001).

"Minimal attention has been given to what employees would like their organization to communicate." (Ruck & Welch, 2012, p. 295). Welch and Jackson (2007) emphasize the need to explore employee preferences for the channels and content of internal corporate communication to ensure that employees are meeting their needs.

Despite the fact that it is always difficult to communicate, it becomes even more difficult when people are stressed, worried and sad (DuFrene & Lehman, 2014, p. 444). Effective communication positively affects employees' engagement in their work and achieving their goals in challenging times (Chanana, 2020). "The most realistic way to be close to employees and understand the problems they face is to be in constant communication with them." (Basaran & Unal, 2021, p. 660). As in communication with external stakeholders, it is a necessity to transfer information quickly, instantly and accurately in communication processes within institutions (Onat, 2021). A study conducted by Institute for Public Relations and Peppercomm on how businesses are handling the crisis has found that communicating with employees on COVID-19 was a priority for the communication function (2020).

### Method

The aim of this study is to understand the challenges of employees who are working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. What are their (non)challenges they went through with the shift of working remotely? What type of future are they forecasting in employee relations? What are the lessons to be taken from this experience of restructuring employee relations in the

future? There are not many studies in Turkey which look at the impact of working from home on employee relations/communication. With the COVID-19 pandemic, working from home has been widespread all over the world, in many industries, and in different types of organizations. Remote working can also employ a hybrid approach in the future. Thus, this research may create an understanding of employee and management communication/relations nowadays.

The research conducted is qualitative. The diary method is used. “A diary can be defined as a document created by an individual who has maintained a regular, personal and contemporaneous record.” (Alaszewski, 2006, p.1). It is an innovative way of gaining rich insights into the daily processes, relationships, products and consumers (Patterson, 2005, p. 142). “Diaries, self-report instruments used repeatedly to examine ongoing experiences, offer the opportunity to investigate social, psychological, and physiological processes, within everyday situations.” (Bolger et al., 2003, p. 580). The sample of the study consisted of 10 randomly chosen employees who are working either from home or hybrid. They are asked to write a diary for a work period of five days. The employees are asked questions on “how they spend their workday at home”, “how they dream of spending their next workday”, and “what could be done to make their next day a better day.” and asked to write answers to them.

Table 1 shows the participants and their sectors.

### Findings

The findings are grouped on the themes of the diary which are challenges, advantages and expectancies.

### Challenges

Participants conveyed the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of communication in their institutions as lack of communica-

Table 1. Participants and sectors

Name	Sector
Aylin	Energy
Bahar	Food
Erkin	Telecommunications
Filiz	Education
Gülin	Electronics and white goods
İlknur	Banking
Burak	Public
Özlem	Energy
Selin	Electronics and white goods
Nilay	Education

tion between employees, forgetting the concept of work hours, negative health-related issues, communication problems, unplanned meetings, technical issues and problems in customer relations. Figure 1 summarizes the challenges of the employees.

Not being able to reach colleagues, not receiving responses to e-mails, not being able to contact by phone, not responding to messages are some of the challenges mentioned by the participants.

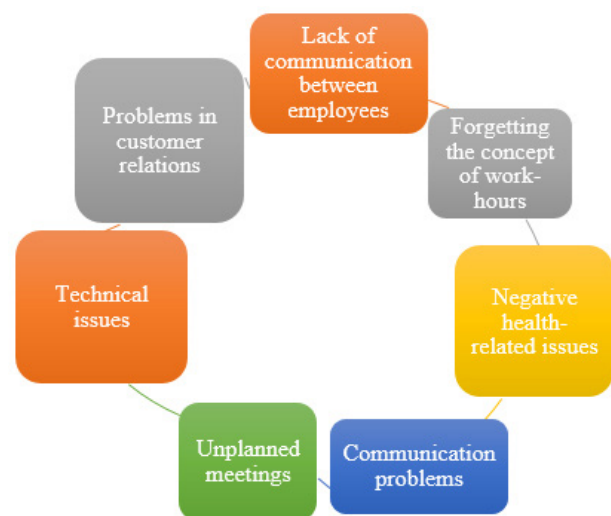



Figure 1. Challenges



The fact that you receive a late reply from the other party in written communication, especially in e-mail communication, causes us to move away from the subject matter in the e-mail. (Erkin)

Especially, there are communication problems due to the fact that the employees in other units of our organization did not direct their office phones during the period when they were working remotely and did not check their e-mails on time. (Burak)

One of our colleagues had a late return to his phone due to his workload, and I had a hard time for a while because I could not move to the next step without reaching him because he was the key point of the chain. (Gulin)

Some of the problems experienced by the participants were that the concept of working hours was forgotten, employees were contacted when they spent private time, meetings were held during those hours, and business and private life were intertwined.

It is very intensive. It can be very tiring to work at home and have a child to care for at the same time. (Aylin).

On the first day of the week, you have a heavy load along with passing from the weekend. Because of pandemic, we are sitting at home, and this laziness of the weekend is difficult to overcome on Monday. (Ilknur).

Working and communicating through a computer also caused some health problems for the participants.

Sitting in front of the computer creates back aches...after work hours, lying down and listening to classical music is a method of resting for me. (Ilknur)

Distant communication caused misunderstandings and reduced communication effectiveness due to the participants' lack of using body language and inability to express themselves correctly.

I think in face-to-face communication, mimics and emotions are more in the picture, while in phone and written communication, there is misunderstanding. When I was talking to my manager, there was a tension and this was emotionally tiring. (Aylin)

Online education does not make face-to-face communication possible and a healthy communication with your colleagues and peers is almost impossible. (Nilay)

In phone communication with BT teams, I was not able to explain the details as easily compared to using body language. (Erkin)

Unplanned meetings caused people to delay the work they were working on and to work with the idea of meeting constantly.

For immediate action, calling for meetings without a planned time, and learning the agenda of the meeting during the meeting. (Özlem)

The technical problems experienced by the employees adversely affected their ability to do business, communicate and work performance.

Audio and visual problems of Webex, during the meetings the audio was lost from time to time. (Erkin)

I wish for a day where expectancies are clear and obvious and no issues on Internet. (Gülin)

In my location, the GSM operator was not powerful enough so I had to rely on WhatsApp and Teams. No problems apart from technical issues. (Selin)

Remote communication also created a problem in terms of employees' communication with customers and weakened the bond between employees and customers. In the words of one participant, "Telephone communication with customers can create distrust." (Ilknur)

### Advantages

Participants conveyed the advantages of the communication they establish while working remotely, as fast and easy communication, visual meetings, quick problem solutions and home comfort. See Figure 2.

The participants explained the advantages such as being able to meet with employees in different cities, solving problems more easily and quickly, and avoiding problems such as traffic as follows:

Because we held meetings via Zoom, we were able to communicate easily with everyone. We held a meeting with our colleagues in Istanbul, Denizli and Bursa offices. We did not have connection problems. (Bahar)

We held our meeting, which was supposed to be face-to-face, over Zoom as if we were in the

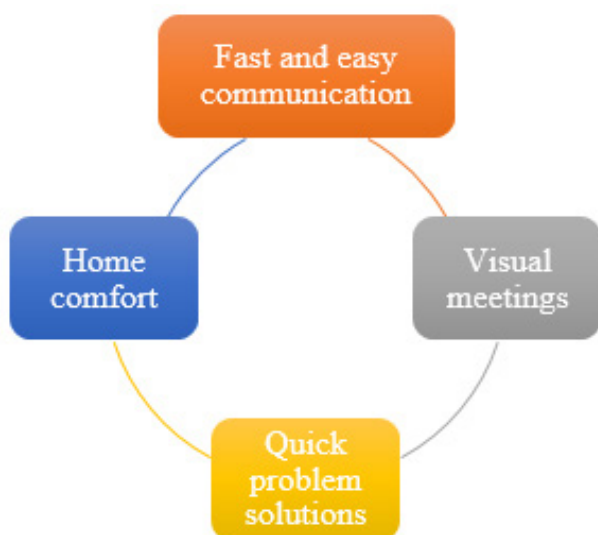


Figure 2. Advantages

same environment. The video meeting made us feel good. (Filiz)

Because of being digitalized to the highest possible level, we have advantages in terms of fast communication, follow-up, and problem solving. (Burak)

I think the downside of working from home is that after a while it becomes routine. However, there is also the fact that an employee works more comfortably at home compared to the comfort of a workplace, so there are positive aspects as well. (Ilknur)

### Expectancies

The expectations of the participants in the communication processes while working remotely were conveyed as planned meetings, short meetings, working within work hours, face-to-face communication, easy adaptation to work and accurate and understandable communication.

Participants describe their expectations from communication while working remotely as follows:

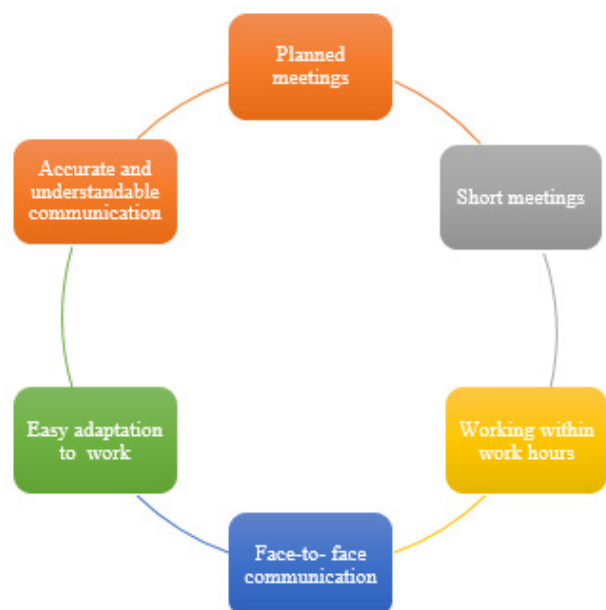



Figure 3. Expectancies



It would be better for me if the meetings did not last so long. Every extended meeting causes me to drift away from my current business plan. (Erkin)

It would be a better day if the meetings that developed without a plan were announced earlier, and if everyone could get ready and be prepared accordingly. (Özlem)

It will be a better work day for me if I work in the same environment with my colleagues... (Filiz)

If only we have correct and understandable communication beforehand, we can agree on the main topics before the meeting, and this would be nice. (Gülin)

I hope to have a more relaxed and calm time tomorrow as there are no meetings. (Gülin)

It would be a better day if you stick to working hours (especially lunch break). (Burak)

### Discussion and Conclusion

According to the data obtained from this study, the communication established by employees while working remotely during the pandemic period has some advantages and disadvantages. Since they were not face-to-face, the participants stated that they faced serious problems while communicating, they had difficulty expressing themselves correctly, and they had conflicts. Another point reported was that communicating while working remotely transformed the routines within the organization and caused some difficulties in sharing and requesting information. Continual meetings and the uncertainty of meeting hours cause employees to be in a constant state of anxiety whilst calls outside of working hours, late meetings, and never-ending work have caused the boundaries between private and business life to be removed. One of the most common complaints of the participants

is that they feel like they are working day and night since working from home has extended their working hours. Especially for female employees, this situation has resulted in them being constantly stuck between house chores and their work at the business.

Participants also mentioned that working from home brings some advantages in terms of communication, as they communicate quickly and easily through digital channels and are isolated from traffic problems. However, they emphasized the necessity of supporting the communication established in the digital environment with face-to-face communication. Therefore, although digital channels facilitate communication, face-to-face communication and meetings are seen as a necessity for the participants.

While working from home, participants expect meetings to be planned and short, to comply with working hours, to protect privacy, to establish channels to solve problems quickly, and the digital to be supported with face-to-face communication.

The public relations/communication and human resources functions of organizations have now actually an issue (COVID-19) where they can equally partner in managing employee relations. The research informs us on the communication challenges of working from home, the expectations of employees, and how to integrate the human factor into this “isolated” environment. Working from home may have benefits such as not commuting to work, (not losing time in traffic), home comfort and has also other negative impacts such as affecting socialization and being accessible at all times. The work hour concept is forgotten, and private and work life are blurred. Women employees have highlighted more challenges in this mode of work life. Participants of the study mention face-to-face communication as still the preferred communication over digital communication. The participants also described



this way of working as creating a vicious circle in their lives. In the future, the diary method can be used with a larger number of employees working remotely, and industry-specific employee experiences and perceptions can be studied as well.

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# Global Capability Framework in Turkey: Findings of the Delphi Study on Public Relations and Communication Profession Capabilities

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## Introduction

In this study, the results of the first-stage research on Turkey's data within the Global Alliance Global Capability Framework (GCF) project, which has been carried out to determine the capabilities required for the public relations and communication profession, are presented. Capabilities are "behavioral repertoires or sets of behaviors that support the attainment of organizational objectives." (Gregory, 2008, p. 216). Shavelson (2010) defines it as follows.

Competence (1) is a physical or intellectual ability, skill or both; (2) is a performance capacity to do as well as to know; (3) is carried out under standardized conditions; (4) is judged by some level or standard of performance as "adequate," "sufficient," "proper," "suitable" or "qualified"; (5) can be improved; (6) draws upon an underlying complex ability; and (7) needs to be observed in real-life situations (2010, p. 44).

Global Alliance Global Capability Framework is a project led by Professor Ann Gregory and so far, by different researchers in many countries such as Argentina, Australia, Canada, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, the UK, USA, UAE and Indonesia, public relations and communication capabilities have been researched (<https://>

[www.globalalliancepr.org/capabilitiesframeworks](https://www.globalalliancepr.org/capabilitiesframeworks)). The research carried out in Turkey is supported by the Turkish Public Relations Association (TUHID).

## Method

For the research in Turkey, data will be collected through three methods, namely three-round Delphi study, survey and focus groups. Thus far, the Delphi study phase has been carried out and the data obtained as a result of it will be presented within the scope of this study.

The research aims to look for the most vital capabilities in public relations and communication management in Turkey. Through the Delphi study, a panel of experts were asked to identify the core capabilities of the field. The objective was to come up with agreed core capabilities.

**First round:** The panel members were asked to list and define these capabilities.

**Second round:** They were asked to rank them in terms of importance.

**Final round:** They were asked to indicate the top most important ones by ranking them.

The Delphi study was conducted between May



Figure 1. Global Capability Framework

Source: <https://www.hud.ac.uk/media/assets/document/research/globalcapabilitiesinpublicrelationsandcommunication-managementgpr/global-capability-framework-brochure.pdf>

2021 and January 2022, and opinions of 14 experts (6 practitioners, 5 academics, 3 employers) were received.

## Results

### First round

At this stage, participating experts were asked to indicate their public relations and communication management capabilities, and thus, 30 capabilities emerged. 14 of these capabilities fall under the titles of communication, 9 of them are under organizational and 7 of them are under professional titles. Participants focused more on communication capabilities.

### Second round

In this round, experts were asked to rate the importance of the 30 capabilities identified in round 1 on a scale of 1 to 7.

At this stage, 6 of the most important capabilities of the participants were under the title of communication, 6 of them were under the title

Table 1. Sample Profile

Participant ID	Occupation	Education	Age	Gender
1	Practitioner	MA	18-29	M
2	Academic	Ph.D	40-59	F
3	Practitioner	MA	30-39	F
4	Practitioner	MA	40-59	F
5	Academic	Ph.D	40-59	F
6	Academic	Ph.D	40-59	F
7	Practitioner	BA	40-59	F
8	Employer	MA	60-64	F
9	Academic	Ph.D	40-59	M
10	Employer	BA	60-64	F
11	Practitioner	Ph.D	30-39	M
12	Practitioner	MA	40-59	F
13	Academic	Ph.D	40-59	F
14	Employer	BA	40-59	F

Table 2. Results of First Round

<p><b>Communication Capabilities</b></p> <p><b>To align communication strategies with organizational purpose and values</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To develop communication strategy and make sure it is aligned with the goals of the organization</li> <li>2. To integrate the communication efforts in a holistic way</li> <li>3. To develop strategic plans and acts based upon these plans</li> </ol> <p><b>To identify and address communication problems proactively</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. To manage issues, risks and crisis (to predict crises, to develop crisis scenarios, to centre the crisis in the organization and digital crisis management)</li> <li>5. To have the skills to solve problems, be problem-solution centred and manage conflicts</li> </ol> <p><b>To conduct formative and evaluative research to underpin communication strategies and tactics</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. To be a good researcher, administer quality research and be able to analyse and interpret data</li> </ol> <p><b>To communicate effectively across a full range of platforms and technologies</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. To use conventional and digital communication channels in an effective way (based on needs to develop models)</li> <li>8. To develop empathy</li> <li>9. To have the ability to speak well (to have presentation skills, and ability to articulate verbally)</li> <li>10. To write effectively (text)</li> <li>11. To have knowledge and skills about visual communication design, visual aesthetics (visual communication such as graphics, infographics, and videos)</li> <li>12. To be creative, inspirational and have the skill to create (good imagination)</li> <li>13. To follow technological developments</li> <li>14. To have the knowledge and competency to manage events (master details of events)</li> </ol>
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### Organizational Capabilities

To facilitate relationships and build trust with internal and external stakeholders and communities

15. To communicate with internal and external stakeholders continuously and develop good relationships.
16. To develop professional and good relationships with media organizations and their members and maintain these relationships (to evaluate the evolving changes in Turkish and world media relations)
17. To maintain relationships with public relations and advertising agencies
18. To manage internal organizational relations in an effective way (to maintain employee satisfaction, increase loyalty and encourage volunteerism)

#### **To build and enhance organizational reputation**

19. To ensure corporate reputation is gained, to manage the reputation and protect it
20. To build and maintain corporate culture (to understand the mission, vision and values of the organization)
21. To work for sustainable developmental goals

#### **To provide contextual intelligence**

22. To follow current, national and global developments and ensure that the organizations are compatible with these developments.
23. To follow the developments in the business world and sector and to integrate these developments/innovations to the business models.

### Professional Capabilities

**To provide valued counsel and be a trusted advisor**

**To offer organizational leadership**

24. To have the ability to lead the organization
25. To advise the leader (preparing content, managing the rhetoric and digital identity and communicating with employees)
26. To have management skills (team management)

**To work within an ethical framework on behalf of the organization, in line with professional and societal expectations**

27. To be able to define the ethical codes of public relations and act accordingly with these codes in all public relations activities.
28. To analyse and predict accurately the impact of public relations projects and activities
29. To consider public interest in all public relations activities

**To develop self and others, including continuing professional learning**

30. To follow the professional developments




Table 3. Results of Second Round

13 Capabilities	Very Important	Extremely Important
To develop communication strategy and make sure it is aligned with the goals of the organization	5	5
To ensure corporate reputation is gained, to manage the reputation and protect it	5	5
To manage issues, risks and crisis	3	6
To follow current national and global developments and ensure that the organizations are compatible with these developments	4	5
To use conventional and digital communication channels in an effective way	3	6
To follow the developments in the business world and sector and to integrate these developments/innovations to the business models	4	5
To communicate with internal and external stakeholders continuously and develop good relationships	4	4
To work for sustainable developmental goals	3	5
To build and maintain corporate culture	4	4
To develop strategic plans and acts based upon these plans	5	3
To have management skills	3	5
To follow technological developments	5	3
To integrate the communication efforts in a holistic way	4	3

Table 4. Results of Third Round

Capability	Rank
To develop communication strategy and make sure it is aligned with the goals of the organization	1
To ensure corporate reputation is gained, to manage the reputation and protect it	2
To manage issues, risks and crisis	3
To develop strategic plans and acts based upon these plans	4
To follow current, national and global developments and ensure that the organizations are compatible with these developments	5
To communicate with internal and external stakeholders continuously and develop good relationships	6
To integrate the communication efforts in a holistic way	6
To build and maintain corporate culture	7
To use conventional and digital communication channels in an effective way	8
To work for sustainable developmental goals	9
To follow the developments in the business world and sector and to integrate these developments/innovations to the business models	10
To have management skills	11
To follow technological developments	12



of organizational and 1 of them was under the title of professional capabilities. The 2 capabilities that the participants deemed most important were 'To develop a communication strategy and make sure it is aligned with the goals of the organization' and 'To ensure corporate reputation is gained, to manage the reputation and protect it'.

#### *Third round*

In this round, the experts were asked to rank the 13 capabilities specified in the 2nd round in the order of importance.

The top three public relations communication management capabilities that respondents consider most important have been listed as 'to develop a communication strategy and make sure it is aligned with the goals of the organization', 'to ensure corporate reputation is gained, to manage the reputation and protect it' and 'to manage issues, risks and crisis'.

#### **Discussion and Conclusion**

According to the findings obtained within the scope of this study, experts in Turkey highlight communicational and organizational capabilities in terms of public relations and communication management whilst professional capabilities lagged behind others. More societal capabilities, such as compliance with ethical codes and public interest, have been considered less important than others. Although in the first round of the Delphi study, the participants pointed out issues such as ethics and public interest on their lists, they gave these capabilities up in the second and third rounds, when they compared them to the others. In this sense, the social effects of public relations are not in the first place for experts.

When we observe the three most important capabilities, it is clear that the participants attach the most importance to developing communication strategies, managing reputation, managing

crises and risks. According to the data obtained, experts place strategy, relationship and management very high in terms of public relations and communication. In this respect, it is possible to interpret that they consider public relations and communication duties as management rather than technical expertise.


Participants did not rank the capabilities they listed in the first-round high, such as leading the organization and mentoring the leader, in the second and third rounds. Following all kinds of developments in the world and ensuring the adaptation of the institution and communication practices to these changes have been deemed as the most important capabilities.

According to the data obtained in this study, public relations and communication practitioners need to be capable of developing communication strategies in line with corporate purposes, making and implementing strategic plans, improving the reputation of the institution, managing risks and crises, following and adapting to developments all over the world, developing good relations with stakeholders, managing communication holistically, using communication channels effectively, working for sustainable development purposes and having management skills.

This study has been carried out as the first stage of a comprehensive study. The study will be carried out with a survey which will reach a broader base of public relations professionals, employers and academics in Turkey. Then, three focus groups are planned to be conducted.

The findings of the study will be conveyed to the public relations professional associations in Turkey such as the Corporate Communicators Association and Communication Consultancies Association of Turkey. In addition, attempts to share them with the public relations programs' chairs and faculty will be made, for example, The Deans' Council of Communication Facul-





ties and the Evaluation and Accreditation Board for Communication Education (ILEDAK) will be informed of the results. The academia might have an action plan to incorporate these into the public relations programs. The public relations professional associations or more specifically The Turkish Public Relations Association (TUHID) can undertake the role of reaching out to the practitioners and employers with the results of the complete study.

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# Engaging Teachers through Effective Communication: Restarting the Government Communication in Education

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## Introduction and purpose of the study

The pandemic has uncovered and exposed many issues in communication between the government and its citizens, not only in the health sector but also in education. During the pandemic, schools have been under many government restrictions, and they've had to follow unprecedented rules - such as wearing masks, social distancing, or even closed schools and online teaching. The governments had to communicate new rules and restrictions to various stakeholders in the education sector: to the founders of the schools (usually municipalities, private or religious organisations), to the directors of the schools and to the teachers, as well to the "recipients" of education: pupils, students, and their parents. In many cases, this communication did not go smoothly (Shavit and Konrádová, 2021), and soon many problems arose: the stakeholders, including teachers, were confused about the government regulations, they did not want to follow them, the disinformation and various Covid-related hoaxes spread quickly, and the trust towards the government fell even lower. Teachers found themselves often in a difficult position: they were often the ones who were

expected to understand the new rules to their students and pupils, and they were often fighting with lack of digital literacy and the use of modern communication tools, such as online video teaching, instant messaging applications, or even emails. And in some cases, they were also in a double role of parents who shall have home educate their children too. The goal of this study is to bring new knowledge about the state of government communication in education, identify potential communication knots (problems), and draft managerial implications for strategic communication (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015).

The field of government communication has emerged recently to analyze and understand the nature of the communication of democratic governments with their citizens (Sanders and Canel, 2013). Public communication is represented by multifaceted and complicated interactions with various stakeholder groups. Its effectiveness is necessary for the functioning of a democratic society (Luoma-aho and Canel, 2020). Government communication in democratic societies is under media control, which is necessary to keep it under control (Liu and Horsley 2007, p. 378, Liu et al., 2010, p. 190, Gelders et al. 2007, p.

328, Fredriksson and Pallas, 2016, p.149).

### Specifics of the Czech situation

Government communication has been studied as a separate phenomenon since approx. 2010 in the Czech Republic (Soukeník, 2018, p. 25). Until then, it was studied together with political communication as a relationship between the media and political representation. Today, government communication is excluded from political communication and concentrates on the communication of a specific institution and is seen rather as its specific form or sub-discipline. However, it can be said that there has been no significant change in the theoretical and research level of government communication in the Czech Republic since 2010 (Potůček, 2007; see also Kasl Kollmanová and Matusšková, 2014).

Basically, the concept of government communication proceeds in two directions: through its actions (what it does) and through a description of what it is. In the first case, government communication is actually a political tool to accomplish political objectives (to influence, control, provide or withhold information, knowledge, and resources; cf. Hood, 1986 and Howlett, 2009). According to Sanders and Canel (2013, p. 4), government communication is the roles, practices, goals, and achievements of communication that take place on the ground in public institutions whose primary objective is the political exercise of power by direct or indirect consent of the people.

This definition cannot be applied in this article, unfortunately. It is still too broad for a specific area of interest - education. Therefore, in this article, we understand the primary goal of government as a service to the people; the primary concern should be the public good (Křeček, 2013). In such a view, the nature of government communication, its quality, and scope also directly or indirectly affect the consent and happiness of

citizens, economic performance, and sustainable development of all individuals, groups, and institutions in society (Soukeník, 2018, s. 9). It corresponds, among other things, to results-oriented management, which is based on the implicit assumption that if public services are improved, the public will be more satisfied with the overall performance of government (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). Such a challenging task needs to be addressed through strategic communication with different stakeholder groups (see also Oh and Ki, 2019).

### Research methodology

This comprehensive study was conducted between 2020 and 2021 on respondents in the Czech Republic. It was divided into two parts. For both parts four research questions were stated and both quantitative as qualitative methods were used.

### Research questions

In this study, which is a part of a larger project examining the government communication of the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (MoEYS), we have raised the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do the teachers perceive and trust the MoEYS and its role in education?
- RQ2. Where do teachers gain information (concerning education or government measures) from? What information sources do the teachers use?
- RQ3. What opinions do teachers hold about specific stakeholders in education, such as governmental and non-profit organisations?
- RQ4. Are there any communication or other barriers or problems in communication between the teachers and MoEYS?

We have used qualitative (Creswell, 2007) and quantitative research methods (Bradburn, Sud-

man and Wansink, 2004; Berger, 2016) in this study to ensure methodological triangulation that means using two or more methods to study phenomenon (Bekhet, Zauszniewski, 2012). There were used “across method” of methodological triangulation which means combinations of qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques (Casey, Murphy, 2009). Both quantitative and qualitative research was designed by the research team but executed with the support of the IPSOS Czech Republic research agency.

### Qualitative research

Concerning qualitative research, we have conducted three focus groups discussions with teachers (pre-school, primary, secondary, and high school teachers, excluding universities and higher education, mixed gender and age groups) in three regions of the Czech Republic (Prague, Ostrava and Hradec Králové). These regions were selected because of their diversity and coverage of the main teaching directions in the Czech Republic. There were three FGDs with 18 respondents (N=18; 1 FGDs per 6 teachers) in October and November 2020. Every FGD lasted 120 minutes and was held online. The qualitative research helped us to get insight and draft the later quantitative questionnaire.

The goal was to find out:

- how teachers communicate with the MoEYS and how they communicate with each other;
- where do they find the necessary information;
- what do you think about the MoEYS;
- what actors in the education system they perceive and how they interact with them.

### Quantitative research

The second part of our research, quantitative one, was held from April 16<sup>th</sup> until August 6<sup>th</sup>,

2021. It consisted of online opinion research among teachers in the length of about 28 minutes. The questionnaire was divided into six thematic parts. There were 530 respondents from the whole Czech Republic. Respondents were selected to ensure a valid sample.

The goal was to find out:

- the role of MoEYS;
- which communication channels and communication tools teachers use;
- motivations and barriers associated with communication between the Ministry and teachers.

### Research results

When reading the following research findings, it is important to remember that the statements of the studied target group were significantly influenced by the specific situation caused by the covid-19 pandemic and the related intensity of communication of the MoEYS.

#### **RQ1. How do the teachers perceive and trust the MoEYS and its role in education?**

The teachers, as well as other stakeholder groups, treat MoEYS with respect and perceive it as the governing body that sets the rules: it issues decrees and regulations, is responsible for the curriculum framework, and makes recommendations the teachers and their supervisors put into practice. Despite this, the quantitative survey has shown that many teachers perceive the MoEYS rather negatively.

If teachers expect anything from the MoEYS, it is mainly the support for them (16%), distribution of precise instructions (15%), or obtaining information in a timely manner (10%). However, two-fifths of teachers have no expectations of the MoEYS whatsoever and are in a passive position towards the Ministry. Teachers do not



feel that the Ministry is sufficiently interested in their feedback. 68% of teachers think that the MoEYS is not interested in teachers' feedback, and 67% think that it fails to take teachers' suggestions into account. Yet they believe that the main role of the MoEYS should be to support them. 60% of the teachers declared that the MoEYS does not fulfill the expectations they have from its role. Only 13% of them declare the opposite, and a quarter of the teachers are neutral in their assessment.

**RQ2. Where do teachers gain information (concerning education or government measures) from? What information sources do the teachers use?**

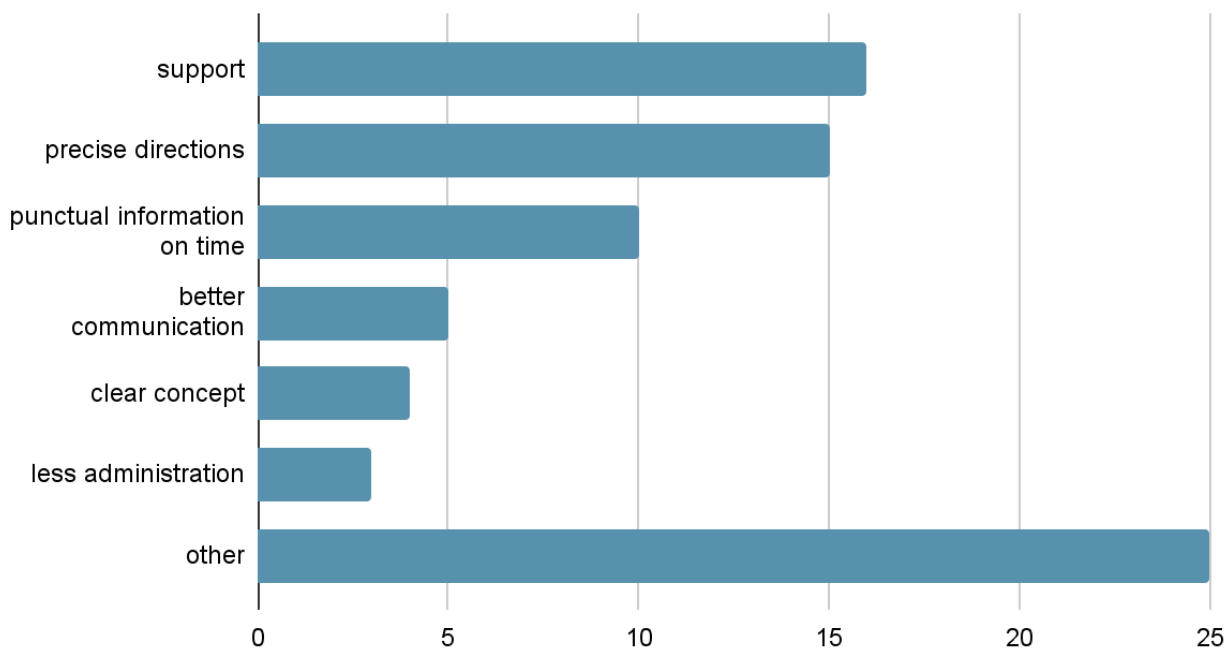
In the spontaneously mentioned sources of information, teachers most often mentioned school management (68%), followed by information from the internet (33%). Nearly a quarter stated

the importance of getting information from their colleagues.

When asked to choose from the resources listed, teachers most frequently selected their school principals and the MoEYS. However, information that is directed to teachers through the MoEYS is often communicated indirectly, either through the media or again via the principals. If a teacher does not understand the information, he or she then consults colleagues or searches for further information on the internet. When we look even deeper, teachers report that they most often obtain information from the MoEYS's website (84%) or by e-mail (32%).

Teachers find the MoEYS's website less clear than stakeholders. However, this is related to the fact that they visit the website less frequently and therefore find it harder to navigate. Most teachers do not need to visit the MoEYS's website

Expectations from MEYS (%)



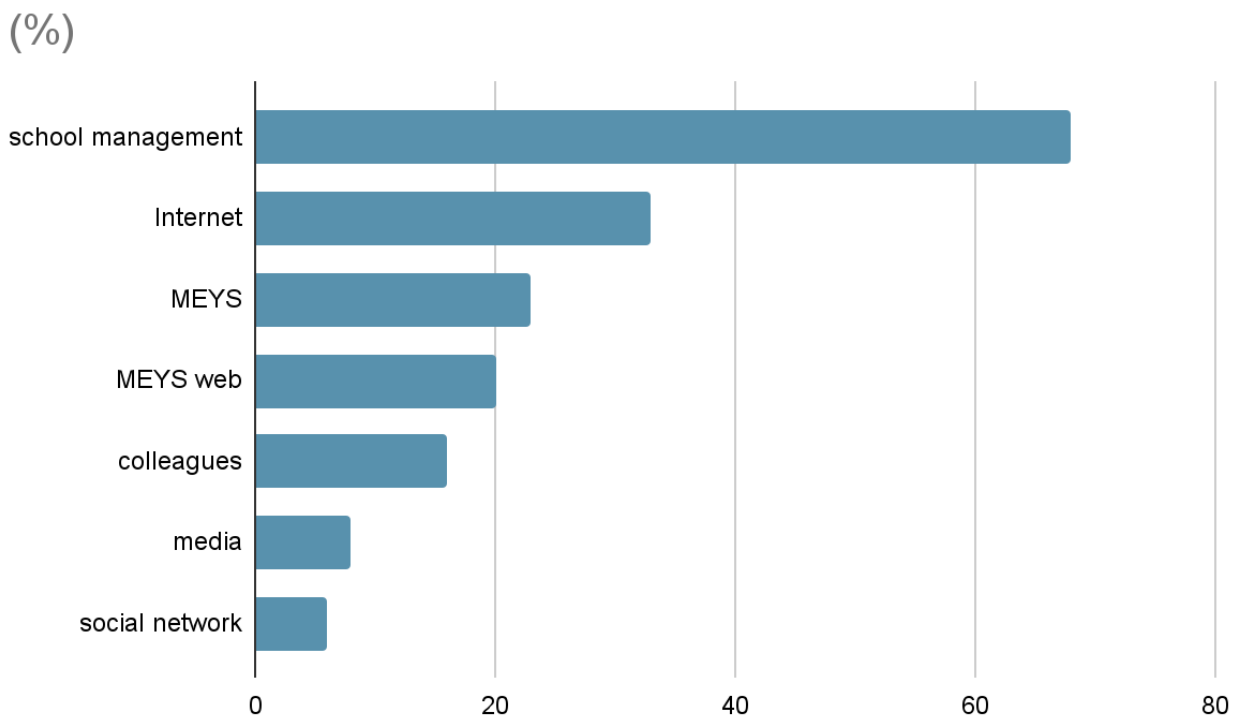
Graph 1: What is MoEYS role in education according to teachers?  
Source: Own data.




because they receive all the latest information directly from the school management, as mentioned above. If they do look up information, it is usually out of their own self-interest, or - in the worst case - their management does not share the information flexibly. The information sought usually includes the following: current regulations, distance learning and how to teach online, or legal issues relating to teaching staff.

From school directors, information is mainly obtained in person (86%) and by e-mail (76%), and often by telephone (34%). The vast majority (93%) of teachers choose personal contact with colleagues as a source of information, and slightly fewer (74%) former colleagues. With colleagues and former colleagues, telephone contact plays an important role compared to other sources of information (colleagues 37%, former colleagues 54%), as well as group conversations and chats (colleagues 30%, former colleagues 50%).

Ministry’s social media are followed by 14% of teachers. Teachers are generally more open to social media than other stakeholders in education. However, some do not use or even refuse them at all. These further claim that they could get into uncomfortable situations when they would have communicated information later than students and parents. Teachers who perceive social media in a positive way would like to follow the MoEYS or a minister to have first-hand information. Among social media, Facebook is the most popular among teachers (77%), followed by a significant distance by Instagram (16%); other social networks are not used much. The leading role of Facebook and Instagram is confirmed with questions about the social media used by the schools - 10 out of 11 schools run their Facebook page, and 2 out of 11 schools have an Instagram profile in addition to Facebook. The profiles are usually managed by the vice-principal or one of the teachers.



Graph 2: What information sources do the teachers use?  
Source: Own data.



In terms of mass media, we know that half of the teachers get information about education from the internet in general. 36% of teachers watch television, the most watched channel being Czech Television (14%). The daily press (19%) and radio (11%) are the least frequently mentioned mass media.

**RQ3. What opinions do teachers hold about specific stakeholders in education, such as governmental and non-profit organisations?**

RQ2 provided information about key communication resources for teachers from both their working environment, MoEYS, and about the role of mass and social media. However, the education system is a complex space for other actors and stakeholders, including other governmental organizations and NGOs that play various roles toward the teachers.

As suggested above, more than half of the teachers are currently not satisfied with the MoEYS communication in general, and only 13% of respondents are satisfied. Top-ranked institution regarding communication is the National Institute of Education (20% of teachers are very satisfied). The Czech School Inspectorate outperformed the Ministry by only one percent with 14% satisfaction. These results show that the government and state institutions are not rated very positively by teachers in general.

Within the non-profit sector two key organisations can be identified according to the teachers perspective. EDUin, NGO focusing on systematic propagation of education, is an information source for 57% of teachers, followed by Učitel naživo (Teacher Live) being source for 22% of respondents. Less frequently represented are the Chamber of Teachers (7%) and Meta (5%). The websites (66%) are the most frequently visited channel for non-profit organisations, and for teachers' unions, teachers primarily obtain information by e-mail (73%). Teachers mainly

communicate with pedagogical-psychological counselling centres and special education centres by e-mail (68%), 45% of teachers choose the telephone option and 40% choose face-to-face communication.

In addition to communicating regularly with their school management and principals, teachers also join various teacher groups - most often Facebook groups - according to their focus and affiliation. They also follow concrete personalities whose opinions on education shape them - opinion leaders are identified among teachers, politicians as well as representatives of non-profit organisations.

**RQ4. Are there any communication or other barriers or problems in communication between the teachers and MoEYS?**

In the qualitative research, we monitored topics and issues in the education system that are perceived in a negative way by the teachers and other stakeholders. Following are some relevant to the relationship between teachers and the communication in education: frequent changes of ministers; overall non-conceptuality of the education system; feeling of constant control at the expense of support; late decision making.

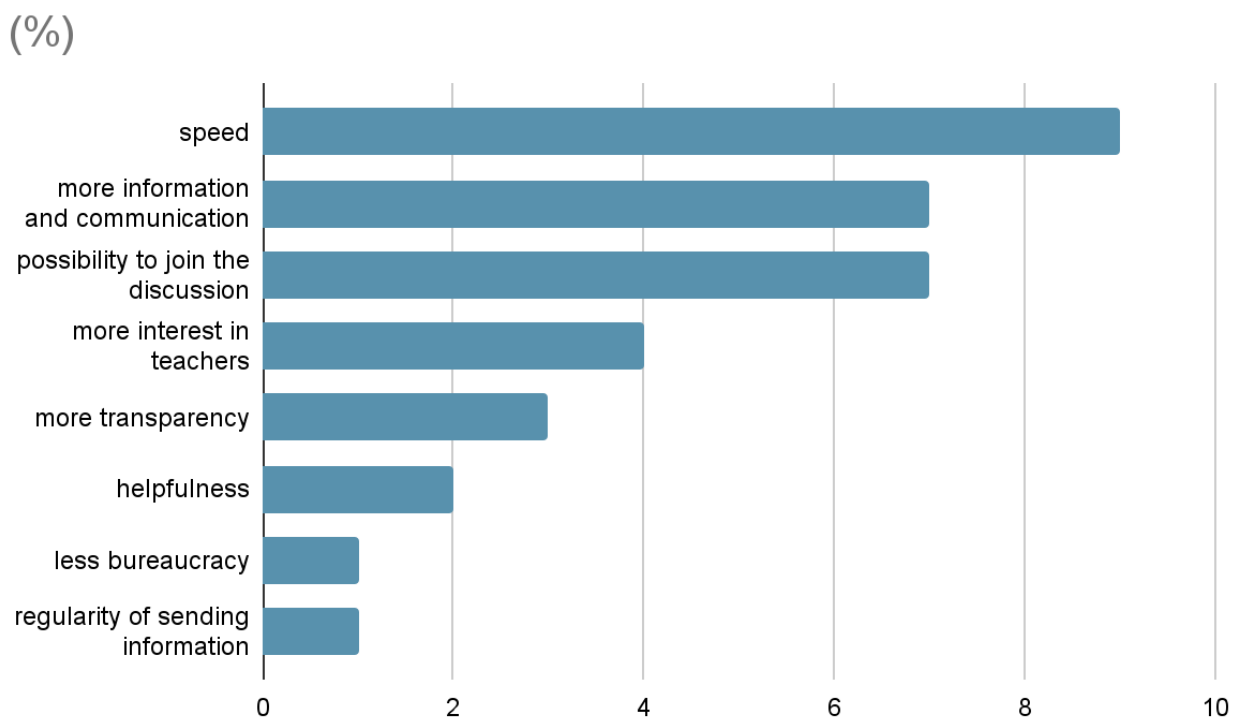
Teachers receive official MoEYS information indirectly from the school management. There is no other communication channel from the MoEYS toward teachers (this is surprising since, for example, teachers are contacted directly by the National Institute of Education on a regular basis). On the other hand, the research showed that neither do teachers feel the need to contact MoEYS in the majority of the cases, with some exceptions. They, therefore, tend to perceive the Ministry as a distant, anonymous office. Teachers rarely contact the MoEYS directly with a query (e.g., labor law issues, etc.). Some have had a positive experience with a quick response, but some have waited a month for a reply. However,

all agree that the answers they finally received were of good quality.

Teachers feel that the MoEYS asks them little or not at all - especially for their opinions from practice. Based on their experience, they believe that only theoreticians prepare decrees and documents, who are cut off from actual practice. Teachers claim they are interested in providing the MoEYS with their expertise, experience, and opinions. They would probably be most comfortable with the format of questionnaire surveys. Engaged teachers would also like to use the possibility of roundtables. However, some openly admit that their participation is voluntary and in their own time, so they do not actually end up seeking out or using these opportunities.

The covid-19 pandemic has increased communication between all target groups, including the MoEYS. This period tested the functionality and effectiveness of existing official communication channels (websites, data mailboxes, e-mails) and

brought new tools such as video conferences and webinars. As the pandemic situation developed, stakeholder groups set up regular online meetings to find out and share information and experiences with each other. Moreover, it appears from the qualitative interviews and discussions that the studied groups of stakeholders have bonded over this period of time. The MoEYS, on the contrary, was perceived by the teacher very critically during the pandemic. MoEYS communication, which they received indirectly through school principals or from the media and other sources, they perceived as chaotic and constantly changing (interviewed in October 2020). Teachers were also concerned that they only received information after published in the media, which they perceived as somewhat diminishing the importance of their role within the education system. Teachers feel that the pandemic situation caught the ministry unprepared in a quick and flexible manner to respond.



Graph 3: Are there any barriers or problems in communication between the teachers and MoEYS?  
Source: Own data.





### Summary of results

Our results show (RQ1) that the teachers have very low expectations from MoEYS and their contact with this top government institution is very distant. 71 % of the respondents have never communicated directly with MoEYS, although only about half of the teachers think they are well informed about the news and important information in education. Most teachers don't value MoEYS as the key leader in education nor as a trendsetter of innovation in communication. Teachers expect MoEYS to support them (22 %), give them precise directions (15 %), and inform them on time (15 %). However, they don't meet these expectations – only 38 % of teachers state that the MoEYS at least partially meets their expectations. Therefore, (RQ2) teachers don't even try to reach the MoEYS to obtain information – instead, they reach their bosses (principals) (68 %), or they search the internet in general (33 %). Only 14 % of teachers declare they follow social media of MoEYS, and this number is, in reality, probably even lower due to the low numbers of MoEYS's social media account followers. (RQ3) Teachers reach for different opinion leaders in education but mostly follow their principals. For the teachers, it's essential to have not a vertical communication line but a horizontal one – to have the possibility to share or discuss information with their peers or colleagues. They also cherish traditional media formats such as bulletins or information boards on the wall in their meeting rooms. There are many communication barriers between the MoEYS and the teachers: only 13 % of teachers think that the government communication targeting teachers from MoEYS are professional, transparent, or friendly to them. More importantly, they also think the communication is not understandable (86 %) and even clear (83 %).

### Discussion and limitations of the research


The research was conducted with data and in-

formation-gathering tools. It was possible to obtain relevant results for the further development of this research, and some of them can be implemented immediately in communication in education. This is also the aim of this research - to provide new insights into the state of (strategic) government communication in education, to identify potential communication problems and opportunities, and to suggest managerial implications for strategic communication. It is necessary to consider the specific situation of the Czech Republic, its education system, and the Czech education administration, but many of the questions and solutions are of a more general nature.

The project risk was the insufficient anchoring of the concept of government communication in both theory and practice and the ambiguous starting position of the Ministry's strategic communication. Current foreign and Czech literature neglects the specific focus of strategic government communication on some of the specific agendas within the functioning of the state vis-à-vis society, one of which is education. It is possible to come across case studies of a specific government campaign or crisis and its communication, but these lack a sound methodological framework applicable to other campuses.

Given that this type of research was conducted for the first time within the Czech Republic and could not even be compared to the details of other similar foreign research due to the lack of publicly available data, we expected a certain level of risk in the research design itself. For this reason, we chose its most robust form, which yielded good results.

When we found that it would be useful to supplement the data with further sub-analyses that would better clarify the relationship of the MoEYS with its stakeholders, we did so. Clearly, many more such additional analyses could be conducted, but we believe that in its current



form, this research represents a well-resourced baseline map that will serve both to draw specific recommendations and can serve as a baseline research design for the analysis of other ministries' communications.

A weakness of the research is the absence of research on internal communication, as the harmony of internal and external communication is the basis for successful communication of the whole institution. In the future, we would therefore recommend combining the findings of the internal communication research, which are not public, with the results and data of this research, as this consistency can also significantly influence communication with regard to individual stakeholder groups.

Our research and the Ministry's activities were affected by the covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in an acceleration of some processes, a suspension of some planned changes by the MoE, and attention had to be largely turned to crisis communication. Going forward, it is worthwhile to further focus on a network analysis of stakeholders to reveal the main currents of thought and the main constructors of general opinion about education in the population. For this, it is desirable to do another part of media analysis to confirm or refute the so-called media ghosting - whether the topics that the population associates with education are really the ones that are described in the media. Furthermore, whether it is possible to raise these topics intensively with the help of the Ministry of Education's spokesperson or opinion leaders, or other stakeholders, such as communication with school principals. Recommendations for further research include repeating some, especially quantitative, parts of the research in the future and creating a range of comparable indicators that can be compared over time or across stakeholder groups. We also recommend greater involvement of online communication analysts to determine communication effectiveness, whether on websites, social

media profiles or newsletters, etc.

### **Conclusion and practical and social implications**

Firstly, the MoEYS must acknowledge the fact that one of its key and primary stakeholders, the teachers, don't have a very favourable view of them and don't perceive their communication as understandable, precise, or timely. Therefore, we must recommend getting back to the basics of the public relations theory, first drafted by Scott Cutlip and known as the 4 Cs in communication and then later elaborated on by many communication scholars and practitioners (Grunig 2002; Baines and Frank 2011). The MoEYS should develop a strategic government communication plan and re-engage with teachers through a new communication approach (Sanders and Canel, 2013; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015; Falkheimer and Heide, 2018; Fredriksson and Pallas, 2016).

Secondly, the MoEYS needs to establish a system for getting feedback and enabling the teachers to ask further questions, either on their website or easily searchable telephone numbers with clear competencies.


Thirdly, despite MoEYS having invested large sums in social media and online communication, this form of communication does not reach the teachers. It needs to engage teachers in a different communication mode, respect them, and create more horizontal communication experiences, such as workshops or shared groups, where they can participate and engage more actively. The top-down communication, which resembles the army system, is paradoxically avoided and not respected by the teachers, although the education system in the Czech Republic is still much based on Habsburg's idea of a top-down structure and "one size fits all" approach.

To sum up, MoEYS has to implement options for ritual communication (Carey, 2008) to re-

gain trust and build relations with teachers; only then can the Ministry mentor them and be perceived as an innovation leader. This requires a strategic communication plan, scenarios for social change, and long-term implementation with respect to its democratic boundaries (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015, Sanders and Canel, 2013; Gelders and Ihlen, 2010).

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## The Full-Stack Public Relations: Future-proofing communication management for stakeholder experience delivery and the digital transformation era

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### Introduction

Big data is the lifeblood of organizations, altering operations, culture and performance. Sales, customer and supplier relationships, employee retention, product features and brand reputation are all being transformed by technology enabled data. Powerful information systems track and monitor this data in real-time to generate powerful business intelligence dashboards for executives to track and improve key performance indicators. Organizations are waking up to an emerging experience age where stakeholders expect the products and services brands offer to meet all of their wants and needs (Accenture, 2021; Castells, 2000; Holtz, 2002; Waderra, 2016). Companies such as Apple, Amazon, Google use adaptive processes by continuously monitoring user data to find patterns from stakeholder behaviors and attitudes and even perceptions (Hax, 2010), which provides the necessary signals to deliver exceptional experiences. Enterprise strategies are moving away from product differentiation and pushing towards competitive advantages crafted through observing experience-level data (Hax, 2010; Temkin et al., 2020). Experiences are effectively the perceptions that anyone has of a brand (Keitt, 2021). Within the organization, public relations monitors several stakeholder groups, not just employees or customers, to ensure the

brand preserves its legitimacy and license to operate in the public sphere (van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). If technology-enabled systems for experience delivery can monitor several stakeholders and their perceptions in real time then what becomes of public relations, a strategic process notoriously plagued with criticisms of poor measurement and evaluation practices? Experience Management is an emerging strategic discipline enabled by technology offering brands one system to monitor, analyze and operationalize feedback from customers, employees and society at large (Temkin et al., 2020). Organizations with Experience programs earn more revenue, retain their workforce and improve their reputations (Temkin et al., 2020). Many other strategic processes such as HR, marketing, sales and digital products incorporate experience practices, underpinned by human-centred design (Norman, 1986), into their transformations (Wong et al., 2019) to meet demands of a rapidly changing economy. If indeed, public relations is a strategic process of the organization and distinct, then where is the evidence of similar transformation – monitoring human and computer interactions in real-time – relevant to measuring the legitimacy of the organization in the public sphere? A set of full-stack public relations competencies would complement a reflective and post reflective approach, while benefiting from a rigorous



measurement and evaluation framework to meet the expectations of the organization.

### Literature Review


#### Distinguishing Public Relations in Organizations

Rather than examining public relations as a phenomenon, Deetz (2004) argues public relations must have a distinct approach to describe and explain the organization much the same way as marketing, HR and finance. Although there are contrasting arguments that public relations is a phenomenon of managing strategic relationships with stakeholders (Heath, 2000; Hutton, 1999) or is the “amalgam of communication processes” (van Ruler, 2018, p. 379), the reflective approach (Holmström, 2004; Van Ruler & Dejan, 2005) determines public relations is distinct because of “special concern for broader societal issues and approaches any problem with a concern for implications of organizational behavior towards and in the public sphere” (van Ruler and Verčič, 2005, p. 189). In a digital society marked by internet-connected devices (Amodu et al., 2019) and social media networks (Wigley & Fontenot, 2010; Grunig, J., 2009; Sedereviciute & Valentini, 2011), organizations are reluctantly losing control of carefully curated messages to an increasingly critical public. Johansen and Valentini (2013) argue a post-reflective approach to public relations encourages organizations to bring their own values when responding to discourse thereby using their influence to shape societal values as well. Most importantly, reflective and post-reflective approaches to public relations are multidimensional and position the strategic process for adaptation within complex and rapidly changing organizational environments (Brockhaus & Zerfass, 2021).

For Fontán, Alloza and Rey (2019), rediscovering organizational purpose is a worthy exercise to synchronize relevant topics stakeholders

care about with the strategies of an organization therefore devising joint commitment, shared values and loyalty. To achieve this, organizations monitor stakeholder opinions and expectations, which are reviewed by executives, to “further engage in the critically important process of defining the organization’s distinctive features – its legitimacy and the future it hopes to build” (Fontán, Alloza and Rey, 2019, p. 112). By delicately balancing stakeholder expectations, the organization maintains a social license to operate, and public relations is acting in the public interest (Brunner & Smallwood, 2019) as well as “better connected to the present time and better equipped to help organizations adapt” (Verhoeven et al. (2018). The broader concern for views and opinions held by the public pragmatically operationalizes the reflective approach of public relations, maintaining differentiation through a strategy that monitors legitimacy in society.

Indeed, when stakeholders interact with organizations they have expectations, which are formed from perceptions that give way to attitudes, opinions and behaviors (Balmer & Greyser, 2006). How an organization is perceived in the public sphere will greatly affect its reputation (Fombrun, 1996). According to Walker (2010) “reputation is based on the aggregate perception of both internal and external stakeholders” (p. 369) and though not an objective measure, it is socially constructed where patterns can be observed within population segments. Conversely, image signifies the way an organization wants to be perceived by its stakeholders (Walker, 2010). The greater gap between reputation and image alerts the organization to a potential risk in loss of legitimacy and compels it to undertake initiatives that engage stakeholders (Merkelsen, 2013; Plowman & Chiu, 2007). Doorley and Garcia (2015) explain that “what an organization stands for and how well it lives up to that standard will significantly affect its reputation” (p. 36). Specifically, two viewpoints emerge in




public relations literature to deal with perception and its impact on reputation and image. Attributed to the relational approach, one perspective is perception should be treated independently of relationship evaluation (Grunig, J. & Huang, 2000; Grunig J. 2018, 1993; Hon & Grunig, 1999) and the other views perception as a necessary ingredient to evaluating relationships as stakeholders voice their expectations “at the point those needs manifest” (Ledingham, Bruning and Wilson, 1999, p. 180). Certainly, perception cannot be separated from evaluating relationships, since perception is a sensory input in order to make sense of the world around us (Reid, 1938). In a cascading effect, perceptions give way to attitudes and attitudes produce behaviors, which ultimately shape relationship dynamics (Fazio, 1986). Knowing the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of stakeholders reshapes the nature of interactions between an organization and its stakeholders, therefore the processes of public relations as well (Thiessen & Ingenhoff, 2011). Validated by CEOs, The Excellence Study (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2006) and CEOs views on Reputation Management (Murray & White, 2005) indicate that developing a good reputation and positive relationships contribute to the value that public relations offers the organization. Public relations holds a distinct strategic position to monitor reputation and uses a number of tactics to facilitate favourable dynamics between stakeholders and organizations as well as society at large (Verhoeven et al., 2018; Tench et al, 2017). Concerningly, even though public relations is most effective when it listens to stakeholders and reports back to leadership, CEOs feel “they do not have a good enough radar for emerging issues” (Murray & White, 2005, p. 4).

#### Measurement Woes for Public Relations

If public relations is a managerial function and is distinct due to the manner it can explain and describe the organization then specific objec-

tives must be monitored, measured and evaluated. Despite repeated efforts by engaged practitioners, membership organizations and academics, public relations struggles to effectively justify its value proposition (Macnamara, 2015). Much of the difficulty comes from confusion and disagreement on measurement frameworks. Huang and Zhang (2013b) found two distinct clusters of studies measuring and evaluating the relationship dimension in public relations. The first applied the PR Relationship Measurement Scale (Hon and Grunig, 1999) as a dependent variable (DV), while the second cluster applied the Bruning and Ledingham (1999) relationship scale as an independent variable (IV) (Huang & Zhang, 2013). For clarity, an independent variable is used to stimulate an effect on the object of a study while the dependent variable remains unchanged in the experiment. Ultimately, authors argued relationship scales in PR “continue to be elusive” (Huang & Zhang, 2013, p. 87) and used inconsistent methodology. Similarly, Watson (2012) compiled a historical perspective on measurement and evaluation in public relations and argued methodologies lacked rigorous application.

Traditional media coverage and public opinion research represents much of public relations measurement and evaluation during the 21st century (Watson, 2012), which began in response to monitoring media relations activities. Eventually AVEs (advertising value equivalency) became a popular measure to monetize publicity, however, the Barcelona Principles rejected their use as exaggerated values (International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC), 2019). Even the Excellence study, praised for its breadth of insights coming from CEOs, used a compensating variation approach to justify the importance of public relations to organizations (Grunig, L., Grunig, J., Dozier, 2006). Critics of this approach (Macnamara, 2015; Watson, & Zerfass, 2011) explained the value estimated for PR by CEOs was



not financial and as such the compensating variation approach – an evaluation of how much to pay for a non-monetary benefit – was not a precise measure. As social media and digital media become more popular, public relations struggles to demonstrate value through these channels as well. This seems odd because robust data and analytics is the joy of internet-connected networks. Examining how social media and emerging digital media have been used by public relations, Wright and Hinson (2012) found 54 percent of practitioners measured what stakeholders were saying on these channels, but only 26 percent of practitioners used that data to observe changing behaviors, opinions and perceptions. Macnamara (2015) attempted to break the measurement and evaluation deadlock built up over the last two decades in public relations research when he came up with the MAIE framework. He proposes four stages – measurement, analysis, insights and evaluation – to “produce insights that inform future organizational strategy, ideally for the mutual benefit of the organization and stakeholders” (Macnamara, 2015, p. 13). These recommendations are unique because MAIE analyzes public relations from an organizational level and a societal level, when historically public relations focused on program and department levels. In addition, Macnamara (2015) suggests including qualitative data and feedback techniques and is consistent with Watson’s (2012) hope that social media will usher in a new opportunity to attest to the value of dialogue with stakeholders. If public relations has the distinction of negotiating the organization’s legitimacy with society, then measuring reputational value is another means by which to validate strategic importance. Doorley and Gordie (2015) provide a basic template for a comprehensive reputation management program consisting of internal and external stakeholder audits to assess the gap in perception between employees, senior leaders and external stakeholders. Furthermore, an accountability formula monitors reputation factors against particular departments such as in the ex-


ample of communicativeness “public relations can be given the responsibility of correcting that impression through proactive communication initiatives” (Doorley & Gordie, 2015, p. 21) .

Ultimately, public relations must establish consistent methodological processes, but pushing this dialogue forward stirs up historical debates on the essence of public relations. Perhaps viewing public relations as either communication or as relationship management is the most problematic dialogue. It curtails innovation because of the circular arguments that ensue. According to Verhoeven, Tench, Zerfass, Mereno, Verčič (2012), the inability of public relations “to prove the impact of communication activities on organizational goals” is a “major barrier to further professionalization and growth” (p. 36). Despite social networks and internet connectivity, public relations continues to take a narrow and limited view of monitoring, measuring and evaluating its performance.

### **Stakeholder Monitoring Technology for Public Relations**

There are a small handful of tools in the marketplace developed specifically for measuring and evaluating public relations and companies promote them as communication-technology stacks with dashboards to visually impress senior executive leaders. For instance, Edelman (2021) offers a product for “deep audience insights [to] quantify reputation and trust” (para. 2) with actionable insights that target, measure and shape behavior by monitoring where messages are picked up by stakeholder groups. Qualtrics is another technology provider that has a brand experience platform, combining deep social-listening insights with a survey function to monitor perceptions of reputation (McCorkindale, DiStaso & Carroll, 2013; Reputation Management: Your Ultimate Guide, 2022:). Meltwater is a social monitoring tool designed to analyze social media and traditional media trends for





conversations on issues and topics, aggregating results into a summary report to condense current opinions and sentiments from stakeholder groups (Meltwater Reviews & Product Details, 2022).


Corporate listening (Macnamara, 2020) through technology enabled software is another area public relations lags behind (Paine & Hart, 2020; Tench & Moreno, 2015; Verhoeven et al., 2012) and is increasingly viewed as an area where brand experiences can be monitored across all stakeholder groups. According to the 2021 Edelman Future of Corporate Communication report, public relations “is crucial in understanding and interpreting risk and delivering an integrated corporate brand experience that maximizes trust and delivers engagement returns” (p. 13) by listening to senior leaders, employees and society. However, only 30 percent of PR practitioners are using communications technology to tie their core activities back to an organization’s revenue and instead 44 percent are using technology for rudimentary measures of media impressions (Edleman, 2021). Two separate studies (Baskin et al., 2010; Edelman, 2021) find that employers do not want to invest in measurement and evaluation tools for public relations practitioners though reasons are somewhat unclear. But a possible rationale is the criticism that PR practitioners are unable to demonstrate their performance as contributing towards organizational objectives, which has been previously stated in this literature review.

Furthermore, corporate listening was not situated within the boundaries of public relations, instead Macnamara (2021) found a number of technology platforms and methodologies “such as customer journey mapping, behavioral insights and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools, including algorithms, natural language processing (NLP), and machine learning” (p. 82) situated in customer service and marketing departments. Specific software technologies in-

put data and analytics to correlate stakeholder perceptions and behaviors in real-time and are found in emails, letters, surveys, complaints, reports, traditional media and social media (Hepp, 2019). Perspectives from within public relations research propose the Internet of Things (IoT) (Amodu et al, 2008), agile methodology (van Ruler, 2016) and design-thinking (Hayes, 2018; Neumann-Strunweg, 2013) can be incorporated into PR’s practice. But with PR lagging behind in technology adoption as well as measurement and evaluation practices, researchers (Falkheimer et al., 2017; Macnamara, 2021) speculate what if any leadership role PR will serve in the future. Innovation owed to technology is transforming every major division and department of organizations because it optimizes performance. Public relations is not immune. Macnamara (2021) points to fractures in society – such as threats to democracy, the pandemic, and inequality – to pressure public relations to advance.

### **Organizing for the Experience Age**

Broadly examining the landscape of organizational transformation in the 21st century, Castells (2000), Holtz (2002), and Hax (2010) highlight how social and digital ecosystems alter stakeholder interactions with brands, shifting business strategies from product differentiation to service experience. This ecosystem democratizes the power employees, vendors, shareholders and citizens have to affect political, social and cultural change, impacting organizations (Castells, 2000). Customers, employees and society are at the apex of organizational strategy and operational goals. According to Hax (2010) Delta Model “performance measurements and quantifiable indicators are essential for the development, execution, and monitoring of the [organization’s] desired strategy” (p. 130). Therefore, organizations that are leading in their market have a sustained focus on meeting the expectations of stakeholders to create consistent



positive experiences. Organizations are ramping up processes to improve human to computer connectivity, a signal of the experience age (Castells, 2002; Wadhera, 2016), aiming to meet the expectations and communication needs of employees, customers and the public sphere. Marked by interconnected mobile devices, the experience age is about “creating, sharing and participating in technology-mediated environments” (Hu Au & Lee, 2017). The human experience cycle begins with organizations focusing on the behaviors of stakeholders that are driving action, then exploring the attitudes leading to these behaviors, which are found in predictive data analytics capable of unearthing the perceptions (Temkin et al., 2020). Simply stated, an experience is defined as any attitude or perception that a stakeholder has through their interactions with an organization manifesting in behaviors (Temkin et al., 2020). When an experience is positive or negative it will impact future behaviors of a stakeholder and by extension the organization’s reputation as well. Utilizing the concept of perception, unsupervised algorithms can mimic patterns created cognitively in humans to predict future behaviors (Cosley, 2022). Essentially, human perception is being decoded by technology, an analysis only performed through time-consuming scientific observation previously.

### **The Discipline of Experience Delivery**

Experience management is a discipline that uses x-data (experience data) and o-data (operational data) to measure and improve the four core experiences in the human experience cycle. Experience Management monitors in real-time “every interaction people experience with a company in order to spot opportunities for improvement” (What Is Experience Management, n.d.). Operating systems collect and store personal stakeholder profiles, analyze data and action workflows with “customized alerts and dashboards that are synchronized to the operational and de-

cision-making cadences of internal stakeholders” (Qualtrics, 2020, para. 4). According to Temkin et al., (2020), researchers credited with developing experience management software, the technology helps “CEOs break down silos of data, hived off in different departments, to create a holistic picture of performance, culture and engagement (para. 3) and predicting behaviors “before issues turn into trends” (para. 4). In summary, Experience Management (XM) is a technology and a strategic discipline that nurtures a culture of empathy for the human experience to meet the expectations of stakeholders. Creating positive experiences with organization involves powerful operating systems capable of synthesizing large amounts of data and requires practitioners who are using credible methodology for measuring and evaluating perception.

Against this background, characteristics are needed for public relations to prepare, understand and optimize for the expectations of experience delivery and the ethos of the Experience Age being adopted by organizations. This qualitative research study investigated the following three research questions:

- RQ1: How is “experience” defined by organizational leaders and experience management subject matter experts and thus how does it compare with existing dimensions of public relations?
- RQ2: What stakeholder groups are identified in the continuous monitoring process for the discipline of experience management and how does it compare with diverse publics identified in public relations literature?
- RQ3: Where does the discipline of experience management, and by extension experience delivery, facilitate multidimensional characteristics of public relations through technology-enabled processes, as noted by the existing models and theories cited.

## Methodology

This is an exploratory, qualitative research study to examine the discipline of experience management and the strategic process of public relations within experience-delivery practices. The sample size consisted of 20 in-depth interviews: 10 senior leaders who had authority in operational and strategic decisions at Canadian organizations classified as large-scale enterprises (500 or more employees) as well as 10 subject matter experts in the experience management discipline. Participants were gathered using LinkedIn messages and snowball recruitment. Interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 60 minutes in length.

Qualitative synthesis focused on words, descriptions, concepts, perceptions and sentiments expressed by participants. Narrative analysis revealed mindsets and perspectives of interview participants, while thematic analysis revealed similarities and differences that could be grouped together for deeper interpretations.

## Results and Conclusions


Two categories emerged from the in-depth interviews to segment 20 participants (n=20) into senior leaders and experience management practitioners. The first group was composed of ten (n=10) senior leaders. The second group consisted of ten (n=10) thought-leaders and practitioners of experience management, includ-

ing five world-renowned thought leaders (n=5). Represented industry categories included finance (n=1), insurance (n=1), utilities (n=1), consumer goods (n=5), telecommunications (n=2), market research (n=3) and technology (n=6).

Overall, interview participants were familiar with the Experience Age to varying degrees. The spectrum of understanding, according to definitions positioned within the literature review (Castells, 2000; Hax, 2010; Temkin et al., 2020; Wadhwa, 2016), ranged from organization-centric to experience-centric mindsets. Experience management practitioners demonstrated a much clearer framework for experience delivery and could explain that experience was essentially a perception that anyone had of an organization. In practice, the use of experience operating systems connected organizational priorities to unmet stakeholder expectations and improved workflow processes to boost internal culture as well as external reputation management. Meanwhile, senior leaders described experience through an outdated view of business strategy that drew on concern for the competitive landscape or product differentiation. At the other end of this spectrum, experience-centric leaders could distill corporate strategy back to the most important stakeholders, but inevitably defined experience through expectations the organization had of itself. According to all interview participants, experience management offered a tangible link to

Table 1

Leadership (C-suite)	Experience Management Practitioners
Chief Executive Officer (6)	Experts (4)
Chief Marketing Officer (1)	Educator (1)
Chief Communications Officer (2)	Data-scientists (2)
Chief Technology Officer (1)	Product manager (1)
	User-Experience (UX/UI) researcher (1)
	Strategist (1)



new sources of growth and profitability. CEOs in particular, described a cyclical orientation of employees, customers and society. For instance, when employees are engaged, they empathize with customer needs and shed light on broader societal issues likely to upset an organization's reputation.


Specifically naming public relations as the strategic process responsible for monitoring stakeholders perceptions was noticeably absent from the conversation even though observations made by leadership and experience management practitioners agreed with PR literature citing the reflective approach (Holmström, 2004; Van Ruler & Dejan, 2005), post-reflective approach (Johansen & Valentini, 2013) and reputation management (Walker, 2010; Doorley & Garcia, 2015). Findings suggest that theoretical research in public relations is not resonating in a manner that demonstrates practical implications for organizational leadership or practitioners. The multidimensional approaches to public relations cited in this literature review were described in organizational life, but interview participants did not indicate it was solely responsible for, owned or managed relationships with stakeholders. Instead, all interview participants agreed that public relations contributed value through communication, a dimension summarized as message delivery and reception for mutual meaning creation (van Ruler, 2016). The organization-public relationship paradigm (Heath, 2000; Hutton, 1999) within public relations is an overreach based on organizational structures described by interview participants. When prompted, senior leaders cited media relations and social media as tactical expressions of public relations and six (n=6) interview participants raised journalistic media as the primary receiver of message delivery. This research paper agrees with findings originally presented by Macnamara (2021) that communication activities were found to be largely tactical, while the authority of relationship management residing

in public relations amounts to “unrealized ambit claims” found in literature (p. 81).

### **Characteristics of Full-Stack Public Relations**

To identify the owners of experience, interview participants were asked to name roles, departments or individuals who best embodied this ability. Responses varied among interview participants. Of the 20 participants seven (n=7) respondents felt everyone had to own the stakeholder because of the singular priority established by the organization to focus on the customer and employee. Zero respondents (n=0) felt technology or IT was responsible for experience. Four (n=4) respondents indicated experience owners embodied an entirely new and innovative role for organizations. Three (n=3) respondents felt marketing and communications held experience with a caveat that HR might hold responsibilities as well. Six (n=6) respondents indicated that product or program managers who work on digital experience products such as websites or apps should be responsible for experience. Those who advocated for marketing and communications with a slight nod to HR highlighted the interconnected identities of stakeholders. For instance, employees could be activists but customers as well. Suppliers could be customers and therefore, experience should be framed through brand and reputation.

For public relations to maintain distinctiveness, new characteristics must be incorporated to situate PR into a rapidly transforming organizational ecosystem. Core competencies for full-stack public relations are observations borne out of this research. They are not offered to contradict evidence-based approaches found in literature. Instead, they're intended to enhance the discussion of distinctiveness within organizational life for the Experience Age. For instance, software developers who are labelled full-stack can focus on visual elements (the front-end) and development issues behind the scenes (server side),



making this function more desirable to the organization. In the same way, public relations can continue to reconcile its expertise with a cross-functional integration more suited to the monitoring and delivery of the experience for all stakeholders. Proposed with this definition are explanations of five full-stack public relations competencies.

### **Dot-Connector**

Experience management practitioners identified that public relations was a useful steward of communication, the action of meaning creation with stakeholders. Both C-suite executives and experience management practitioners described that tone and voice in communication was a unique competency as well. There are three types of meaning creation that emerged through participant interviews: communication as the creation of a message; communication as a conduit to message delivery; and communication as synthesis for message clarity. Communication creation was described by interview participants as drafting of key messages at a tactical level within a cross-functional environment or at a senior strategic level. Communication delivery meant messages were directed to one or more receivers such as employees, customers, shareholders and social media users. Communication for message clarity meant messages found new comprehension when discussed in consultation with leadership, and facilitated alignment with stakeholders for the strategic priorities and goals of the organization. Outcomes desired by the organization were understanding and acceptance of strategic priorities within stakeholder groups. At a program or service level, public relations crafts messages for teams to use when interacting with stakeholders through communication channels such as newsletters, emails, social media, call centres, text messages, chat bots etc. Communication as meaning creation is a powerful mechanism for public relations. Defined by van Ruler (2018) as an organism of sorts – a whole with

interdependent parts – but not to be confused with a relationship, communication is “an agile management process in which the focus is on feeding the arenas in which meanings are presented, negotiated, constructed, or reconstructed for strategy building and strategy implementation” (p. 379). This overlaps in sentiment with the Hax (2010) Delta Model theory. Sidelined in literature (Hutton, 1999; van Ruler, 2016), communication remains a recognizable characteristic of public relations (van Ruler, 2016; Macnamara, 2021) and was explicitly mentioned by senior leaders and experience management practitioners during in-depth interviews. According to Castells (2002), an Experience Age theorist and sociologist, communication decisively shapes culture “because culture is mediated and enacted through communication” (p. 16), which is rapidly and fundamentally being transformed due to new technological systems. In one sense, this research might be disheartening to academics and practitioners who view public relations as a mediating process wholly responsible for relationships between organizations and their stakeholders.

As part of this function, public relations monitors message clarity, ensuring that the purpose, mission, values and strategy are well communicated to employees, investors and other unnamed stakeholders. Public relations as a strategic process is uniquely equipped to socialize the corporate strategy among internal and external audiences. The ongoing engagement of employees, customers, leadership and society “is presented and promoted by communication, but also rebuilt by it in a continuous and reflective way” (van Ruler, 2020, p. 378). Hax (2010) argues “a strategy that is not well communicated is meaningless, and it will never become an effective reality” (p. 93).



### **Empathizer of Human Experiences**

Among the experience management practitioners interviewed, emotions and needs-identification from stakeholders were critical to this growing field. Interview participants said they felt that translating data, analytics and journeys into descriptions that evoked empathy or could be understood on a human and emotional level was extremely important to the entire experience-delivery ecosystem. In particular, organizations are increasingly looking for senior leaders who can understand emotion, perception and the impact they have on customers and employees. A challenge was issued by experience management experts to public relations to improve the calibre of messages to drill into human connection and emotion, and remove jargon like key messages from the practice. The flexible and co-collaborative essence with which van Ruler (2016) defines communication highlights the need for a more human approach. Public relations is compelled by the Experience Age to align its message delivery and message clarity processes with the perceptions, emotions and attitudes of stakeholders.

### **Influencer**


There are many different structures in place at organizations, some still undetermined, to prioritize stakeholders by monitoring and continuously delivering on unmet needs through experience management. Macnamara (2021) mirrors the findings of this paper, but on a larger scale, and argues that “achieving a strategic leadership role and influence requires a high level of capabilities and credibility” (p. 84). Delivery and clarity of the mission is crucial as experience-centric, they need skilled leaders to describe the change, capture the challenges and communicate effectively with stakeholders. To a certain degree, structure is irrelevant therefore, influence can occur at any level and public relations facilitate this process.

### **Problem-Solver**

Experience management ecosystems hinge on a framework drawing organizational life into the orbit of a stakeholder’s perception. Design-thinking frameworks were brought up by 14 (n=14) interview participants, who expressed the importance of delivering positive and memorable experiences to stakeholders. These touchpoints can be internal to the organization or external, but all of them affect the stakeholder in some way. Creating a visual of these touchpoints is called a journey map. One experience management expert who is sought after for their journey-map consulting explained that communication as an activity should be included in journey-mapping processes. As an example, they shared a situation where the entire company’s product-to-channel-to-customer-delivery chain was examined and an entirely new journey map was created to put the customer at the centre of the experience. What they found was that the company’s communication materials did not reflect the experience promised to the customer, and, if left uncorrected, could have resulted in safety issues. As a recommendation, the experience management expert built communication messages into the journey map and fixed the problem before it became a reputational issue for the company.

### **Ethical Data Translator**

Analytics were important vehicles to clarify decision-making because of behavioural patterns found by monitoring transaction, operation and perception data. However, interview participants described organizational environments that swept up large sums of data, but didn’t always have a purpose for all of that information, which in many cases was personal to each stakeholder. One experience management researcher indicated that a new executive from among marketers or communicators – a first among equals – will emerge for organizations to develop a mission of analytics, instructing organizations to discern



the data that is important to collect from stakeholders as well as how to use it. This philosophy supports perspectives concerned for stakeholders and their privacy as organizations are pushing towards personalization of experiences as a way to improve loyalty and engagement with brands. Experience management practitioners interviewed expressed concerns that collecting mass amounts of data in the name of personalization was misguided, causing reputation risks to brands. The use of analytics requires a governance model for ethical decision-making, communication and personalization in the experience ecosystem. These managerial functions are uniquely suited to public relations when acting in the public interest and serving as the organization's ethical advisor (Bowen, 2008). The best measurement and evaluation frameworks described during participant interviews could triangulate relational, transactional and operational data. Experience management practitioners highlighted the architecture of experience delivery as being baked into the digital ecosystem.

For instance, customers, employees and society make choices along their journey of interaction with organizations. Call centres, online websites, and surveys have listening and feedback mechanisms at regular intervals of the interactions to collect and analyze perception or emotional cues from stakeholders. Identifying patterns in this data revealed stakeholder behaviors that could be influenced or modified by the organization and gave way to process adaptations for the organization as well. Many pointed to outcomes such as profitability, employee retention and reduced process waste and technical debt through experience management practices. Interview participants with backgrounds in marketing and communications pointed to departmental and programmatic measurements of public relations. Metrics such as share-of-voice, power-of-voice, media mentions, social media monitoring, earned media evaluations or AVEs were highlighted. Consistent with findings from literature

(Buhmann, Macnamara & Zerfass, 2019; Macnamara, 2021; Watson & Zerfass, 2011; Wright and Hinson, 2012), interview participants could not immediately point to public relations as presenting important measurement and evaluation metrics on the voice of stakeholders for the benefit of the organization or society (Macnamara, 2015). Excellent public relations for the experience age monitors the dynamic between the public's view, an organization's actions and broader societal issues that could impact a brand's license to operate. Determining ethical data usage keeps these factors at the forefront of an organization's leadership agenda.

### **Meaning Creation Model of PR for Experience Delivery**

Communication, not relationship management, is the dominant identifier for public relations among interview participants. Specifically, this paper demonstrates a multidimensional approach to public relations such as reflective or post-reflective is a more neutral position to interpret the dynamic that exists between organizations and stakeholders in the experience age. Depicting a framework of public relations for the experience age, the meaning creation model of PR incorporates revisions to traditional communications plans as evidenced by Niemann-Struweg (2014), but added experience management methodology and the practice of journey-mapping to better incorporate the human-centered philosophy of discovering unmet needs. In Figure 1 below, there are numerous iterations of communication plans produced by public relations for the organization in service to maintaining connection with stakeholder groups, which is why this model is visually represented with a bicycle chain to represent perpetual motion. The second and smaller circle outlines different types of affinity stakeholders can have towards an organization by virtue of the communication activities that are utilized. Forrester Research visualized a similar model by outlining steps of

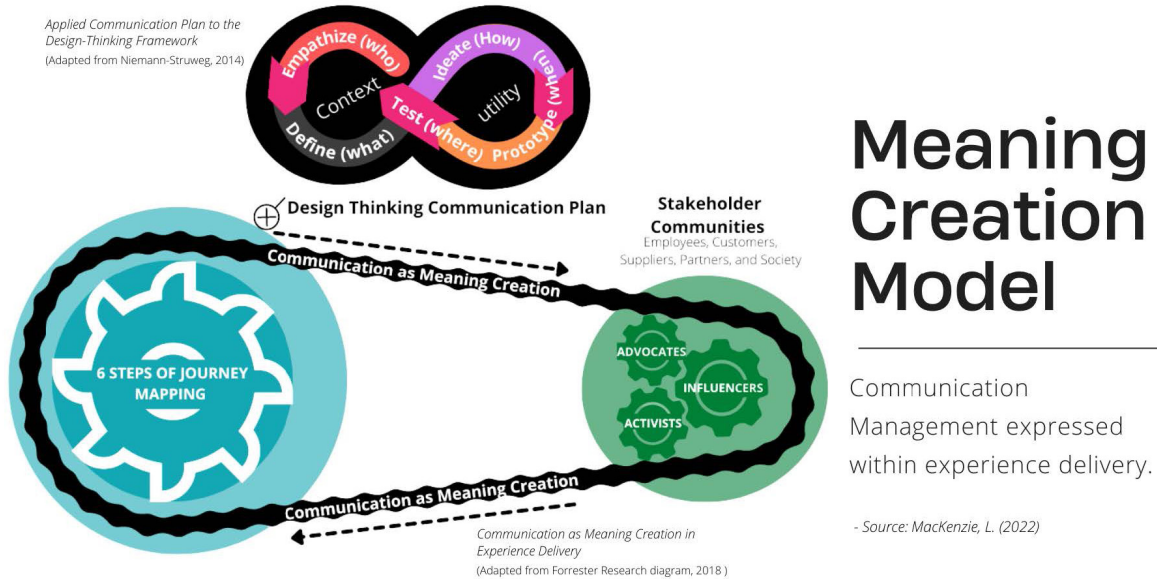


Figure 1: Public Relations Meaning Creation Model for Experience Delivery

Note: The model outlines the continuous movement of journey mapping in the experience delivery ecosystem and its creation of different stakeholder communities with varying levels of affinity to the organization. Any offshoots from the communication and meaning creation process are the result of communication plans when organized through a design-thinking framework. The offshoots can be understood as various tactics such as media releases, e-newsletter, advisory boards, emails, text messaging, Twitter chats etc.

journey mapping steps to show stakeholder communities as outcomes of that process. However, communication activities were not identified as vehicles to assist with growing affinity with stakeholders towards brands in the experience delivery process. Hax (2010) argues “a strategy that is not well communicated is meaningless, and it will never become an effective reality” (p. 93). Public relations has a vital responsibility to test “strategic decisions by presenting and negotiating these in a continuous loop” with stakeholders (van Ruler, 2018, p. 380).

The process of meaning creation for public relations in the experience age is iterative and begins with empathy as learnings from communication plans are adapted based on on-going interactions with stakeholders.

### Practical and Social Implications

Emerging systems of experience management monitor the perceptions and attitudes that people have with organizations and deliver data-informed analytics designed to continuously improve the experience. To safe-guard distinctiveness for the Experience Age, public relations must incorporate adaptive, full-stack competencies. Innovation beyond the confines of disciplinary theories found in public relations can produce adaptation alongside the organization, presently affected by technological influences. This shifted orientation toward the stakeholder is an opportunity to reconstruct public relations for experience delivery. If not, public relations may be relegated to a tactical function rather than a strategic process. The findings are instructive for professionals performing PR activities and researchers studying them, as well as institutions offering academic study in public



relations. A limited sample size and diversity of interview subjects by profession are limitations that should be acknowledged. However, this study does make a significant contribution to public relations research by introducing the discipline of experience management into the hegemony of communication management literature.


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## New challenges for the countries in external communications due to fake news blossoming

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### Introduction

By conveying biased and false information, fake news can destroy folk's faith and beliefs in products, authorities, experts and the government, and others, damaging the country brand. A recent study analyzing data from 126,000 stories on Twitter has unveiled that fake news stories spread faster than real ones and can elicit feelings of fear, disgust, and surprise (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Since fake news intends to deceive readers and, at the same time, create more traffic, it ultimately leads to someone profiting. Websites effectively "buy" their targets using Facebook content marketing which, in turn, adduces thousands of dollars of revenue for the publisher. At the same time, accurate fake news detection is still challenging nowadays due to the dynamic nature of social media and the complexity and diversity of online communication data.

Several studies have posited that world news not only considerably enhances public knowledge about foreign countries but also can significantly affect people's perceptions of nations and, consequently country brand formation (Albritton & Manheim, 1985; Perry, 1987). In fact, due to the lack of knowledge about other countries, it is obvious to presume that the media significantly influence the thoughts and ideas people apply in the process of building certain judgments toward various countries.

Although the unprecedented scale of fake news has brought more scholarly attention in recent years, most studies mainly focus on public policy and political communication perspectives (Jang & Kim, 2018; Vargo et al., 2017). Relatively little research has investigated fake news in the context of brand management and communication, and there is no research in the context of the country brand.

However, the threat of fake news targeted at brands is unlikely to dissipate in the near future, especially when considering the importance that brand image and brand reputation have overall brand equity; it is evident that brand managers need strategies to mitigate the threat of fake news. To comprehend the way of crisis strategies of China in the frame of fake news, one should identify the consequences and conditions which are mostly damaged during the fake news attacks.

This study will shed light on the volume of the impact of fake news on country brand and its weak points, which suffer most of all due to negative disinformation pressure. Since this is the first study trying to depict the post-fake news effect on country brand equity, the main question will be to clarify if any negative consequences exist and, if it does, to what degree based on country brand equity measures.



### Literature review


Referring to the literature in the field of marketing, an image is “a set of beliefs/convictions, ideas and impressions that a person has on an object” (Kotler, 1991). Papadopoulus (1993) adheres to the point of view that the image of an object arises from perceptions that people hold. Being different from individual to individual, the image that each possesses towards a particular object will also be, in turn, diverse. Based on statements provided by Kunczik (1997, p. 41), “the image of a nation is formed by a highly complex communication process involving diverse information sources. [...] Those who create the most powerful images are international TV and radio, newspapers and magazines, cultural exchange programs, commercials, books, and news services. Add to this education traveling, i.e., the degree of personal experience related to certain foreign cultures that also has an important role in building an image”.

The recent rise in the incidence of fake news can be attributed, in this vein, to technological developments and how individuals search for and consume information. However, some research applied content analytical methods of analyses identified that foreign nations are often depicted in a more negative light, whereas their nation is evaluated more positively (Blain et al., 1993; Wanta et al., 2004). The results of a study by Domke et al. (1999) reveal news coverage to be a potent stimulus that not only shapes recipients’ cognitions about the issues or objects covered but also builds cognitions about the involved races or ethnic groups perceptibly. Few researchers (Brewer et al., 2003; Mercille, 2005; Wanta et al., 2004) shed light on the impact of foreign nation depictions which affect the perception of those nations in terms of agenda-setting, framing, priming, or other image-formation effects. According to their findings, news coverage encompasses an instantaneous influence on recipients’ evaluations of other nations. The

scientists elucidate these effects by contending that ordinary people do not base their judgments on the whole picture of the relevant knowledge stored in their memories when facing complex political issues or events. Instead, they accept a shortcut strategy, evolving the process of assessing based on the pieces of information most easily retrieved from memory (Krosnick and Brannon, 1993).

Therefore, it could be deduced that the results obtained in these studies pinpointed that the media significantly impact the standards by which people eliminate foreign nations. Though, the data also unveils that there are bounds to this effect. When members of the audience read stories providing a direct link between an issue and a nation that possessed a specific evaluative implication, they tended to adopt this frame of reference in their own thinking. In three out of four cases, frames that provided this sort of link shaped how people formed judgments (Brewer et al., 2003)

These findings delineate the process of country image formation, which could be negatively attacked by false information (i.e., information that is not true) widely spread in social media nowadays in the form of ‘fake news’ that would feature prominently in the brand management landscape. Fake news is a type of false information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent (Lazer et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2020). Fake news may be revealed in many forms, including false stories, pictures, reviews, or polls (Berthon and Pitt, 2018). Conceptualizations of fake news overlap with those of both misinformation, which is defined as the sharing of false or misleading information, and disinformation, which is determined as the creation and sharing of false or misleading information with the intent of engaging in deception (Lazer et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018; Wardle, 2017).



Based on results, it was found that false news reached more people than the truth on Twitter from 2006 to 2017. The top 1% of false news cascades diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people, whereas the truth rarely diffused to more than 1000 people (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Falseness also diffused faster than the truth. The degree of novelty and the emotional reactions of recipients may be responsible for the differences observed. Other researchers show that fake news is emotionally persuasive, and it triggers more emotional consumer responses than truthful news stories (Ekman, 1992) and more high-arousal emotions than candid new stories (Vosoughi et al., 2018). At the same time, repeated exposure to false information will lead to perceived truthfulness of that information, even when the credibility of the source is questionable. In effect, news consumers will trust reputable news organizations (CNN, NBC, FOX, etc.) more than unknown ones. Still, repeated exposure to fake news decreases this effect (Roggeveen and Johar, 2002). Shin et al. (2018) analyzed tweets representing rumors which are one type of fake news determined that rumor has a tendency to reverberate and resurface many times after the initial publication. In contrast, factual information does not come up again and again.

It could be concluded that any fake news shared by consumers can have damaging consequences by negatively impacting the brand. The concern is becoming even more significant in light of the fact that any news, genuine or fake, can spread like wildfire on online social media and go viral very quickly (Bessi, 2017; Popat et al., 2017). A recent study by Marwick (2018) utilizes a sociotechnical model of media effects to explain that people share fake news guided by their pre-existing beliefs, media affordances, and the structuring of messages.

To follow the existing studies where the conflation of different kinds of media and country image and their contribution occurs, one can

come to a more detailed insight of country image, which can be divided into the categories of perceived and projected images. Thus, how a country is perceived and projected by other countries can result in changes in their mutual relationships and strategic responses.

Originating from various sources, projected images are those ideas and impressions created about a destination and available for people consideration (Bramwell & Rawding, 1996; Kokosalakis & al., 2006). At the same time, perceived images of nations can be determined as the pictures of other nations in the minds of people from the perspective of social psychology. Boulding (1956, p. 423) identifies perceived images as the 'total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure of the behavior unit or its internal view of itself and the universe' Hu and Ritchie (1993) argue that the perceived image can be viewed as a phenomenon affected by previous familiarity and knowledge, perception of the image at the destination, and the subsequent existing preference of that information. Moreover, the perceived image is formed by information received through indirect sources and experiences at the destination; it represents the image that a tourist creates in reality (Govers & Go, 2005).

However, images arising from an individual's cognitive systems will not become visible until they are communicated. Mass media acts as a critical player in formulating and disseminating the images of nations (Kunczik, 1997). Images of objects are embedded in the minds of individuals, limited by external and internal factors. Media, as the virtual channel for people to get information on international issues, contribute heavily to national image projection. They rely more on media discourse for global issues rather than direct experiences or the search for original statements that are primarily available on the internet (Chitty, 2007; Choi, 2006). Therefore, the mass media continue to 'occupy the most

significant place for most people when they access the world beyond their immediate environment, but information and misinformation can transform the world politically, militarily, and economically, as addressed by Taylor (1997, p. 3). In this vein, perceived and projected images share a blurry relationship (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013).

Turning to the availability of existing models intended to capture news effects on the country image and continuing on the theme of identifying the level of its impact, several models have been developed, mainly including framing and priming approaches (Brewer & al., 2003). But all of them mainly concentrated on specific positive or negative characteristics without identifying the area of country brand damage. At the same time, there is no integrative model linking the news or fake news and country brand dimensions. Previous research concerning media impact on audience tended to focus either on the perceptions of country image from a consumer's perspective (Li & al., 2020; Luna-Cortez, 2018) or on the images projected from various media channels (Wacker A. & Groth A., 2019; Bernkopf D. & Nixon L., 2019). However, no effort has been made to examine projected by fake news and perceived images of a country brand simultaneously and specifically in fake news propagation and its actual perceptions by the readers.

The present study attempts to fill a niche by investigating the country brand perception by a consumer, the perceived image of country brand after reading fake news, and its impact on country brand equity dimensions. In other words, if projected images by fake news are evaluated as a real influence on changes in country perceived image and how it is, in turn, related to brand equity: awareness, associations, quality, and loyalty.

### Research hypothesis

Although, there is no deep direct exploration of the relationship between news or fake news and country brand equity dimensions, plenty of studies on spreading online information reveal the relationship between social media and brand equity (Bruhn et al., 2012; Vries & Carlson, 2014; Schiviniski & Dabrowski, 2014; Kapoor & al., 2013; Christodoulides et al., 2012). Some studies have shown this relationship through electronic word of mouth (Wolny & Mueller, 2013; Yasin & Zahari, 2011; Murtiasih et al., 2013).

According to not extensive studies devoted to social media's positive effect on brand awareness, the news from specific news brands extensively shared on social media exposes consumers to the news brands, which contributes to brand awareness (Hutter et al., 2013). As consumers are exposed to information about the brand, they develop brand awareness, simplifying their brand choices, and making them more inclined to choose the brand to which they were repeatedly exposed (Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000). Brand awareness, in this way, is seen to be the simple familiarity (recall or recognition) of a brand name relative to its product category McDowell's (2006,b). In the light of the evidence provided in the literature, the following research hypothesis is proposed:

#### **H1: Fake news will have a direct and negative influence on country brand awareness**

Abundant literature in the field of electronic word of mouth supports the fact that it has a significant impact on brand awareness, brand association, loyalty and perceived quality (Murtiasih & al., 2013; Severi & al., 2014). Christodoulides (2009) posits that social media provide consumers the platform to express their opinions regarding their interests and, in some instances, even to disagree with the views ex-



pressed openly. This relates to research where consumers are regarded to be co-creators of the brand (Christodoulides, 2009), producing market perceptions outside the control of the organization's management, and hence influencing brand associations in the minds of consumers (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015). Brand associations, in this context, refer to anything linked in memory about the brand, including thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and everything that reflects the brand characteristics (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Regarding this, a second hypothesis contends:

**H2: Fake news will have a direct and negative influence on country brand association**

Perceived quality is distinguished as “the customer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service concerning its intended purpose, relative to alternatives” (Zeithaml, 1988, p.3). Consumers identify promotional news as an extrinsic cue to judge the quality of products (Rao and Monroe, 1989). Researchers also reported positive relations between perceived promotional news and perceived quality (Kirmani and Wright, 1989; Villarejo-Ramos and Sánchez-Franco, 2005). Based on this approach, the following hypothesis in the context of fake news is proposed:

**H3: Fake news will have a direct and negative influence on country brand quality**

Finally, the likelihood that readers will remain loyal to the news distinguishes brand loyalty (Lim et al., 2015). When companies offer social media content and frequently update that content, consumers' brand loyalty is positively affected (Erdoğan & Çiçek, 2012). In addition, emotional engagement predicts brand loyalty—an effect mediated by affective commitment (Sashi, 2012). In other words, when users are emotionally involved in the content, they will have stronger brand loyalty.

**H4: Fake news will have a direct and negative influence on country brand loyalty.**

**Methodology**

The main aim of this study is to develop and test a framework that incorporates fake news and (country) brand equity dimensions and assess the level of counterfeit news effects on country evaluation in one complex model.

This study applies fake news as “... all kinds of false stories or news that are mainly published and distributed on the Internet, in order to purposely mislead, befool or lure readers for financial, political or other gain.” (Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020, p.4)

China was selected to be the country of evaluation of the deviations in consumers' perceptions of brand equity because, according to data, views of China have grown more negative in recent years across many advanced economies (Silver et al. 2020).

This study applies perceived and projected approach to analyze the contribution of fake news to country image from a methodological point of view. It attempts to fill a niche by investigating the country brand perception by consumers before reading disinformation, the perceived image of a country brand after reading fake news, and its impact on country brand equity dimensions. In other words, if projected images by fake news are evaluated as an actual influence on changes in country perceived image and how it is, in turn, relates to country awareness, associations, quality, and loyalty (Boo, Busser, & Baloglu, 2009). At the same time, this paper evaluates any deviations from the concept of CBE and its dimensions, focusing mainly on a product category such as traveling and education in Universities of a certain country rather than specific brands. CBE theory has become a valid and valuable framework for examining consumers' brand evaluation, preferences, and purchase intentions



(Christodoulides and de Chernatony, 2012).

For exploring the collective evidence of fake news impact on country brand equity, quantitative research was chosen. The respondents were 290 students of different programs from Russian universities around the country. Data were collected using an online questionnaire, which was supposed to include areas referring to country brand as well as the product of country brand: the dimensions of country brand equity of Chinese universities; China country brand equity. The variables of the model were measured using multi-item scales (seven-point Likert scales), which allow us to obtain evaluations of psychological variables that cannot be quantified directly (Churchill and Iacobucci, 2002).

The scales were adapted from previous studies to ensure content validity: the scale for measuring country brand loyalty was developed according to Boo et al. (2009) and Konecnik & Gartner (2007), whereas perceived association - Yoo & Donthu, 2001. Country brand awareness and perceived country brand quality were measured through scales based on the works of Boo, Busser, & Baloglu (2009) and Konecnik & Gartner (2007). And all of them were adapted to the specific field: travel as China brand equity and Chinese higher education services.

A survey was conducted to determine the perceptions about the country brand of China. The questionnaire incorporates four sections. In the first section, respondents were asked to provide personal knowledge about the country, their experience, gender, and age. In the second part, the perceived image of the respondent was evaluated based on concepts of cognitive and affective country image and country brand equity dimensions; country awareness, associations, quality, and loyalty, which were assessed with the help of a 7-point scale. In the third section, respondents were given fake news messages bearing negative connotations about China, its people,

and its product. After reading fake news, participants were asked to indicate their attitude toward the truthfulness of the information (e.g., "Please rate your overall attitude toward news") on three items anchored with a 7-point scale (Ahluwalia and Gurhan-Canli 2000; Simonin and Ruth 1998). Finally, participants proceeded to the fourth section, where the relation of their perceived image after reading fake news was assessed based on the same scale provided by Boo, Busser, & Baloglu (2009) but in another order with the help of the 7-point scale.

## Results

A total of 290 respondents took part in the online survey who are the students of Russian Universities from cities of various geographical locations around the country with various proximity to China. Most of the respondents are females (226 participants) and just 64 males, of whom 91.2 % have never visited China and only 8,8 % have already traveled to China.

The following paired-sample t-test examined whether a specific deviation in country brand equity perception occurs after reading fake news bearing negative collocation. Tables I presents the results of the paired-sample t-test.

Table 1 reveals that according to mean data not all dimensions of brand equity referring to China as a travel destination and Chinese universities significantly decrease after reading fake news.

Thus, based on the significance provided in Table 1, both China and Chinese universities encompass a considerable decline in the perception of their good name in the brand awareness dimension; in perceived quality, respondents show a reduction in personal safety and quality of knowledge provided. It seems that perceived association possesses fewer inclinations, whereas perceived loyalty depicts significant mitigation based on all presented scales of this dimension. It is interesting to note that some scales of per-

Table 1. Results of paired sample T-test based on answers of Russian respondents

Country brand equity dimensions		Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig
Brand awareness country (Bac)/ universities (Bau)	China has a good name and reputation	before 4,84	1,199	0,000
		after 4,28		
	The universities of China have a good name and reputation	before 5,16	1,302	0,000
		after 4,26		
	When I am thinking of an international holiday, China comes to my mind immediately	before <b>2,61</b>	1,259	0,086
		after <b>2,73</b>		
	When I am thinking of my international education, the university of China comes to my mind immediately	before 2,47	1,285	0,101
		after 2,34		
I have seen a lot of advertising promoting China holidays	before 2,97	1,356	0,364	
	after 2,90			
I have seen a lot of advertising promoting universities in China	before 2,72	1,276	0,169	
	after 2,61			
The universities of China are very famous	before 3,11	1,353	0,130	
	after 3,23			
Characteristics of China come to my mind quickly	before <b>4,37</b>	1,441	0,935	
	after <b>4,38</b>			
Perceived quality country (PQc)/ universities (PQu)	High-quality accommodation	before <b>4,25</b>	1,274	0,519
		after <b>4,30</b>		
	High levels of cleanliness	before 3,88	1,129	0,436
		after 3,83		
	High level of personal safety	before 4,12	1,205	0,006
after 3,93				
High-quality infrastructure	before 5,10	1,108	0,791	
	after 5,08			
High-quality knowledge provided	before 4,75	1,354	0,000	
	after 4,37			
Perceived association country (PAc) / universities (Pau)	China fits my personality	before 2,54	1,252	0,190
		after 2,44		
	My friends would think highly of me if I visited China	before 4,56	1,191	0,000
		after 4,10		
	The image of China is consistent with my self-image	before 2,85	1,220	0,010
		after 2,66		
I can recognize Universities in this China among other competing brands.	before 2,88	1,267	0,027	
	after 2,71			
Some characteristics of the most popular University of China come to my mind quickly.	before <b>2,28</b>	1,337	0,335	
	after <b>2,36</b>			
I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of any university in China	before <b>1,90</b>	1,122	0,000	
	after <b>2,18</b>			



Table 1. Results of paired sample T-test based on answers of Russian respondents (continued)

Perceived loyalty country (PLc) / universities (PLu)	China would be my preferred choice for a vacation	before	<b>2,51</b>	1,233	0,000
		after	<b>2,91</b>		
	China would be my preferred choice for a study	before	2,45	1,005	0,015
		after	2,30		
	I would advise other people to visit China	before	<b>4,28</b>	1,337	0,004
		after	<b>4,51</b>		
	I would advise other people to study at the University of China	before	3,42	1,200	0,071
		after	3,29		
	I intend to visit China in the future	before	4,96	1,147	0,000
		after	4,50		
	I intend to study at the University of China in the future	before	<b>2,20</b>	1,011	0,132
		after	<b>2,29</b>		

ceived association and loyalty are proved to be significant. However, the indicator increased (marked read in the Table 1) that means that the wish to go for traveling or study to this country has been enhanced.

Since not all scales per dimension elicit considerable differences, it is hard to prove or reject the hypothesis. Therefore, a further step in identifying the actual exposure of fake news on country brand equity is the computation of the average score per each dimension of country brand equity, and the results of Table 2 come from a paired sample t-test in which the means were compared.

Therefore, the results obtained confirm that fake news has direct and negative influence on China country brand equity in the way of brand awareness (H1) both in accepting China as a travel destination and a place to study. Additionally, the empirical evidence obtained confirms the most substantial effect of fake news on the perceived association of the country as a travel destination (H2). Contrary to the prior hypothesis, fake news does not appear to possess significant exposure to brand loyalty (H4) and perceived quality (H3).

The impact of gender and the city was estimated by the application of the ANOVA test based on DELTA values. To calculate the DELTAs, the following equation was applied: the mean of data reflecting the perception before reading fake news and the mean of data obtained after reading fake news were deployed.

$$\text{DELTA} = \text{Mean (dimension X before reading)} - \text{Mean (dimension X after reading)}$$

However, no considerable difference based on gender (F value: 1,558 – 0,000; p value: 0,755 – 0,213), as well as, city (F value: 1,990 – 0,579; p-value: 0,885 – 0,117) per each dimension were identified.

To find out the similarities among the examined segments before reading fake news and after that, DELTA values of the country brand equity per dimensions as a clustering method were applied with Ward’s method of coupling and calculation of the Euclidean distance among the monitored objects. Identified clusters were subsequently presented in Table 3.

Three clusters were identified to analyze respondents’ behavior based on similarities in behavior. The first cluster, which was called “Mixed perceivers,” with the majority of participants

Table 2. The average dimension unveil the results based on answers of Russian respondents

Country brand equity dimensions		Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
H1	Brand awareness country	3,6983	0,76985	2,765	0,006
		3,5733			
H1	Brand awareness university	3,3629	0,83526	5,132	0,000
		3,1112			
H3	Perceived quality	4,3388	0,77723	1,190	0,235
		4,2845			
H2	Perceived association country	3,3138	0,80322	5,215	0,000
		3,0678			
H2	Perceived association university	2,3540	0,91675	-1,153	0,250
		2,4161			
H4	Perceived loyalty country	3,9184	0,86468	-1,041	0,299
		3,9713			
H4	Perceived loyalty university	2,6885	0,76176	1,362	0,174
		2,6276			

(146), encompasses the opinions which haven't changed much or a bit both to the negative side in the most dimensions and to the positive side in perceived loyalty and quality to China as travel and perceived quality to Chinese Universities. In other words, respondents got a higher interest in studying and travel to China after reading fake news. The second cluster called "Positive perceivers" (42 participants) includes opinions being transformed significantly from negative into positive ones in all country brand equity dimensions. These findings unveil the phenomenon that fake news bearing negative connotations, in fact, evoked the interest in the mind of students towards China as a country to travel to or study, which hadn't been expressed before reading them. However, based on T-test results, this positive effect is not significant, but such a phenomenon is observed.

And finally, the third cluster, "Negative perceivers," involves 97 participants with considerably changing opinions to the negative ones. That means that after reading fake news, consumers'

perceptions decreased significantly.

What is worth saying is that these clusters are significantly different based only on the city origin. Therefore, these results could rely on the theory, which states that the distances from the country could influence the effects of the news.

### Implication, Limitations, and further research

A key point being developed from the outset is an extensive and robust body of literature within news framing and country brand fields. However, the research attempting to conflate them is scarce and primarily conceptual—and the research integrating fake news impact on country brand equity involving its product and tourism components is virtually nonexistent. Therefore, the level of fake news impact on country brand equity has never been supported empirically before. Yet, in practice, most countries are taking steps to coordinate their images across various contexts.

Table 3. Clusters

		Mixed perceivers	Positive perceivers	Negative perceivers
<b>Brand awareness country</b>	Mean	0,1455	-0,5	0,46
	N	146	42	97
	St.dev	0,56	0,65	0,78
<b>Brand awareness university</b>	Mean	0,299	-0,43	0,57
	N	146	42	97
	St.dev	0,66	0,65	0,78
<b>Perceived quality</b>	Mean	-0,17	-0,05	0,48
	N	146	42	97
	St.dev	0,53	0,65	0,95
<b>Perceived quality university</b>	Mean	-0,28	0,05	1,6
	N	146	42	97
	St.dev	0,915	0,88	1,18
<b>Perceived association country</b>	Mean	0,24	-0,19	0,54
	N	146	42	97
	St.dev	0,61	0,97	0,75
<b>Perceived association university</b>	Mean	0,14	-1,15	0,23
	N	146	42	97
	St.dev	0,63	0,97	0,69
<b>Perceived loyalty country</b>	Mean	-0,15	-0,05	0,19
	N	146	42	97
	St.dev	0,79	0,84	0,83
<b>Perceived loyalty university</b>	Mean	0,18	-0,5	0,26
	N	146	42	97
	St.dev	0,54	0,69	0,73

Before place marketers are able successfully to develop and implement crisis management programs to support the attacked country brand, they need to comprehend whether tourism and product images are damaged in the minds of target consumers after reading fake news, and if so, in what way. This study aimed to contribute knowledge about the effect of fake news on country brand by developing a practical model that encompasses the damage to both the product and tourism sides of country image.

Thus, the empirical evidence obtained supports the existence of a hierarchy of fake news effects on the dimensions of country brand equity. In

particular, according to the results, the perception of brand awareness decreased after reading fake news. In turn, the reduction is seen in China as a place for travel and study. Thus, it is to say, the perceptions about the country determine the consumers' evaluation of the universities' brand awareness, which in turn will affect their beliefs about the brand image.

Finally, fake news negatively influenced the perceived association of the country as a travel destination. Therefore, consumers' intentions to visit, study or recommend the country in the future will decrease after reading fake news due to thoughts, feelings, and familiarity with negative

changes, which are the base of country brand awareness and association. Thus, consumers' perceptions about the country (in terms of culture and heritage, tourism, science, technology, or socio-political issues) will significantly affect their perceptions of the brand awareness of its universities. However, no direct negative effect of fake news on the brand association of the country's universities was found.

In addition, the study provides evidence of the influence of fake news on brand loyalty and perceived quality, however, it is not evident. The findings suggest that one's views of damaging disinformation will deteriorate some dimensions of country brand equity but not all of them simultaneously.

The results contribute to the theoretical foundations and practical analysis of place image. For China, the model dynamics raise important issues. Its country brand strengths are perceived quality and brand loyalty towards the country as a place for travel and study, which are not affected by negative fake news on a short-term base.

While this study is the first to empirically examine the effect of fake news on the dimensions of country brand equity, it also has limitations that may constrain the generalizability of the findings and point to possible future research areas.

The fact that this research focuses on a specific country (China) could limit the generalization of the results. According to Nation Brand Index 2020 ranking, China takes 2<sup>nd</sup> place, following the USA, and the strength of the brand may protect the actual consequences that occurred after the fake news impact. Thus, a country with a less strong brand may substantially affect country brand equity. It would be exciting to replicate the study in other countries with different characteristics and images. In any case, China is considered to be a good benchmark for such a pioneer study since it happened precisely during

the COVID-19 period, which was marked as a period of intensive fake news spreading. Therefore, our approach of testing fake news impact on China brand equity suggests that the results may be stable and applicable to other environments. On the other hand, different sample and target country combinations may produce different results.

Another limitation is that a short-term effect was evaluated in this study. Respondents had approximately 20 news, after which the dimensions for country brand equity were measured. However, the results of long-term effects may vary significantly because the effect could be constant and prolonged.

Finally, the sample only involves Russian students who are close to China geographically. This is a limitation of the study; the results obtained from the respondents of the farther countries could show some more characteristics and volume of fake news influence.

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# Rebooting for the “New Normal” while “Working from Home”? Results from a long-term interview study concerning and Internal Social Media among up to 500 German companies 2013-2022

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## Introduction

According to the Call for Paper for this conference, the pandemic has demonstrated the fragility of humans and the societies we inhabit. As stated there, “[a]tomized employees were asked to work from home, and the very definition of the workplace seems to have been redefined”. Internal social media and enterprise social networks play an important role during this process, because a “rapid expansion of ESN use and its significant role in the ‘new normal’ have combined to create a substantial change to the context of work” (Dickinson 2020).

To analyse current changes linked to these developments, a long-term perspective might be helpful to distinguish Covid-19 related developments from other, even more fundamental effects. Therefore, this paper will use a general stakeholder approach related to internal communication combined with the “Working from home” (WFH) concept as well as existing Internal Social Media studies. These perspectives will be applied to analyse data from a long-term interview study concerning the use of internal social media within up to 500 German companies 2013-2022.

## Theoretical Foundations & Literature Review

### Internal Communication Matrix

As a general theoretical framework for this paper, the stakeholder theory based “Internal communication matrix” from Welch and Jackson (2007) will be used. A main component of this theory is that it differentiates between internal line management communication, internal team peer communication, internal project peer communication and internal corporate communication—four dimensions which are also crucial for the use of internal social media within companies since all these levels should be part of it (see figure 1).

Especially the two mentioned peer levels were heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in the sense that suddenly, ‘working from home’ (WFH) became the ‘new normal’. By forcing (project) teams into the virtual world, the pandemic reconfigured internal communication to a great extent, with both advantages and disadvantages, as described in the next chapter. While the sudden transition to virtual communication was at first a shock for many teams, rapid adap-

tion processes could be observed in companies across the world (Standaert et al., 2022).

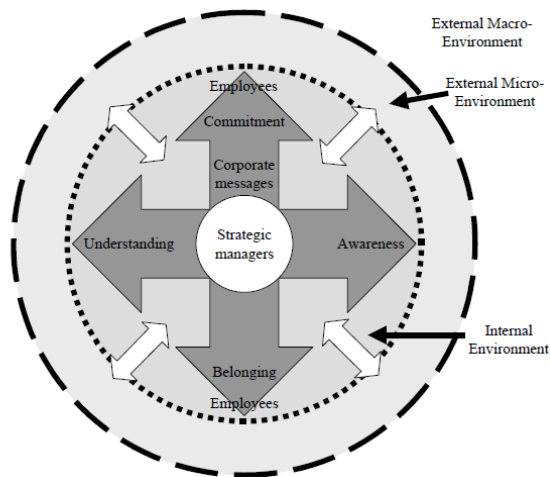


Figure 1: Internal communication matrix (Welch & Jackson, 2007, p. 186).

**Virtually Working from Home**

Studies conducted long before COVID-19 made it clear: On the one hand, the use of digital communication technology at work increases efficiency and accessibility; on the other hand, constant interruptions and a lack of planning

reduce well-being and can lead to burnout and a decrease in engagement (Ter Hoeven et al., 2016). However, it was only the pandemic that led to the widespread use of videoconferencing tools (e.g. EY & Wuppertal Institute, 2020). The widespread use during the pandemic also showed that virtual meetings cannot replace face-to-face meetings—for example, because group processes are slower if they take place in the virtual world or because informal communication is neglected (Blanchard, 2021).

According to Ipsen et al. (2021), most knowledge workers in Europe had a rather positive experience with WFH during lockdown. However, the authors identified uncertainties at work (which normally can be dealt with through intensive peer dialogue) and inadequate tools among the most negative factors. Based on this, the vast majority apparently wishes to continue working flexibly on a remote basis, at least to some extent (Kunze et al. 2020). Nevertheless, learning and habituation effects, as well as the realisation that virtual meetings often save time and costs, have permanently changed communication practices in many companies (Standaert et al., 2022).

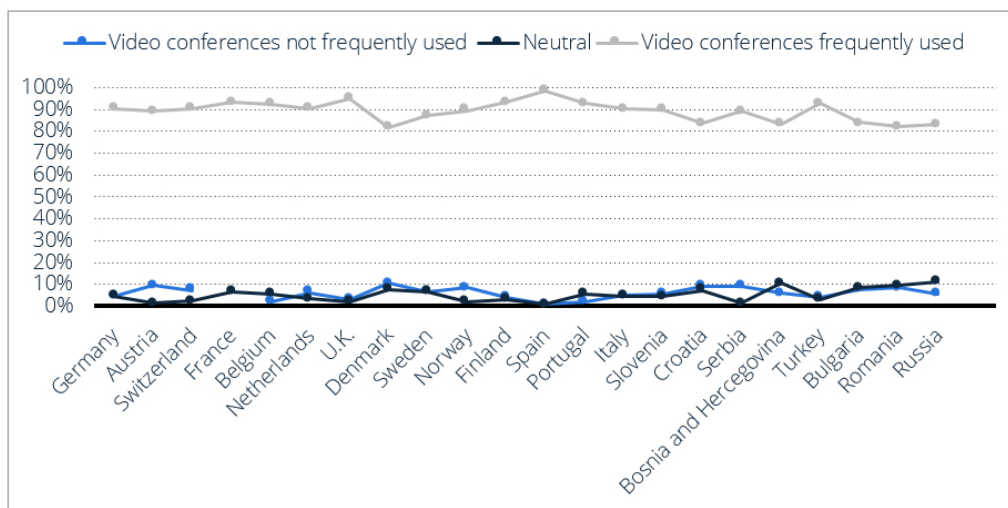


Figure 2: Usage of video conferences per country (Weidenbach, 2022, based on data published by EACD & EUPRERA, 2021); n = 2.382 PR experts.



## Internal social media

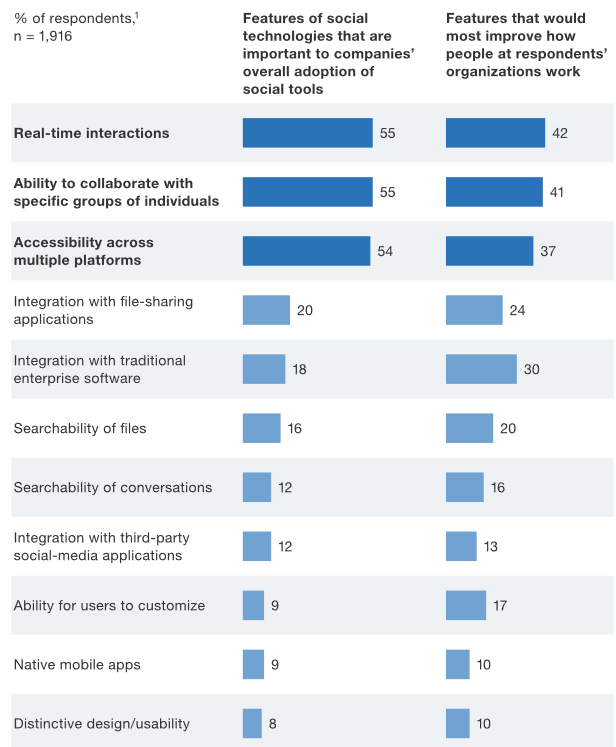
Internal social media can play a major role in the implementation of “working from home” within the internal communication matrix, as scholars have pointed out. They can be understood as communication platforms that enable knowledge sharing and communication across hierarchical levels (Madsen, 2021). Ideally, they are designed to facilitate direct communication and collaboration through appropriate platforms (Sievert, 2014), with the aim of enabling employees to work together in more efficient and innovative ways (Bughin, Chui & Harryson, 2016). Therefore, respondents say that the most important tools currently are those including features that improve directly the way how organisations work (fig. 3).

It is expected that the development from a “culture of presence” to a “culture of flexibility” will succeed in parallel (Stranzl et al. 2021). Looking at Internal Social Media and following Huck-Sandhu (2015), social media applications open up new possibilities for collaboration, participation and—above all—dialogic communication in organisations. However, according to some studies, a majority does not see “collaboration in projects as a goal”. Also, just for some “project and teamwork do not seem to be a central task of the intranet” (Kiesenbauer et al., 2021). The main focus seems to be more on communication and employee engagement (Sievert & Scholz, 2017).

### Methodology

The survey studies were conducted in 2013, 2016, 2019 and 2022, in each case in January, with 579, 555, 352 and 421 respondents respectively. The online questionnaire, which was validated by an extended qualitative pre-study before the two firsts waves, was distributed to company representatives (mainly in the areas of

Respondents say the most beneficial features of social tools are those that will most improve how organizations work.



<sup>1</sup> Respondents who answered “don’t know” are not shown.

Figure 3: Perceived advantages of social tools for organizations (Bughin et al., 2016, p. 3); n = 1,916.

communications, human resources and general management) via address lists and editorial references. While this study is, like many company studies, not really representative, it does, however, entail a good selection of companies in the country, roughly corresponding to official statistics. Above all, it is highly comparable in terms of developments over time since there is a very similar composition of distributors and participants across all four surveys (see Sievert & Pütz 2013; 2016; Sievert et al. 2019; Sievert & Osterbrink 2019).

This year, a total of 401 people from German companies took part in the online-based survey. Between 258 and 263 respondents also answered the demographic questions. Once again, the majority of respondents (55.1 percent) are

currently employed in companies with more than 250 employees. The top 3 business sectors represented in the sample are, as in previous years, “information and communication” is most prevalent with 27.4 percent, followed once again by “manufacturing” and this time “financial and insurance services” with 11.0 and 9.1 percent respectively

As in the previous studies, a large part of the respondents indicated one to five years of company affiliation (30.2 percent). The respondents are again mainly between 20-29 and 50-59 years old (21.8 and 35.1 percent), the other age groups (except for the 14–19-year-olds, who were not in the focus) are represented this time with 10.3 to 19.5 percent. As in the past, management and external communication dominate with shares between 17.2 and 29.9 percent. Internal communication is less frequent this time with 8.8 percent, while sales/distribution, production and research/development have somewhat higher values (10.3 to 12.3 percent). In contrast to the previous studies, the gender distribution is somewhat more male-dominated (60.5 percent male and 39.5 percent female).

Based on the state of research outlined above, the following hypotheses have been tested:

- Hypothesis 1: The importance of internal social media in companies has grown tremendously during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Hypothesis 2: Participation of employees has become the most important success factor for internal social media during the Covid-19 pandemic
- Hypothesis 3: Deterioration of personal relationships is currently seen as the biggest risk linked to internal social media.
- Hypothesis 4: The older employees, the more negative colleagues are experienced during virtual and hybrid meetings
- Hypothesis 5: Flexible working hours and

workplaces with WFH and office elements are the preferred model of the future

Of course, this study has important limitations and desiderata: First of all, the sample is not representative, although, as stated above, it is highly comparable between the four survey waves. Also, it is limited to German companies. Therefore, a really systematic comparison across countries is needed. Finally, the construct validity of the items in the questionnaire was tested only in qualitative interviews, but not by statistical means.

### Selected results

#### 4.1 Hypothesis 1: The importance of internal social media in companies has grown tremendously during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Against the background of the developments of a significant push towards digitisation in Germany cited at the beginning, the authors of the study had expected a very significant increase in the importance of internal (as well as external) social media compared to the values of the last survey—similar to what had already happened with external communication between 2013 and 2016. However, the results clearly show that this is not the case (see Fig. 4).

The share of companies in which social media is of “high” or “very high” importance in internal communication at the same hierarchical level increased by only 4.5 percentage points from 34.6 to 39.1 percent within three years. Between 2016 and 2019, on the other hand, the increase was 14.2 percentage points, and between 2013 and 2016 it was still 8.2 percentage points. A similar development with somewhat lower overall values is also evident for the importance of interactive social tools for internal communication between hierarchy levels: At the beginning of this year, they had a high or very high value at 36.5 percent of the companies surveyed. And even with external communication via so-

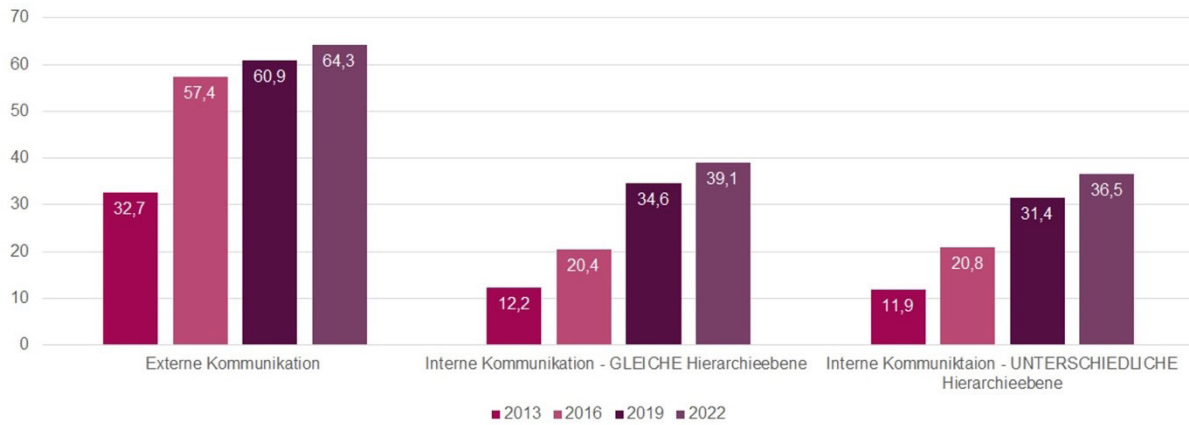


Figure 4: Very high and high importance of social media in German companies. Question: “What role does social media play in your company’s day-to-day work to date?” Own survey (n = 579 (2013), n = 555 (2016), n = 352 (2019); n = 394-401 (2022); all figures in percent; total top box of the top two values of a scale of five).

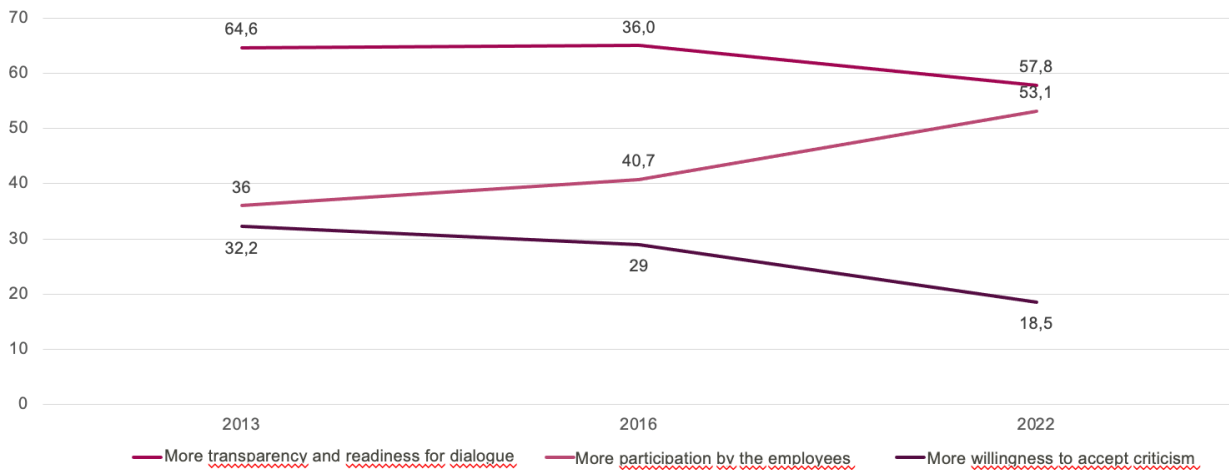


Fig. 5: Expected changes through the use of internal social media. Question: “Leadership using social media offers opportunities for more dialogue and knowledge sharing. Which of the following changes would you expect for your company and to what extent?” Own survey (n = 579 (2013), n = 555 (2016), n = 271 (2022); 2019 not covered by the study; all figures in percent; total top box of the top two values of a five-point scale).

cial media such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter & Co., there are still significantly higher overall values than internally. Meanwhile, the increase over the pandemic years from 2019 to 2022 is even only 3.4 percentage points among the respondents. Hypothesis 1 therefore has to be rejected.

#### 4.2 Hypothesis 2: Participation of employees has become the most important success factor for internal social media during the Covid-19 pandemic

The results are shown in Fig. 5. The respondents increasingly confirm the potential of internal social media to involve employees. While the figure was 36.0 percent in 2013, it has increased by 12.4 percentage points between 2016 and 2022 to 53.1 percent. However, the data also show



that transparency and willingness to engage in dialogue (from 64.6 to 57.8 percent) as well as to accept criticism (from 32.2 to 18.5 percent) are expected to a lesser degree, but the former continues to occupy the top position. For this reason, hypothesis 2 cannot be confirmed despite strong development in the direction outlined.

### 4.3 Hypothesis 3: Deterioration of personal relationships is currently seen as the biggest risk linked to internal social media.

The hypothesis regarding the risks that respondents expect when using internal social media can be confirmed. 66.3 percent fear that personal relationships will suffer if such tools are used for change communication. Other critical points are perceived to be time-consuming search processes (42.1 percent) and the need for extensive training (36.8 percent) (see Fig. 6)—but these rank behind the perception assumed in the hypothesis. The perception of internal social media as confusing and detrimental to communication was only stated by a clear minority of 24.1 percent.

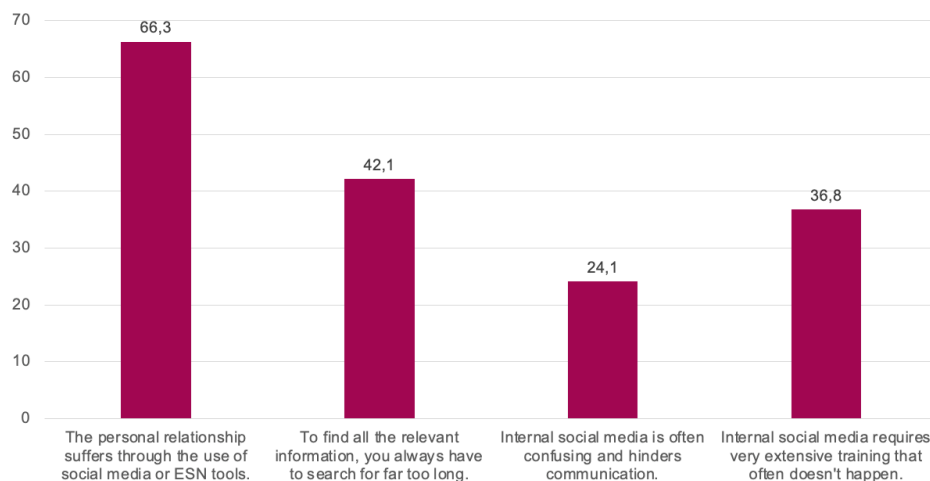


Figure 6: Disadvantages of internal social media. Question: “In your view, what are the risks of using internal social media for change communication?”; n=261 (2022); multiple answers possible; all figures in percent.

### 4.4 Hypothesis 4: The older employees, the more negative colleagues are experienced during virtual and hybrid meetings

The study also asked how colleagues are perceived in the context of virtual or hybrid meetings. The results indicate a neutral or even skeptical view of virtual or hybrid meetings (see Fig. 7). The negative attribution “distracted” is not only the most frequently mentioned in relative terms with 52.3 percent, but it is also the absolute majority. Remarkably, the positive perception “more focused” (38.8 percent) is stated just a little more often than the negative perception “more inattentive” (35.4 percent).

Certain age-related specifics can also be observed: The older the respondents are, for example, the more often they perceive colleagues as more focused; the younger they are, the more motivated colleagues seem to be perceived. However, the above mentioned hypothesis must be rejected: there is no critical view of the older generations concerning the online behaviour of colleagues; if anything, younger groups occasionally have somewhat higher values here, but there is no clear connection between age and how colleagues are perceived during virtual and hybrid meetings.

**4.5 Hypothesis 5: Flexible working hours and workplaces with WFH and office elements are the preferred model of the future**

What is interesting to observe regarding hypothesis 5 is the development of the preferred work place over the given time frame, especially when compared to the own experiences with internal social media (see Fig. 8). In 2013 and 2016, the office workplace with flexible working hours (41 and 37.4 percent) was by far the most preferred solution among employees surveyed concerning internal social media. In both years, a

flexible workplace with flexible working hours was only preferred by 2 or 3.2 percent nine and six years ago, compared to 27.1 percent at the beginning of 2022. However, WFH has even been reduced as preferred solution from 5.0 percent in 2013 (with fixed working hours) to 1.9 percent in 2022 (with flexible hours). Overall, mixed forms are currently most preferred (40.6 percent).

The findings concerning WFH can be understood from a stakeholder perspective: Since spontaneous peer communication is getting

	14-19 years	29-29 years	30-39 years	40-49 years	50-59 years	60 years and older	all respondents
more distracted	50,0%	61,8%	68,0%	59,2%	44,6%	35,5%	52,3%
more committed	25,0%	14,5%	12,0%	2,0%	8,7%	12,9%	9,6%
more focused	25,0%	18,2%	16,0%	42,9%	40,2%	61,3%	35,8%
more motivated	25,0%	16,4%	8,0%	6,1%	3,3%	3,2%	7,3%
more inattentive	25,0%	45,5%	52,0%	28,6%	34,8%	16,1%	35,4%

Fig. 7: Perception of colleagues during virtual and hybrid meetings. Specific question: “How do you usually experience your colleagues during virtual and hybrid meetings compared to “real” meetings? (Multiple answers possible.) Own survey n = 261, but 5 recipients did not answer the age questions (2022); all figures in percent.

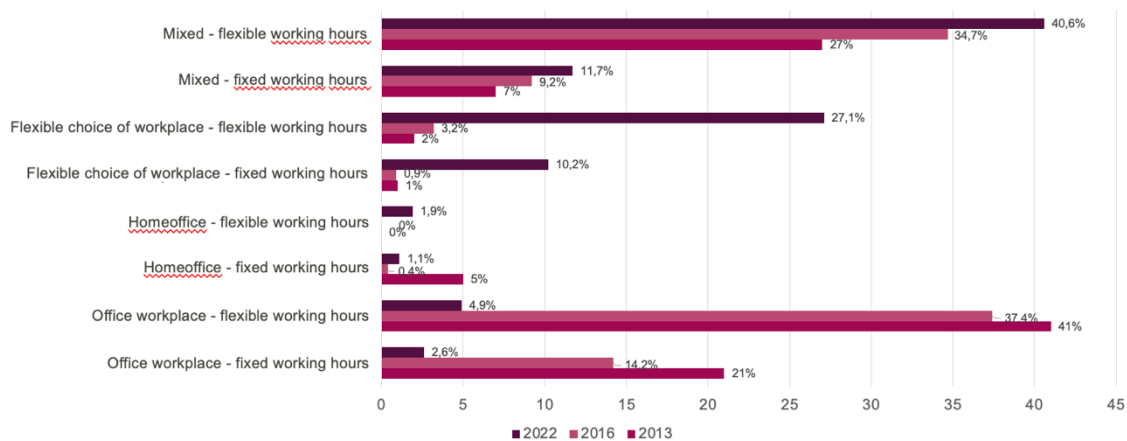


Fig. 8: Preferences for work location and working hours. Specific question: “How, when and where should your company’s employees work in the future? Own survey n = 556 (2013), n = 266 (2022), 2019 not covered by the study; all figures in percent.

quite difficult in a mainly WFH based model, this is rejected even more often than 9 years ago. Also, mixed forms are now preferred. However, also these mixed forms are only possible using an appropriate technology as well as on the condition of an adapted meeting and company culture. Nevertheless, the final hypothesis discussed here can be clearly confirmed.

### Conclusion

The results of the 2022 study show that the expected big push towards digitization cannot be observed, at least with regard to the perceived importance of internal social media. The pandemic has primarily brought about an increase in videoconferencing, but not in fundamental digitization. Only the communication channels, especially video conferencing and partly internal social media tools, have seen a real boost and change. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that deeper digitization follows with a certain time lag. But this depends on whether the increased use of digital technology is also followed by a cultural change within organisations.

The practical implications of this study should thus be quite evident: Only if internal social media communication takes into account the specific stakeholder dimension of international communication, it can be successful. Moreover, only if internal social media communication is successful, the digital side of a flexible workplace with flexible working hours can be realised appropriately—and organisations might be able to rediscover and further develop communication with internal stakeholders.

In other words: Organisations need to address specific cultural change dimensions to foster a “real” new normal. Only then the real advantages of a really “new” workplace can be “rebooted”. Finally, this study has demonstrated that the discussion of how the pandemic has affected (internal) communication needs to be evidence-based.

In this case, the data showed that some of the popular assumptions regarding the digitization of businesses have to be revised.


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## Employee satisfaction with internal communication in private companies during the first lockdown

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### Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 crisis hit the whole world, and it is still unfathomable what and how many consequences it will leave behind. Its effects are clearly visible in the daily operations of most companies. In the most challenging period during March, April and May 2020, companies had to show how they cope with the crisis and how prepared they are for it in all aspects of their operations and management.

One of these areas is internal public relations, more precisely - internal communication. Internal communication, as part of public relations, is a relatively young field in practice that most companies did not pay much attention to until the first lockdown. At that time, under the pressure of the overall situation, companies had to adapt internal communication to the new conditions, considering that for most employees, work was moved from the office to their homes. Along with the concept of internal communication, there is also the concept of organizational culture, and these two concepts are interconnected and complement each other. Consistency with organizational values and the overall organizational culture is an important factor in the survival of a company in times of crisis. Employees, as the main resource of every company, represent the most sensitive part that needs to be giv-

en a lot of attention considering all the negative aspects that the crisis brings to every company. If internal communication is ineffective, wrong and of poor quality, it is quite clear that the future of the company itself is extremely uncertain: "However, internal communication - if it is not good - becomes a dangerous threat to the organization that can tear it apart into its component parts. Good and/or bad communication significantly affects organizational efficiency. Therefore, it deserves more effort and attention. It's about a skill that can and should be constantly improved," he points out (Novak-Ištok, 2006: 38). Therefore, it is very important to set up an appropriate communication plan and internal communication channels that, in accordance with the organizational culture of the company, will strengthen the employees' trust in the company in which they are employed and help in the fight against the crisis, but also enable external communication with end users and customers to be efficient.

The subject of this research is the internal communication of Croatian companies during the COVID-19 crisis and the first lockdown, with a special emphasis on organizational culture and the relationship with employees, as well as employee satisfaction with internal communication during the first lockdown. The period of the



first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia covers March, April and May 2020.

### **The role of internal communication in companies**


Business communication is realized in two key categories - within the organization (internal communication) and outside the organization (external communication). Internal public relations refer to communication between employees and superiors, communication between superiors and employees, and mutual communication between employees that flows horizontally. Cultivating internal communication in the company is an important prerequisite for the further development of the company and its external operations. The following is a description of the development of internal communication through history and its conceptual definition. Also, the relevance of internal communication in the company's business will be highlighted and the organizational placement of internal communication in companies will be shown, as well as the presentation of certain models and channels of internal communication.

In the United States of America, the term employee communication is most often used, while in Croatia it is common to use the term - internal communication or internal communication. In addition to the mentioned name, there are many other equivalent names such as internal (corporate) communication, internal public relations, communication with associates, communication with employees, information for associates, business communication, corporate communication and organizational communication. Internal communication, as Tench and Yeomans (2009: 358) point out, is a "specialization within the broader field of public relations".

Internal communication is generally understood as communication with employees. Stauss and Hoffmann (2000: 132 according to Tench, Ye-

mans, 2009: 359) defined internal communication as "the planned use of communication actions to systematically influence the knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of current employees". At the level of knowledge, theorists believe that an employee must be informed and must know the organization's strategy and organizational changes. On the other hand, at the level of attitudes, the employee must be identified with the organization and must understand management's decisions. Ultimately, by achieving the stated goals, employee behavior will be self-responsible, and internal communication will be high-quality, explains Tomić (2016: 794). M. Welch and P. R. Jackson (2007: 183) believe that internal communication is the strategic management of relationships and interactions between stakeholders at all levels within the organization. Tomić (2016: 793) points out that internal communication is "a term used to describe a system of organizational management of communication where employees are considered the most important target public". For Milas (2011: 114), internal communication "includes all communication and information procedures between members of organizations". The author Tkalac Verčić (2015: 285) emphasizes that internal organizational communication is the creator of the communication system between the employer and the employee, and it has the role of maintaining that same system. For Duraković (2019: 67), internal communication is communication between people who make up a company, but also between departments of a company and between the leadership and membership of that company.

Open and two-way communication is the key to employee satisfaction and motivation, but also to the success of the company. Brkić (2003 according to Tomić, 2016: 798) believes that internal communication programs motivate employees to do their jobs better and accordingly adds six key programs for employee relations: security, participation, consideration, respect,




recognition and opportunities. Quality internal communications “influence the improvement of productivity, reduction of absenteeism, increased level of innovation, reduced number of strikes, higher quality of products and services, better reputation and reduced business costs” (Clampitt, Downs, 1993 according to Sušanj Šulentić, 2014: 61). Good internal communication, as Bolfek, Milković and Lukavac (2017: 23) point out, is a necessary condition for the development of successful external communication, given that internal communication affects the efficiency, satisfaction and motivation of employees, but also the value of the company itself. Accordingly, companies that have successful and high-quality communication with their employees have more satisfied and productive employees, but also a better reputation, greater customer loyalty, and achieve significantly better financial results. Robbins and Judge (2009 according to Jurković, 2012: 391) clearly set four functions of communication within the organization - controlling, motivating, emotional expression and informing. Internal organizational communication enables managers and executives to have a standard level of control over the members of the organization. Also, internal communication stimulates employees and encourages managers to give feedback information about the quality of subordinates’ work, but also enables the expression of employees’ feelings in social interaction in the context of formal or informal internal communication in the company. Finally, the function of informing implies the transmission of data and information that are necessary for business decision-making. “None of the four functions of communication is more or less important. In order for the organization to operate successfully, it needs to maintain control over its employees, stimulate their work, enable them to express their feelings and facilitate decision-making,” explains Jurković (2012: 391).

M. Welch and P. R. Jackson (2007: 188) point out that the goals of internal communication

are determined by the words commitment, belonging, awareness and understanding. Internal communication contributes to internal relationships characterized by employee commitment, promotes a positive sense of belonging to the company, but also develops the employee’s awareness of changes in the environment and consequently develops an understanding of the company’s goals as a response to these changes. Broom (2010 according to Bolfek, Milković, Lukavac, 2017: 18) summarizes the purpose of internal communication in three key points - acculturation of employees, informing employees, listening to employees. From the moment a new person is hired, it is crucial that they are familiar with the organizational culture and its most important values. It is also extremely important that employees are informed about organizational developments, events and news, but also that they are given the opportunity to express their concerns, difficulties and suggestions for improvement. Novak-Ištok (2006: 38) vividly describes the role and purpose of internal communication in companies: “Internal communication is often compared to a network or mesh that holds (or should hold) organizational units together. However, internal communication - if it is not good - becomes a dangerous threat to the organization, which can break it down into its component parts. Good and/or bad communication significantly affects organizational efficiency. Therefore, it deserves more effort and attention. It’s about a skill that can and should be constantly improved.”

The initial need for internal communication arose parallel to the need for companies to strategically communicate with all their external stakeholders. The strategic purpose of internal communication, as emphasized by Tench and Yeomans (2009; 362), can be understood as concern for building two-way and inclusive relations with internal publics with the aim of improving the effectiveness of the organization and as such is crucial in the context of responding to






problems and crises, promoting brand value and managing relations with external interest-influential publics.

### Authors

In the field of internal communication research so far, significant results have been shown. For example, Čorić and Musa (2015: 154-157) conducted a survey on satisfaction with internal communication in a public institution on a sample of 97 respondents. The results of the research showed that the respondents express the lowest level of satisfaction with the feedback they receive about their personal success with an emphasis on the issues of their personal needs, evaluation of employees and their work performance by their superiors, and their superiors' understanding of work-related problems. Also, the authors determined that all the correlation coefficients between the dimensions of satisfaction with internal communication and overall satisfaction with internal communication are extremely important, high and positive, while the key dimensions of satisfaction with internal communication were examined - data on personal success, communication with superiors, horizontal communication, organizational integration, corporate information, communication climate and media quality. Bolfek, Milković and Lukavac (2017: 21-23) investigated the impact of internal communication on employee satisfaction with their workplace on a sample of 68 employees of a trading company. The authors established a link between internal communication and job satisfaction, and accordingly conclude: "Effectiveness in communication with colleagues and business partners and professional business behavior has become an important skill in business. Today, internal communication is considered one of the most important tools in running an organization, because its effectiveness spills over into the effectiveness of communication with external stakeholders. The fact that today more and more attention is paid to internal

communication is not at all surprising when you take into account its importance in the business of every company. Internal communication is a prerequisite for effective and good teamwork, and if it is negative, it can be its biggest obstacle." (Bolfek, Milković, Lukavac, 2017: 24).

Sušanj Šulentić (2014: 65-75) investigated the connection of the internal communication climate with job satisfaction and employee loyalty on a sample of 786 respondents employed in a company that underwent strategic organizational changes immediately before the research, and determined that the communication climate is the key factor for job satisfaction: employee information about corporate activities, satisfaction with co-workers, perceived importance of the workplace in the organization, perceived job stability and perceived sense of injustice. Also, the author's research confirmed the assumption that a high-quality communication climate is extremely important for employee satisfaction and loyalty in challenging moments of communicating bad news and strategic shifts. In order for internal communication to be effective, Duraković (2019: 68) states that it must be timely, credible, concise, comprehensible, transparent and unambiguous, and employees must have a good understanding of the organization's strategy and goals, so accordingly the author relates the functional significance of internal communication to practical effects. According to the author, internal communication must achieve certain practical results so that the organization can be maintained and renewed. The dynamic character of internal communication is manifested in the realization of communication through concrete activities in a certain time and space. Jurković (2012: 395-396) investigated the state of organizational communication on the example of a private economic entity in which 41 employees filled out the questionnaire, and the focus of the research was on the frequency of communication, the method of communication and satisfaction with communication that is realized



in the observed economic entity. The research showed that communication from the top to the base is daily and frequent. It is interesting that the research points out that employees exclusively use traditional channels of communication such as face-to-face conversations and phone conversations, and the reason given by the author is the smaller number of employees in the business unit, that is, the size of the observed business unit. None of the company's employees participate in video conferences, and only a few employees use e-mail as a channel of internal communication. However, in the near future, the company should consider new communication channels due to simpler and more effective communication that can be better for its business and thus can strengthen its competitive position on the market, according to the author. A percentage of 90% of respondents showed satisfaction with internal communication, and the author concludes that in smaller and hierarchical organizations the director communicates regularly and personally with employees.

### **Internal communication and organizational culture**

Organizational culture is the culture of the company and includes the vision, mission and values that the organization cherishes towards its employees, as well as external stakeholders. The concepts of internal communication and organizational culture are interrelated and inseparable, and as such they complement and complement each other. After the definition of the organizational culture, a theoretical presentation of the importance of the vision, mission and values of the organization in the context of the company's operations follows.

The gathering of people in a certain space for a certain time results in the creation of a cultural phenomenon. Culture is an important element of every form of organization, including companies. As such, it forms the basis of communi-

cation itself. One of the most important functions of internal communication is, as previously stated several times, the promotion of organizational culture. Organizational culture is „the implicit, invisible, intrinsic and informal consciousness of the organization that directs the behavior of individuals and is shaped by their behavior” (Scholz, 1987: 80). Cingula (1992: 498 according to Žugaj, Bojanić-Glavica, Brčić, 2004: 18) points out that „organizational culture is expressed through the behavior of employees, and through the history and tradition of the company, the long-standing value of brands, corporate identity, a mix of rational and intuitive company management techniques, long-term relationship with consumers, quality, and product service and maintenance”. Bahtijarević-Šiber et al. (1991: 202) state that organizational culture is „a relatively permanent and specific system of forms of behavior, values, beliefs, norms and customs that determines organizational behavior, opinion and directs all the activities of individuals and groups that make them up”. Organizational culture, as pointed out by Brčić (2002: 1049), „is a set of open and secret rules, values and principles, which are permanent and guide behavior in the organization, it provides meaning to the members of the organization”. Sikavica and Novak (1999: 596) see organizational culture as „a system of values, understanding, belief, ethics, lifestyles, personality and character of the company”.

Sikavica and Novak (1999; 593-594) believe that organizational culture is influenced by various elements such as organizational history, qualification structure, spatial location, features and personality of the management, but also nationality, type of activity, types of organizational structure, ownership, size of the organization, type of tasks, goals, environmental technology and leadership style, characteristics of the organization and administrative processes within it.



The three layers of organizational culture are values, behaviors and habits, as well as symbols and language. It is possible to manage the culture in the organization through a clearly defined vision, mission and statement of the organization's values. Behaviors and habits refer to the existence of formal policies and informal customs in the organization, and symbols and language represent the most visible level of organizational culture. Certain authors believe that organizational culture is manifested on a visible and invisible level. The visible part of organizational culture consists of symbols, language, rituals, customs, way of dressing, technology, and the other invisible part of organizational culture consists of organizational values (Schein, Edgar, 1985 according to Duraković, 2019: 81).

It is extremely important to nurture the organizational culture and focus on improving or maintaining the quality of relations with employees in times of crisis in order for the overall business of the company to survive, but in order to ultimately preserve relations with all external stakeholders, which affects the very market position of the company:


“It is a well-known claim that employees are the ‘most valuable resource’, which companies often emphasize when creating their own mission. However, in many cases this remains just a dead letter on paper, especially in extraordinary situations of a business crisis when exclusive attention is directed to the market (customers, consumers, clients, business partners), while simply ignoring employees, without realizing that they are the ones the key to success. In the same way, it is necessary to invest in resources and use them adequately, which is not only true for material, but even more so for human capital. Furthermore, it is important not only to speak to employees, but to talk with them, to respect their opinion, attitudes, view of the situation, remarks, suggestions and praise, bearing in mind that the company achieves a competi-

tive advantage based on their quality. Quality is exactly what competing companies cannot copy, unlike technology, product or service range.” (Brčić, Malbašić, Đukes, 2013:291) An organizational culture that nurtures a relationship with employees is essential for internal communication, and these two concepts are interwoven and connected. Quality organizational culture contributes to quality internal communication, and quality internal communication creates a quality organizational culture that enables resistance to change.

#### **Corona crisis and internal communication**

In a turbulent and uncertain situation, with ever faster and more radical changes, the COVID-19 crisis encouraged companies to adapt their current communication to the new situation. Adaptation of internal communication and organizational culture and investment in relations with employees is of crucial importance for finding new and original solutions in order to meet the demands of the market, but also to ensure the advantage of the organization over the competition in a crisis.

Every company goes through changes in its existence. These changes, as a series of factors, affect the company, especially the employees, and can potentially create a crisis. A crisis is “an anomalous event that can negatively affect an organization and that requires its effective communication in order to reduce the damage associated with the event to the greatest extent possible” (Jugo, 2017: 23). The source of changes and crises can be internal, such as changes in the way of working, management structure, quality of communication, working conditions, etc., but also external. Changes in the external environment that affect the organization, Crandall, Parnell, Spillan (2014: 54), divide into political-legal factors, economic factors, social factors and technological factors.




Jugo points out (2017: 60-63) that changes in the political environment refer to changes in legal regulations, government policies and changes in international politics. Furthermore, he attributes the growth or decline of GDP, potential inflation and increased interest rates and changes in other economic indicators to economic factors. Social factors include social values, trends, religious worldviews and trends such as the trend of healthy living and sustainable development. He considers scientific innovations and technology as technological factors that can be an opportunity, but also a potential threat for the organization. Also, Jugo (2017: 59) points out that crisis situations can be divided based on the difference between their causes, which are “known-unknown” and “unknown-known”. “Known-unknown” includes accidents that may occur due to the influence of the organization and its activities, while “unknown-known” refers to events that cannot be predicted, such as employee behavior or unpredictable circumstances.

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Otto Lerbinger (1997 according to Jugo, 2017: 58-59) categorized eight types of crisis situations according to two key causes - management irregularities and environmental forces. In eight types of crisis situations, Lerbinger includes natural crises (weather disasters and diseases), technological crises (breakdown of equipment or technology), confrontational crises (boycott of products and services of a certain company due to unethical operations), malevolence, distorted management values, fraud (lying to employees), irregularities in the work of the administration (disrespect for the law and unethicality) and economic and business crises.

According to W. T. Coombs and S. J. Holladay (2002), the types of crises can be as follows: crises in which the organization is a victim (minimum organizational responsibility), crises due to an accident (low organizational responsibility), crises that could have been prevented (high organizational responsibility). The authors include natural disasters (tornado, earthquake, fire, epidemic, etc.), rumors (inaccurate information about the organization), violence in the workplace and an external factor that can cause a certain type of damage to the organization for some reason to crises in which the organization is a victim. Organizations have a low level of responsibility in crises due to an accident caused by a technical error (equipment failure, damage to products due to equipment failure, claims by stakeholders about the company’s inappropriate way of doing business). The crises that could have been prevented include accidents caused by human error, damage to products due to human error, and violations of the law by management and those responsible.

Osmanagić-Bedenik (2010: 109) defines crisis management as an activity aimed at “planning and implementing certain measures to ensure the primary goals of the company”. Quality crisis management, or crisis management, is the key to the survival of an organization in a crisis and




after it. It seeks to reduce or completely prevent the crisis and its consequences, thus fully protecting the organization, its operations and stakeholders: “In its essence, crisis management enables the organization to formulate a systematic response to crisis situations. This answer is the basis that enables the organization to continue its daily operations while managing the crisis at the same time,” Jugo (2017: 26) believes.

The authors Kalyal and Saha (2008 according to Belak, Ušljebrika, 2014: 92) closely associate the term organizational culture with the term organizational commitment, which is influenced by two important factors, namely communication during change and trust in management, which we closely associate with the management of internal communication and organizational culture in companies during the COVID-19 pandemic in March, April and May 2020. Encouraging and timely internal communication during change affects the reduction of skepticism and negativity among employees: “During organizational change, it is necessary for management to communicate with employees in order to gain their commitment. If employees are timely and accurately informed about the course and outcomes of the organizational change, they will be less skeptical about it. If there is no effective communication strategy, rumors can seriously harm the change process, because it will increase uncertainty and develop a negative attitude towards it, thus undermining organizational commitment” (Belak, Ušljebrika, 2014: 92). Kalyal and Saha (2008 according to Belak, Ušljebrika, 2014: 92) believe that the purpose of communication during a certain change is “a vision, to minimize the fear of insecurity, to overcome resistance and cynicism towards change and to gain the commitment of employees”. On the other hand, Belak and Ušljebrika (2014:92) conclude that due to the absence of open formal communication from superiors to employees during certain changes, employees are influenced by various information and misinformation, which can affect previously

acquired trust in superiors and thus create an extremely negative attitude towards change and organizational culture. When employees develop trust in management, they will accept the decisions made by managers and executives because they believe that management puts their needs and wants first while empathizing with employees. When this trust reaches an extremely high level, as a result, employees will be ready to give themselves more and more to the organization and efforts to face organizational change and its potential consequences, which can be negative as well as positive. Kalyal and Saha believe that “trust reduces resistance and enhances commitment to change, which paves the way for successful implementation of change” (2008 according to Belak, Ušljebrika, 2014: 92).

Employee trust in the company’s crisis management is achieved, among other things, through quality and effective communication and is one of the key factors in the company’s fight against the crisis, while “motivational, perceptual and experiential barriers in communication in the crisis manager-employee relationship (in both directions) represent the greatest danger and at the same time lead to organizational ineffectiveness, which is primarily reflected in the failure to achieve basic business goals” (Brčić, Malbašić, Đukes, 2013: 287-288). Also, Hurley (2006 according to Brčić, Malbašić, Đukes, 2013: 289) lists and explains ten factors that form the basis for building trust between employees and superiors in specific situations such as a crisis, namely: risk tolerance, level of adaptation, relative power, security, similarity, satisfaction of interests, benevolent concern, ability, integrity and predictability, level of communication. People differ in their risk appetite, and they all have a common need to instill hope that the future will be better. By the level of adaptation, Hurley means the minimum time to gain trust in other persons who carry a key characteristic that determines and conditions the time of trust creation in certain persons. Furthermore, the factor of relative



power stems from the hierarchical position of a person in an organization or company, because a person at a higher hierarchical level represents greater authority and thus creates a greater level of trust among others. Connecting organizational members based on shared values, belonging to a certain group or based on traits creates a higher level of trust. A person who can understand the interests of others, satisfy them, focus on them before his own interests, and take risks for the benefit of others, is certainly a person who will easily win the trust and loyalty of his employees. A trustworthy manager must be competent, consistent and have integrity, and his future endeavors must be predictable to all employees. And finally, lack of communication results in mistrust, so it is necessary to encourage open and honest communication.

### **The impact of the corona crisis on internal communication**

Crisis situations mark a specific period in the company's operations in which communication with target audiences, internal and external, is absolutely adapted to the circumstances. "In order for an organization to be created, function and survive, (internal) communication is necessary, which is rightly compared to the blood flow in the body. She - communication is a (pre) condition that cannot be done without. In order for work processes to take place, it is necessary to communicate. Every human action is at the same time a communication - even the negative one, which we often call non-standard or crisis", says Novak-Ištók (2006: 38). Milas notes: "Internal communication is especially important in times of organizational changes in the corporation. The goals in the communication of changes are to encourage new patterns of behavior and to prevent activities or behaviors that can complicate the process of changes in the company" (2011: 115). During crisis periods, vertical internal communication with an emphasis on the two-way relationship between crisis manage-

ment and employees is of key importance. Managers must timely and accurately inform their employees about the causes of the crisis, potential consequences and the crisis management process because "only with such an approach will crisis managers be able to develop a relationship with employees based on mutual trust, which will certainly result in increased employee engagement and their involvement in finding business solutions crisis" (Brčić, Malbašić, Đukes, 2013: 288). However, employees also have a very important role in communication because by actively listening and making suggestions, but also by pointing out irregularities in the actions and suggestions of crisis managers, and in conclusion Brčić, Malbašić and Đukes (2013: 288) point out: "The link between all the above-mentioned activities is communication, which is necessary for the exchange of information and knowledge, overcoming conflicts, distribution of tasks, empowerment, or simply put - mutual understanding. It is precisely high-quality internal communication that contributes to building trust in the organization - both in horizontal organizational communication (among employees of the same hierarchical level), and even more so in vertical organizational communication (among employees of different hierarchical levels)."


The internal public, as Jugo (2017: 167) points out, includes all classifications of employees - workers, interns, management, volunteers and occasional associates. Crandall, Parnell, Spillan (2014: 199) lists two basic functions related to communication with internal stakeholders in times of crisis. Management and control function of communication involving management and owners - crisis management. Another function is to inform other employees about the status of the crisis and its potential development, as well as expectations in the future in terms of resolving it. Likewise, Jugo (2017:168) believes that due to the possibility of uncertainty regarding job loss, employees should be informed and focused on daily duties. According to Theaker

(2007: 194 according to Jugo, 2017: 168), it is also necessary to think about the fact that employees are not a passive and homogeneous group, but consist of different interest groups, each of which has its own needs for information.

For Fearn-Banks (2011: 48 according to Jugo, 2017: 168), the best channels for transferring information during a crisis in an organization are meetings, e-mails, intranet and bulletin boards, as well as a well-laid crisis communication plan. Jugo (2017: 168) especially emphasizes two key channels of internal communication during the crisis - the Internet and the intranet. Regarding the Internet, he points out that “although it is a form of one-way communication, it is an important tool for solving communication problems during a crisis because its main feature is speed and availability, which are key to successful communication during a crisis” (2017: 168). Regarding the intranet, he states that “it is also one of the excellent channels for solving communication problems, and the additional possibility that this channel provides is the formation of internal discussion groups that can be an effective two-way channel of communication, which will have a therapeutic effect and enable the organization’s employees to connect with each other, especially if the organization is large and the employees are not located in the same place” (Jugo, 2017: 168-169). Milas (2011: 115) states that the key channels of internal communication during changes are personal communication (face to face), an internal magazine for employees, intranet and e-mail. Recommended channels for improving internal communication according to Novak-Ištók (2006: 39) are regular written notices and instructions, employee meetings, departmental meetings, short regular management meetings (briefings) and control of informal communication. For Tench and Yeomans (2009: 374), the six main channels for internal communication are:

- Internal magazine – conveying management messages and business news.
- Intranet – transfer of corporate documents, but also has an interactive form.
- Bulletin boards – a traditional medium found in corridors and areas for employees, most often used to announce events and can be updated as needed.
- Newsletter – a weekly publication that is distributed via e-mail, and the format can be adapted to current issues.
- Conference with management – a face-to-face medium, the director can address all employees, but employees can also participate in the form of workshops.
- Briefing groups – a face-to-face medium for the transfer of management information from different levels of the organization, can be held as a team and are usually two-way.

Fearn-Banks (2011: 48 according to Jugo, 2017: 169) emphasizes that during a crisis, it is important to provide employees with quality information that will ensure that they continue to work normally and that the organization continues to operate normally, and if necessary, educate them and direct them to perform a specific task. They also point out the importance of open communication with employees about the temporary or permanent loss of their jobs if the crisis implies this, along with an explanation of the possibilities in the future depending on the outcomes of the crisis. A common problem that occurs with employees is the “mushroom” problem. Jugo (2017: 169) explains that this is a situation “in which employees complain that the management left them in the dark during the crisis and fed them bad information, which leads to the feeling that they are treated exactly like mushrooms”. This comparison indicates the importance of internal communication even in situations where the information for employees



is not positive and promising. The importance of quality communication in the corona crisis is also indicated by the fact that quality internal communication builds quality, good and positive relationships within the organization, which consequently raise the quality of the atmosphere in which work processes take place, which leads to a higher quality of work itself and communication with clients, users, customers and other key stakeholders in challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. "In order for the company to be successful in its operations and serving the target markets with the aim of not only survival, but also further growth and development, the contribution of both management and other employees is important. This is precisely why crisis situations are viewed as 'common problems' of managers and employees, but they are not only problems, but also opportunities for positive changes," according to Brčić, Malbašić and Đukes (2013: 282-283).

#### **Research questions, hypotheses and methodology**

For the purposes of this work, a quantitative research was conducted using the survey questionnaire method. The research was conducted on a convenient sample of 84 respondents via the Google Docs platform. The target group was all employed respondents in the Republic of Croatia between the ages of 18 and 60. The focus of the research was to gather an equal number of respondents from different types of companies in relation to their size. The type of economic activity of the company in which the respondents were employed provided a profile of the company in which the respondents were employed. The survey questionnaire consisted of twenty-two questions, and was available for completion from August 2 to September 1, 2021. Each company is a special system that differs from other companies in many features of its structure and way of functioning. Companies can be divided according to various criteria, and some of these criteria

are the following: company activity, company size, key resource of the company, ownership and legal form of the company. For the purposes of this research, three key categories were distinguished: ownership, size and activity of the company. The division of companies according to ownership is important for determining the way of managing the company, therefore, only privately owned companies were analyzed in the paper. The type of economic activity that the company engages in significantly determines the other features of its economic - technical structure and operations, as well as the ability to adapt to new trends in the management of the company's internal communication. Therefore, respondents from companies of the following economic activities were included in the research: production company, service company, catering company, tourist company, agricultural company, fishing company, trade company, mining company, industrial company, transport company, utility company, construction company and others. The size of the company, depending on the author, is based on different criteria such as the number of employees, the value of invested capital, the size of the annual income, the value of total assets, etc. According to the Accounting Act (Zakon.hr, 2020), companies are classified into micro, small, medium and large depending on the amount of total assets, income and average number of employees. According to the Law, micro enterprises employ an average of 10 workers per year, macro enterprises 50 workers, medium enterprises 250 workers, and large enterprises more than 250 employees. For the purposes of the research, the size of the company was considered exclusively according to the number of employees based on the following division presented by Karić (2005: 5): micro companies (0-9 employees), small companies (10-49 employees) and medium-sized companies (50-249 employee). Large companies with more than 250 employees have also been added. In some questions, a Likert scale was set on which respondents expressed their own attitude. Also,



for some questions, respondents had the option of multiple choice of answers and a completely open and descriptive answer. The main goal of the research was to examine the attitudes of employees of privately owned Croatian companies (micro, small, medium and large) about internal communication during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia. The subject of research in this thesis was the internal communication of Croatian companies during the COVID-19 crisis and the first lockdown, with a special emphasis on organizational culture and the relationship with employees. The period of the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia covers March, April and May 2020.

The specific objectives of the research work are:

- C1: Define the concepts of crisis, crisis communication in the context of organizational culture and internal communication.
- C2: Investigate how employees experienced the COVID-19 crisis in the work context of the company where they are employed.
- C3: Investigate employees' attitudes about the organizational culture of the company they are employed in during the first lockdown.
- C4: Investigate employee satisfaction with the quality of internal communication in the company where they are employed during the first lockdown.

For the purposes of the work, the following research questions were asked:

- IP1: How is internal communication formed in a crisis and how does the crisis affect the corporate culture?
- IP2: How did employees experience the COVID-19 crisis in their work environment?
- IP3: How did employees perceive the organizational culture of the company where

they were employed during the first lockdown?

- IP4: How did employees perceive the internal communication of the company in which they were employed during the first lockdown?
- IP5: How did employees perceive the company in which they were employed during the first lockdown?

For the purpose of the work, the following hypotheses were set:

- H1: In the period of the first lockdown, the attitude of employees about the organization in which they are employed changed.
- H2: During the first lockdown, the attitude of employees about internal communication and the organizational culture of the organization in which they are employed changed.
- H3: The corona crisis influenced the creation of a negative attitude about the organization among employees.
- H4: Because of the corona crisis, employees felt bad in their work environment

### Presentation of research results

The results of the conducted survey are presented in the continuation of the work using graphs and tables. 84 respondents employed in private companies in the Republic of Croatia took part in the survey. For each graph and for each table, the number of respondents who answered that question is indicated. Of the total number of respondents, 54.8% are male and 45.2% are female.

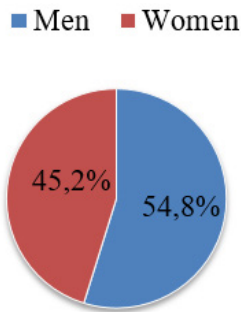


Chart 1. Distribution of respondents by gender (N=84)

Table 1 shows the age structure of the respondents. The largest number of respondents, 74.4% of them, are between 20 and 35 years old. The smallest percentage of respondents, 8.4%, is in the age range of 46 to 57. Also, a very small percentage of respondents aged 36 (1.2%), 40 (1.2%) and 43 (1.2%) participated in the research. 2.5% of 44-year-old respondents, 3.7% of 45-year-old respondents, and 7.4% of 37-year-old respondents participated in the survey.

Chart 2 shows that only 20.7% of respondents are employed in large companies with 250 or more employees. Furthermore, 23.2% of respon-

dents are employed in medium-sized enterprises, which usually have from 50 to 249 employees, and 24.4% of respondents are employed in micro-enterprises with a maximum of 9 employees. 31.7% of respondents who answered this question are employed in small companies (from 10 to 49 employees).

Below is a table (Table 2) showing the distribution of respondents according to the economic activity of the company where they are employed. It can be seen that 21.4% of respondents are employed in a trading company, and a slightly smaller number of respondents, 19% of them, are

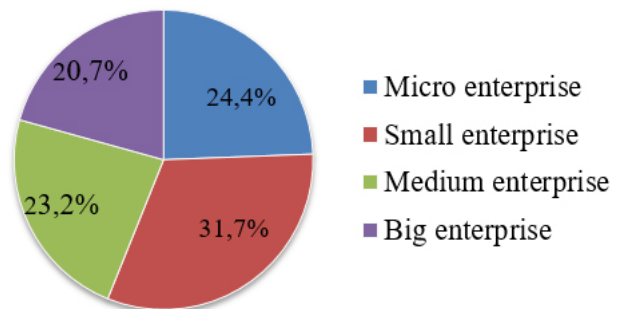


Chart 2. Distribution of respondents according to the size of the company where they are employed (N=82)

Table 1. Age structure of respondents (N=81)

Age	Percentage of respondents (%)	Age	Percentage of respondents (%)
20	2,5%	37	7,4%
24	9,9%	40	1,2%
25	5,3%	43	1,2%
26	4,9%	43	1,2%
27	7,4%	44	2,5%
28	6,2%	45	3,7%
29	8,6%	46	1,2%
30	9,9%	48	1,2%
31	3,7%	51	1,2%
32	4,9%	52	1,2%
33	3,7%	53	1,2%
34	2,5%	56	1,2%
35	4,9%	57	1,2%
36	1,2%		

Table 2. Distribution of respondents according to the economic activity of the company in which they are employed (N=84)

Type of company	Percentage of respondents (%)
Trading company	21,4%
Production company	19,0%
Service company	13,1%
IT company	13,2%
Construction company	9,5%
Agricultural enterprise	7,1%
Tourist company	4,8%
Industrial company	2,4%
Catering company	2,4%
Transport company	1,2%
Education	1,2%
Physiotherapy center	1,2%
Polyclinic	3,5%

employed in a manufacturing company. 13.1% of respondents are employed in service companies, and 13.2% of respondents independently stated that they are employed in IT companies. Furthermore, 9.5% of respondents are employed in a construction company, 7.1% in an agricultural company and 4.8% in a tourist company. The smallest number of respondents are employed in industrial (2.4%), catering (2.4%) and transport companies (1.2%). Other data that the respon-

denents provided independently are listed in the table.

According to the responses of respondents, the largest number of companies (35.7%) preferred the remote work model (work from home) during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia. Then, 25% of respondents stated that they worked in shifts. 19.0% of respondents went to the workplace during the first lockdown, and 10.8% of respondents stated that their company preferred a hybrid work model (a combination of working from home and going to the workplace). Finally, 9.5% of respondents indicated that their company preferred working in teams during the COVID-19 pandemic.

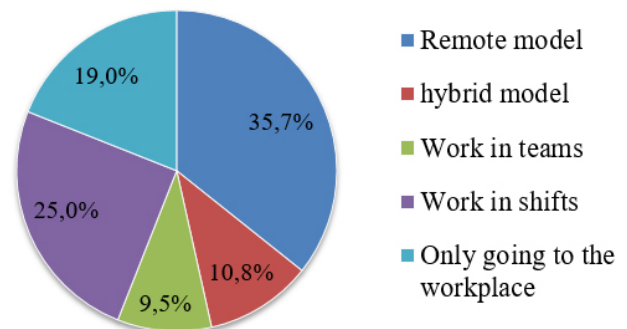


Chart 3. Distribution of respondents according to the business model during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia (N=84)

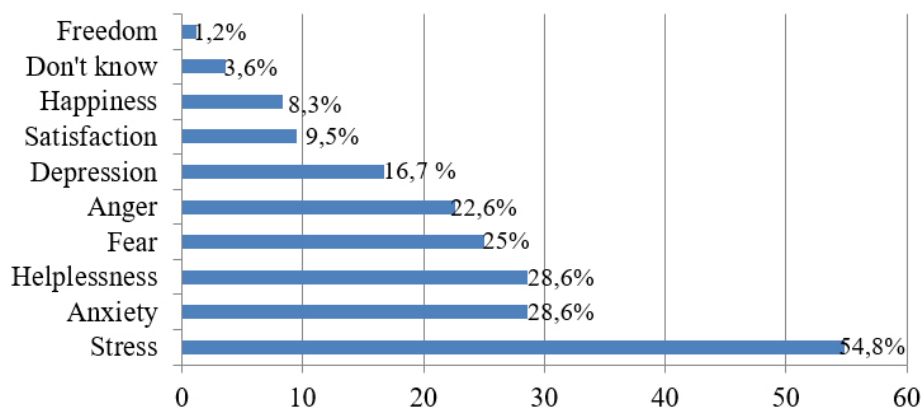


Chart 4. "During the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia, did you feel any of the above?" (N=84)

Respondents mostly encountered negative feelings during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia. More than half of all respondents (54.8%) felt stress during the first lockdown. Also, to a greater extent, the respondents indicated that in addition to stress, they also felt anxiety (28.6%), fear (25%), anger (22.6%), depression (16.7%) and helplessness (28.6%). Some respondents stated that they felt happiness (8.3%) and satisfaction (9.5%). A slightly smaller number of respondents, representing a percentage of 3.6%, state that they do not know what they felt during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia, and the smallest percentage of respondents, 1.2%, declare that they felt freedom during that period.

Table 3 shows the extent to which the respondents agree with the stated statement, and the respondents were asked to answer the stated one according to the work model preferred by their company. A total of 72 respondents answered this question. More than half of all respondents who answered this question and who went to work in any way, 58.3% to be exact, said that they fully agreed with the statement. On the other hand, 16.7% of respondents completely disagree with the statement that they were afraid to go to the workplace in order not to infect themselves and their family. An almost equal percentage of respondents, 9.4%, stated that they neither agree nor agree with the stated statement, and mostly agree with the stated statement. 5.6% of respondents who answered this question mostly disagree with the statement.

Table 3. "I was afraid to go to the workplace in order not to infect myself and my family" (N=72)

Degree of agreement/ disagreement	Percentage of respondents (%)
I completely disagree	16,7%
I disagree	5,6%
I neither agree nor agree	9,7%
I agree	9,7%
I completely agree	58,3%

On the other hand, 39.3% of respondents who worked from home according to any model and who answered (N=66) to this question state that they did not feel anxiety at all when being away from work, while 16.7% of them declare that in fully agrees with the statement that they felt anxiety when absent from work. Also, 16.7% of respondents think that they mostly disagree with the statement. While 25.8% of respondents declared that they neither agree nor agree with the statement that they felt anxiety when absent from work, and only 1.5% of respondents state that they mostly agree with the statement.

Table 4. "I felt anxiety when absent from work" (N=66)

Degree of agreement/ disagreement	Percentage of respondents (%)
I completely disagree	39,3%
I disagree	16,7%
I neither agree nor agree	25,8%
I agree	1,5%
I completely agree	16,7%

Table 5 shows that 34.5% of the respondents fully agree with the statement that they feared they would lose their jobs because of the crisis, and 14.3% of them did not fear that they might lose their jobs because of the crisis. Other data are shown in the table. Furthermore, table 6 shows the evaluations of the adaptation of the company where the respondents were employed during

the lockdown period in the Republic of Croatia. 9.5% of respondents gave their company a very bad rating, and 4.8% of respondents considered the adaptation to be mostly bad. 29.8% of respondents rated it good and 20.2% rated it very good. In the end, 35.7% of respondents estimated that their company adapted well to the lockdown period.

Table 5. "I was afraid that I would lose my job because of the crisis." (N=84)

Degree of agreement/disagreement	Percentage of respondents (%)
I completely disagree	14,3%
I disagree	1,2%
I neither agree nor disagree	16,7%
I agree	33,3%
I completely agree	34,5%

Table 6. Evaluation of the company's adaptation during the lockdown period on a scale from 1 to 5 (N=84)

Evaluation	Percentage of respondents (%)
Extremely bad	9,5%
Mostly bad	4,8%
Good	29,8%
Very good	20,2%
Excellent	35,7%

When asked about which communication channels they use for internal communication with their superiors, respondents had the option of multiple selection of answers between different communication channels. They also had the same option when choosing the channel of communication with colleagues and when choosing the channel through which their superiors transmitted information to the respondents and their colleagues during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia. Respondents were offered the following channels: Teams platform, Zoom platform, Google Meet, Skype, e-mail, messaging applications (WhatsApp, Messenger, Viber, etc.), intranet, informative newsletter, bulletin board, face-to-face meetings and the possibility independent answer. A total of 83 respondents answered the question about internal communication channels between employees and superiors. By far the largest percentage of respondents, 81.9% of those who answered this question, used e-mail as one of the channels for communication with their superiors during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia. This is followed by messaging apps, 48.2% of respondents stated that they used different messaging apps such as Viber, Messenger, WhatsApp. In addition to the above, respondents also used the Teams platform (28.9%), Intranet (20.5%), Skype (16.9%),

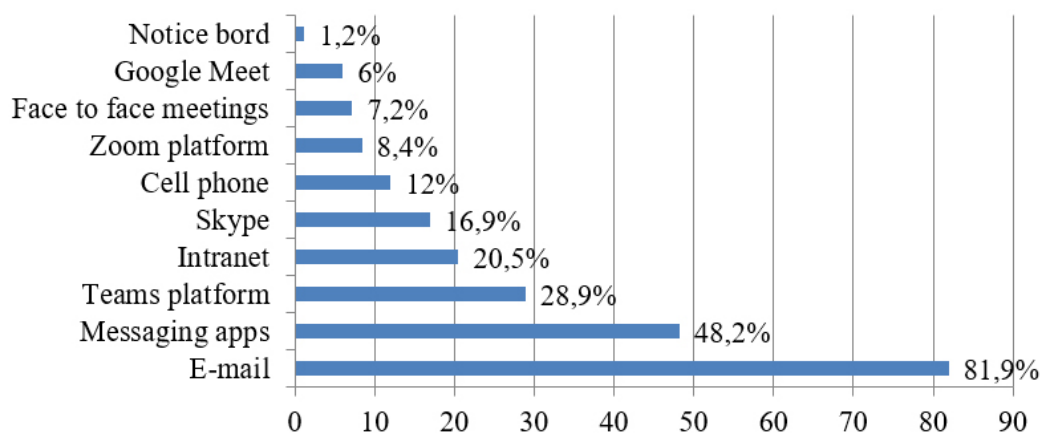


Chart 5. Communication channels of respondents with superiors during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia (N=83)

Zoom platform (8.4%), Google Meet (6%). Face-to-face meetings were practiced during the first lockdown by 7.2% of the respondents, and 1.2% of the respondents mentioned the bulletin board as a channel of communication between the respondents and their superiors. The mobile phone was also one of the respondents' communication channels with their superiors, cited by 1.2% of the respondents. Also, it is necessary to highlight the fact that traditional communication channels (face-to-face meetings, mobile phone) were used most often by employees of micro enterprises in all communication models during the lockdown period.

A percentage of 37.3% of the respondents believe that they are completely satisfied with the communication with their superiors during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia, while 13.3% of the respondents are completely dissatisfied with the communication they had with their superiors during March, April and May 2020. The smallest percentage of respondents, 2.4% of them, believe that they are mostly dissatisfied with the same communication, and 22.9% of respondents state that they are mostly satisfied with internal communication with their superiors.

Table 7. Respondents' satisfaction with upward communication with superiors during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia (N=83)

Level of satisfaction	Percentage of respondents (%)
I am completely dissatisfied	13,3%
I am mostly dissatisfied	2,4%
I am neither dissatisfied nor satisfied	24,1%
I am mostly satisfied	22,9%
I am completely satisfied	37,3%

A total of 84 respondents answered the question about which communication channels the respondents used to communicate with colleagues in their company during the first lockdown. As in the previous case, the most represented channel is e-mail (73.8%), followed immediately by messaging applications (46.4%). Furthermore, the Teams platform (27.4%), intranet (17.9%), Skype (14.3%), mobile phone (13.2%) and Zoom platform (9.5%) are the most frequent channels of communication between respondents and of their colleagues during March, April and May 2020. In addition to the above, respondents also include face-to-face meetings (9.5%),

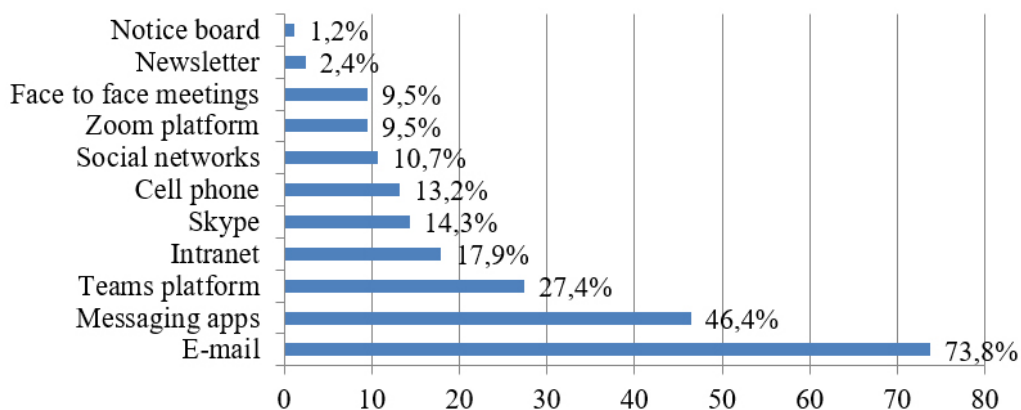


Chart 6. Communication channels of respondents with colleagues during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia (N=84)

informative newsletters (2.4%) and bulletin boards (1.2%) as internal communication channels between employees. Respondents (10.7%) independently mentioned social networks as a relevant channel in employee communication.

35.7% of respondents were completely satisfied with communication with colleagues during the first lockdown. 27.4% of respondents were mostly satisfied, and 22.6% were neither dissatisfied nor satisfied. A very small percentage, only 1.2% of respondents, are mostly dissatisfied with communication with their colleagues during the first lockdown, and 13.3% are completely dissatisfied with the same communication.

Table 8. Respondents' satisfaction with lateral communication with colleagues during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia (N = 84)

Level of satisfaction	Percentage of respondents (%)
I am completely dissatisfied	13,1%
I am mostly dissatisfied	1,2%
I am neither dissatisfied nor satisfied	22,6%
I am mostly satisfied	27,4%
I am completely satisfied	35,7%

When we talk about the communication channels through which superiors transmitted information to employees during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia, again the largest number of respondents, along with other channels, mention e-mail (79.5%), messaging applications (44.6%) and the Teams platform (27.7%) and Skype (19.3%). A significant shift was shown in the use of the intranet (26.5%) and informative newsletter (20.5%) in downward internal communication as opposed to upward and lateral internal communication. A slightly smaller percentage used the Zoom platform (8.4%) and Google Meet (6%) as communication channels through which superiors transmit information to their employees in relation to upward communication with superiors and lateral communication with colleagues. Also, face-to-face meetings (6%) were represented in this model of communication. Again, a small number of respondents mentioned the bulletin board (1.2%) and social networks (1.2%). Also as before, the mobile phone (8.4%) respondents independently mentioned as a communication tool with which their superiors transmitted key information. 83 respondents answered this question.

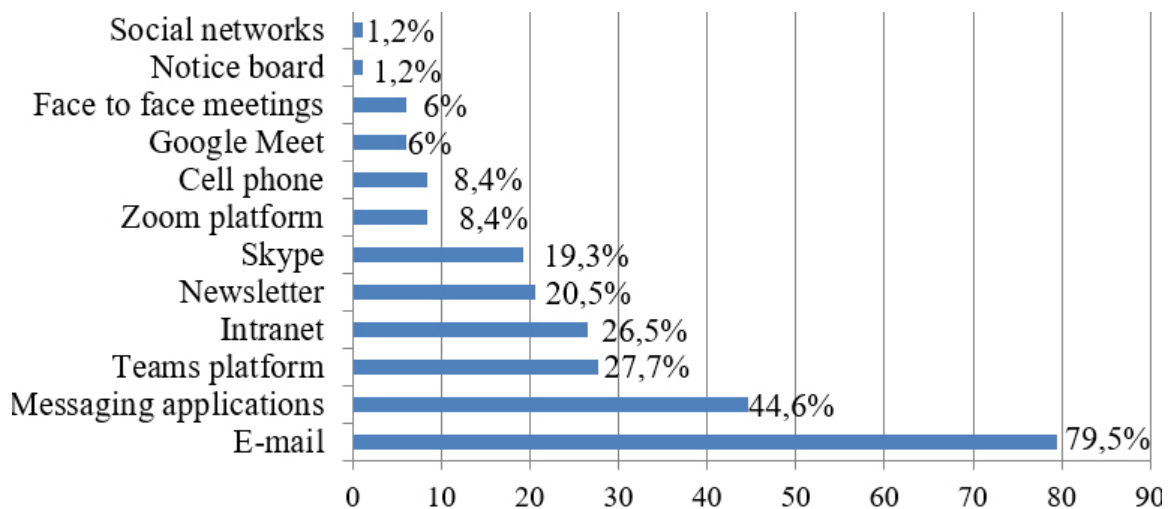


Chart 7. Channels of communication between superiors and employees in companies where respondents were employed during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia (N=83)

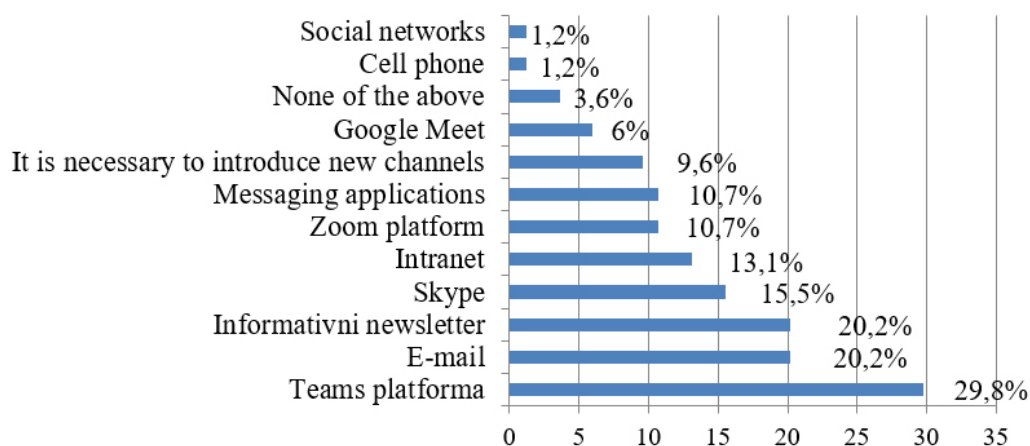
32.9% of respondents were completely satisfied with the transfer of information from superiors to employees during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia. 26.9% are mostly satisfied, and 2.4% are mostly dissatisfied. A total of 25.6% of respondents are neither dissatisfied nor satisfied with such communication. 12.2% of the respondents declare themselves completely dissatisfied, which is slightly less than in the previously mentioned two forms of internal communication.

*Table 9. Respondents' satisfaction with downward communication of superiors with employees during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia (N=82)*

Level of satisfaction	Percentage of respondents (%)
I am completely dissatisfied	12,2%
I am mostly dissatisfied	2,4%
I am neither dissatisfied nor satisfied	25,6%
I am mostly satisfied	26,9%
I am completely satisfied	32,9%

Respondents were asked to answer which communication channels from the lockdown period they would keep even today in the internal communication of the company where they are employed. Respondents had the option of choosing multiple answers, and a total of 84 respondents answered this question. In first place, the largest percentage of respondents mentioned the Teams platform (29.8%), followed by e-mail (20.2%) and informative newsletter (20.2%), Skype (15.5%), intranet (13, 1%), the Zoom platform (10.7%), messaging applications (10.7%) and Google Meet (6%). A very small percentage of respondents mentioned, among other things, mobile phones (1.2%) and social networks (1.2%). Also, 3.6% of the respondents independently stated that they would not keep a single channel, and it is interesting that 9.6% of the respondents independently stated that they used the same channels before the corona and believe that it is necessary to introduce some new channels. All 84 respondents answered this question.

An extremely large percentage of respondents, 83.4%, declared that their company kept certain communication channels from the lockdown period. While 16.6% of them stated that they did not keep a single channel of internal communication that they used in the period of March, April and May 2020.



*Chart 8. Presentation of communication channels from the lockdown period that respondents would keep in the company even today (N=84)*



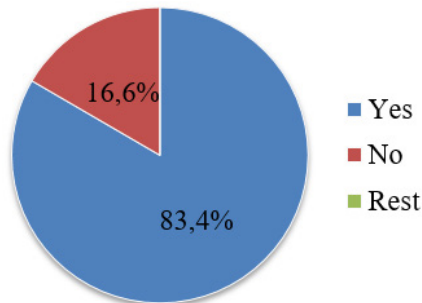


Chart 9. "Have you kept any communication channels from the lockdown period?" (N=84)

Respondents were also asked an open-ended question about what measures their company had taken to make the lockdown period easier for employees. Respondents could answer this question openly and with a qualitative - descriptive type of answer. A total of 81 respondents answered this question. To a large extent, the respondents stated that the company helped them organize work from home, and those who had to go to work pointed out that the company fully took care to provide all necessary measures to protect employees from potential infection (masks, gloves, disinfectants and other). Some respondents stated that they had reduced working hours due to the corona crisis. While a very small number of them pointed out that they received additional follow-up benefits if a member of the employee's family fell ill, as well as compensation for the costs of working from home and its organization. What is convincingly the largest number of respondents mentioned online informal socializing with coffee or beer. They also mention online socializing with various games and competitions, as well as psychological support from experts. On the other hand, to a lesser extent, they also report dissatisfaction with the measures that their company has taken, or more precisely, that it has not taken. Below are a few responses from respondents:

*"Informal online socializing, joint online exercise, board games, psychological help, extra allowance*

*for working from home for necessary equipment"*

*"Psychological support, online socializing, means of protection against infection in the workplace (masks, gloves, etc.)"*

*"Given that this is a delivery service that worked during the lockdown, the company provided additional compensation for those who become infected and their families"*

*"Virtual socializing with coffee, online psychological help, social online games, online exercise"*

*"Terms for working from home"*

*"Psychological help, those employees who had at-risk family members did not have to come to work"*

*"Informal online socializing with coffee or beer, informal online competitions in certain games, conversation with a psychologist"*

*"Work from home, regular meetings of the entire company as a kind of morale boost"*

*"Virtual socializing with coffee or beer, games, psychological help, exercise, competitions (e.g. in running, whoever runs the most km gets a day off)"*

*"Ensured distance in the premises, work from home, disinfection. means and disinfectant. space, testing"*

*"Given that this is a polyclinic that worked in an extremely difficult health situation for the Republic of Croatia, but also for the world, we needed psychological support, so our superiors made it possible for us"*

*"Twice organized some virtual get-togethers with games... and that's it. They didn't really try, and they canceled our transportation! They can be ashamed!"*

*"Nothing special"*



- “Nothing but masks and gloves”*
- “It did not take any measures”*
- “None in particular except those prescribed by the government”*
- “Absolutely nothing”*
- “Nothing”*
- “No measures, only basic”*
- “We worked as usual”*
- “No measures, except for masks and disinfectant”*

Graph 10 shows the representation of certain features of organizational culture in the respondents’ companies. The most represented characteristic in companies, according to respondents, is teamwork (79.5%), followed by informality in communication (67.5%), flexibility (47%), unconventional way of dressing (28.9%), gender equality (22.9%) and care for the environment (21.7%). In a slightly smaller percentage of 19.8%, employee well-being is represented - care for the physical and mental health of employees. The least represented features of the organizational culture in the respondents’ companies are

pet friendly (9.6%) and family friendly (15.7%) policies. A small percentage of respondents, 4.8%, independently declared that their company does not have relevant features of organizational culture.

A very small percentage of respondents, 6%, believe that the organizational culture of their company has changed significantly during the lockdown. On the other hand, a significantly higher percentage of 28.6% of respondents believe that the organizational culture of the company where they are employed has not changed even a little during the extraordinary circumstances exemplified by the corona crisis in March, April and May 2020. Almost half of the respondents, 46.4% of them, believe that the organizational culture neither changed nor changed significantly during the lockdown. For 11.9% of respondents, the organizational culture has mostly not changed, and for 7.1% of respondents, the culture has mostly changed during that challenging period.

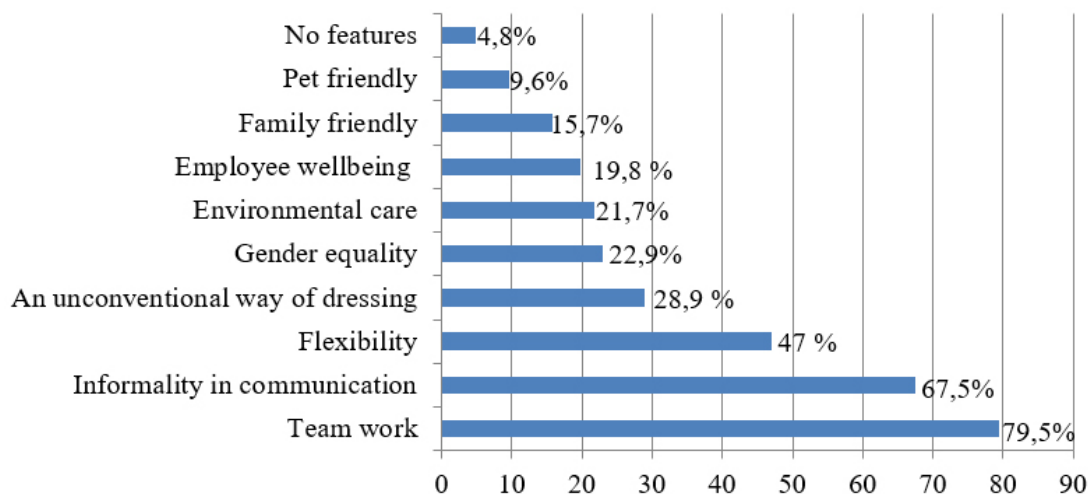


Chart 10. What are the characteristics of organizational culture in your company? (N=83)

Table 10. "How would you rate the change in organizational culture during the lockdown in your company?" (N=84)

Evaluation	Percentage of respondents (%)
She hasn't changed a bit	28,6%
For the most part, she hasn't changed	11,9%
Neither has she changed, nor has she changed	46,4%
She has mostly changed	7,1%
She has changed a lot	6%

When we talk about the consistency of the company's organizational values, 35.7% of respondents believe that their company remained completely consistent with its organizational values during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia. On the other hand, 9.5% of respondents believe that their company has not remained consistent with its values at all, and 8.4% state that their company has mostly not remained consistent. For 14.3% of the respondents, their company mostly remained consistent with its organizational values during the lockdown period, while the percentage of respondents of 32.1% believes that the company in which they are employed neither did nor remained consistent with its organizational values during the corona crisis.

Table 11. Has the company remained consistent with its organizational values during lockdown? (N=84)

Evaluation	Percentage of respondents (%)
It didn't stay entirely consistent	9,5%
For the most part, it didn't stay consistent	8,4%
It is neither nor has it remained consistent	32,1%
For the most part, it remained consistent	14,3%
It remained completely consistent	35,7%

## Discussion

The period of the first lockdown had multiple consequences on the operations of host companies in Croatia, but at the same time it also opened numerous opportunities. Each aspect of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic can be investigated separately, but high-quality internal communication and the satisfaction of respondents, as well as the organizational culture that is nurtured during every crisis, even in this case of the corona crisis, is a prerequisite for the continued survival and success of the company's operations.


When talking about a possible change in the attitude of respondents about the organization during the lockdown, the research showed that a very small percentage of respondents (6%) believe that the organizational culture of their company has changed significantly during the lockdown. On the other hand, 28.6% of respondents believe that the organizational culture of the company where they are employed has not changed a bit during the extraordinary circumstances exemplified by the corona crisis in March, April and May 2020. Almost half of the respondents, 46.4% of them, believe that the organizational culture neither changed nor changed significantly during the lockdown. If it is taken into account that respondents' satisfaction with communication with superiors is completely (37.3%) and mostly satisfied (22.9%), and that more than 50% of respondents are satisfied with upward communication and communication with employees, it can be concluded that the first hypothesis was confirmed in this context, which reads: During the period of the first lockdown, the attitude of employees about the organization in which they are employed changed. The conclusion is that the change in attitude is not drastic, so we cannot talk about a significant change, but some minor deviations from the earlier attitude.



When we talk about internal communication in the respondents' companies, the analysis of the data showed that the respondents were mostly or completely satisfied with the upward, downward and lateral communication model in the companies where they were employed during the corona crisis in March, April and June last year. Also, there are those who feel that they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. It is important to note that online channels of communication were used to an extremely large extent, replacing the traditional way of internal communication (e.g. bulletin boards and face-to-face meetings) with which employees in numerous companies were well acquainted before the new situation and which they certainly had primate. We should certainly not ignore the fact that companies with a smaller number of employees continued to use traditional communication channels during the lockdown period. According to research conducted by Jurković (2012), this is one of the key characteristics of companies with fewer employees. The data of 9.6% of the respondents who independently stated that it is necessary to introduce completely new communication channels in the company, because they used most of the mentioned channels even before the pandemic, and they think that such an approach is extremely bad, and these are IT companies, turned out to be extremely interesting. who are very likely, due to the nature of the business, well acquainted with certain communication channels and their positive and negative sides. A large percentage of respondents would retain online communication channels (Teams platform, Zoom platform, e-mail, Skype, informative newsletter, etc.) from the lockdown period, and it can be assumed that the reason for this is speed and efficiency in communication through such channels and saving time. In this question, respondents were offered the option of choosing some of the traditional communication channels such as face-to-face meetings and bulletin boards, so it is of extremely relevant importance that not a single respondent mentioned face-to-face meetings and

bulletin boards as channels of internal communication that they would retain in the further business of the company, although a certain number of respondents used, among other channels, traditional communication channels during the first lockdown in the Republic of Croatia, which certainly had a leading position even before the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, it can be said that during the first lockdown, the attitude of employees about the internal communication of the company in which they are employed changed. As for the organizational culture, almost half of the respondents (46.4%) assessed that it had neither changed nor significantly changed during the lockdown. Also, a significant percentage of respondents believe that it has mostly not changed (11.9%) or that it has not changed at all (28.6%). A small percentage of the respondents stated that it has mostly or significantly changed. A close match was shown between the percentage of respondents who believe that their company has completely remained consistent with organizational values (35.7%) and between the percentage of respondents (32.1%) who believe that their company neither has nor has remained consistent with organizational values during lockdown. In this context, it is not possible to accurately assess whether the attitude of employees about the organizational culture of the company where they are employed changed during the first lockdown. In conclusion, the H2 hypothesis cannot be completely refuted or completely rejected, and in this case the H2 hypothesis is only partially accepted: During the first lockdown, the attitude of employees about internal communication and the organizational culture of the company where they are employed changed.

Further research and analysis of all data revealed that the corona crisis did not affect the creation of a negative attitude about the company among employees. An extremely large percentage of respondents are satisfied with the company's adaptation to the lockdown period, and also by ana-



lyzing the qualitative responses, it is concluded that to a large extent the employees are satisfied with the measures taken by their company to facilitate their work period in the period of March, April and May 2020. Therefore, in completely rejects the hypothesis H3: The corona crisis has influenced the creation of a negative attitude about the organization among employees. On the other hand, it can be concluded that due to the corona crisis, employees felt bad in their work environment due to the uncertainty of the situation in which they and their company found themselves. In recent times, life has changed for the whole world, and these changes are sometimes very radical and unpredictable, so it is difficult to accept and cope with them. Uncertain times caused stress, anxiety, anger, fear, depression, helplessness and fear of potential infection at the workplace for the vast majority of respondents, as well as intimidation due to existential issues - job loss. In this context, hypothesis H2 is fully accepted, which reads: During the corona crisis, employees felt bad in their work environment.

### Conclusion

In the last two years, life for the whole world has completely changed. The global COVID-19 crisis has affected the health, economic and social aspects of our lives. Quality internal communication of a company in crisis is an important prerequisite for effective external communication with all its external interested and influential publics such as customers, investors, suppliers, media, local community, public administration, etc. The time of the first lockdown in Croatia posed a great challenge in front of Croatian companies that had to completely change internal communication, including the strategy and internal communication tools themselves, and adapt their organizational culture to the new situation. Satisfaction with internal communication and organizational culture during the coronavirus pandemic is of crucial importance

for employees, their development and potential, and as such is the key to successfully creating an organization's competitive advantage in these challenging times.

As expected, the very beginning of the lockdown in the Republic of Croatia caused negative feelings among respondents, including stress, anxiety, helplessness, fear, anger, depression, and uncertainty regarding infection at the workplace and potential dismissal caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The corona crisis brought companies and their managers to a situation where they had to demonstrate in a very short time how to manage the company and internal communication in a crisis. Some employees worked entirely from home, and some worked in teams and shifts. Also, it was determined that, depending on the nature of the economic activity the company is engaged in, certain companies practiced a hybrid model of work (a combination of working from home and going to the workplace) and exclusively going to the workplace. One of the focuses of internal communication research during March, April and May 2020 was to focus on respondents' satisfaction with upward, downward and lateral communication in companies and to examine the representation of certain channels. It was established that the vast majority of companies in that period, except for those companies that, due to the nature of their work, used certain channels even before the situation caused by the COVID-19 virus, turned to newer communication channels such as the Teams platform, the Zoom platform, messaging applications (WhatsApp, Viber, Messenger, etc.), Google Meet, informative newsletter, intranet. It is interesting how e-mail turned out to be a channel that employees would keep from the lockdown period, although it is not in itself a novelty in internal communication if we compare it with the appearance of the Teams platform and similar channels. The use of new, online communication channels during the crisis certainly accelerated the digitization of certain



companies, but also pointed out to both employees and managers the efficiency, economy and time saving of using such channels. Also, it was shown that in companies with a smaller number of employees, the use of traditional channels of internal communication is still practiced. It turned out that the surveyed employees were extremely satisfied with upward, downward and lateral communication, considering that a very small percentage declared that they were completely dissatisfied and mostly dissatisfied with internal communication in the company. Also, it was shown that an extremely small percentage of respondents rated the company's adaptation to the lockdown period as extremely bad and mostly bad. It was also determined that the corona crisis did not greatly and significantly influence the change in the attitude of employees towards employers, except when we look at the change in attitude in the context of the assessment of the change in organizational culture during the lockdown period and the respondents' satisfaction with internal communication. The results also showed that there is room for improvement in the management of internal communication, especially in the segment of strengthening organizational culture and relations with employees.

Without investment in employees, internal communication and organizational culture on a long-term level, employee dissatisfaction and departure may occur. Internal communication and organizational culture are two interrelated and dependent concepts - a quality organizational culture creates quality internal communication, but also quality internal communication creates a good and healthy organizational culture, as proven by numerous previous studies. Employees or internal users are just as important as external users or customers, because without a satisfied internal employee there is no satisfied external user. Given the importance of this fact, it is necessary to continuously research your internal users, invest in them and monitor the results of investments, especially in times of crisis

when it is extremely important to preserve and raise the motivation of employees so that the company survives in all its aspects. The research showed that the company's measures that tried to preserve and raise the motivation and satisfaction of employees, for example online informal gatherings with coffee or beer, online exercises and competitions, help with the organization of working from home and concern for the psychological health of employees in times of crisis, to a large extent contributed to creating a positive attitude of employees about the company where they are employed. The characteristics of the organizational culture are the guiding line of the company in times of crisis, and every company should easily refer to the values and features that make up the organizational culture and be guided by them in further solving problems and crisis situations.

In order to get a better insight into this topic, it is necessary to conduct qualitative research using the method of in-depth interviews with executives and managers of companies in order to expand this topic by examining the views of superiors on the issue of the quality of internal communication in private companies during the first lockdown. By writing this paper, the issue of the effectiveness of new internal communication channels that had primacy during the lockdown compared to the channels used by companies before the COVID-19 crisis was opened, which can also be a recommendation for further research. Crisis as a term denotes something negative, but research has shown that it does not always have to be that way. The COVID-19 crisis opened the possibility for companies to change their operations, to become digital and to recognize the advantages and disadvantages of the current way of doing business. Also, the crisis put internal communication in the foreground - an area of public relations that is relatively young in practice, and which was not given so much attention and importance before the crisis itself. What is extremely important, internal communication

has found a place in organizations and has largely shown that quality internal relations with the public together with a quality organizational culture are the key to the success of external business. By investing in employees and quality internal communication, managers and superiors invest in the future of the company. Superiors and their employees should keep in mind that something good, positive and useful for the future can be highlighted from every crisis.

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## How does the motivation of watching live streaming commerce affect online purchase intention?

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### Introduction

Live streaming from various social media networks offers users news, production information, entertainment, and shopping functions. Live streaming commerce has become an uprising trend with the utilization of live streaming for commercial purposes (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2021; Cai & Wohn, 2019; Hamilton et al., 2014), commonly seen selling apparel, fashion, beauty, food, consumer electronics, furnishing, home décor, and automobiles (Mckinsey Digital, 2021).

Compared with traditional online shopping, live streaming commerce provides product demonstration, information, and excitement to consumers, leading to the popularity of live-streaming commerce (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2021). In China's market, live streaming commerce rapidly evolved and took less than five years to build up as an innovative sales channel with an estimated 10 percent penetration, reaching up to \$170 billion in 2020 (Mckinsey Digital, 2021). During the Covid-19 pandemic, digital platforms have become essential for businesses to engage with consumers. In China's market, the sales growth of live streaming commerce has been intensified, expected to reach \$432 billion by 2022. While in

the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, despite the unprecedented health and economic crisis in the global economy, the retail industry's transformation from offline to online and the utilization of live streaming commerce has been accelerated.

### E-commerce and the Uprising of Live Streaming Commerce in Hong Kong

The pandemic has forced people to stay at home and consumers at home, e-commerce is developing rapidly, and a rising number of traditional retailers are expanding into e-commerce. According to Osome's Hong Kong Ecommerce Trends and Statistics, in 2021, there are more than 4.5 million online shoppers in Hong Kong, and the e-commerce penetration rate is expected to hit 72.6 percent in 2022. Consumers are increasingly utilising digital platforms to purchase goods, value an excellent digital experience, and spend more with companies that provide this experience (KPMG, 2020). As some traditional businesses are shifting to the online platform, businesses are exploring utilising interactive live streaming to boost sales in the e-commerce platform. Online retailers in Hong Kong, such as HKTVmall, ViuTV channel, and Big Big channel, have also started to embrace live streaming e-commerce.



### Current Study

This research adopts the theory of consumption value, which applies to predicting consumer behaviours to study further the effect of live streaming on online consumption intention. In addition, this research explores the uses and gratifications theory (Rubin, 1994), aiming to study people's motivations in watching live streaming commerce and purchasing online from another perspective and extending beyond the theory of consumption value. Moreover, with most of the earlier research has either focused on a generalised view of live streaming commerce or considering fashion and cosmetics as the specific context, this research focuses on a particular category, grocery, and daily necessities, rather than providing a generalised view commonly discussed in previous literature.

There are two focus research questions are studied in this research. Firstly, this research tried to identify the motivations of people using live streaming commerce and find out why people engage in live streaming commerce from a consumer's perspective. Secondly, this research determines how these motivations relate to consumers' online purchase intention. Three consumption values (functional, epistemic, and conditional values) and three gratifications (social interaction, enjoyment, and passing time) are put into the research model to study whether they are motivations for people to watch live streaming commerce and their relationship with online purchase intention.

### Literature Review

#### Live Streaming Commerce

Live streaming commerce, a subset of e-commerce, is a recent phenomenon in online shopping, originated in China and continues to develop worldwide. Leading e-commerce platforms worldwide, such as Amazon and Taobao, have comprehensively integrated their e-com-

merce with live streaming, adopting live streaming commerce to boost customer engagement and revenue. (Cai et al., 2018). Live streaming commerce is commonly taking place in four main types of channels, including live streaming platforms (e.g., Liveme), e-commerce sites or marketing places (e.g., Taobo.com), mobile apps (e.g., Talkshoplive), and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook Live) (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2021).

Earlier studies have discussed both the utilitarian and hedonic value of live streaming commerce. Babin et al. (1994) defined utilitarian value as the functional instrumental and practical value that a consumer receives based on rational consumption behaviours; hedonic value is more subjective and personal, reflecting the potential entertainment and emotional worth of shopping. Previous studies show that live streaming e-commerce perceives both utilitarian and hedonic value, contributing to people's trust in a brand, purchase intention, and engagement with the brand.

Product uncertainty is a demotivating factor in online markets that adversely affect consumers' purchase intention. When shopping online, the identity of the sellers is not revealed, which leads to a decrease in the sellers' trustworthiness. Moreover, consumers cannot thoroughly evaluate the products; the information provided is often ambiguous and inadequate, and faked product descriptions, and displays may also occur on the e-commerce platform. Especially in fashion and cosmetics, people are often insecure about whether the products suit them. All of these could lead to a decrease in trust from the consumers to both the sellers and the products (Lu & Chen 2021). Hence, live streaming commerce perceives utilitarian values such as supplying detailed information on the products and helping to identify sellers' trustworthiness, which mitigate the product uncertainty in e-commerce (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020; Clement



Addo et al., 2021; Lu & Chen 2021).

### **Purchase Intention**

Purchase intention is a component of consumer cognitive behaviour, referring to consumers' preference to buy the products or services (Younus et al., 2015; Ling et al., 2010). Various current research has examined moderators, such as technology affordance, trust in sellers, and celebrity endorsement, that moderate the utilitarian Value and hedonic value of live streaming, affecting consumers' online purchase intention. Earlier research has found out that live streaming significantly increases the sales volume in China's leading online marketplace (Taobao.com and Yizhibo.com), especially for experience goods, including clothes and services (Chen et al., 2019; M. Zhang et al. 2019).

Compared with ordinary e-commerce, live streaming commerce shortened the psychological distance between sellers and consumers, as sellers could provide synchronous interaction with many consumers through real-time video (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2021). These could ease sellers' communication and relationship-building with consumers compared with e-commerce, hence increasing consumers' online purchase intention.

### **The Theory of Consumption Value**

The theory of consumption value put forward by Sheth et al. (1991) to explain the reasons for the choice made by consumers, why the consumers choose to buy or not buy a product, and over another. The approach identified five consumption values: functional value, conditional value, social value, emotion value, and epistemic value, and proposed that consumer choice is a function of the five independent consumption values that influence consumer choice. In this research, the functional value, the epistemic value, and the conditional value of live streaming commerce will be evaluated on their relationship with con-

sumers' purchase motivation online.

Nevertheless, emotion and social value are excluded from this research. Despite it being predicted that the enjoyment perceived by live streaming commerce could drive people's consumption and engagement, this research would further explore the gratifications of live streaming commerce separately by the uses and gratifications theory, which supplies a more comprehensive view of the emotional hold by consumers and is more appropriate in studying live streaming commerce as a form of media than merely a sales tool. Social value, which is measured on a profile of choice imagery, is mostly used in predicting consumers' behaviours on goods and services that are highly visible and related to social classes. With the targeted research categories being groceries and household goods, which are necessities, the social value of prominent and symbolic products is excluded from this research, as social values are more symbolic and more suitable to highly visible goods and services. Therefore, it is more suitable to provide a higher emphasis on the interaction between the host and the audience, and among audiences, which are not strongly related to any social classes or cultural factors.

The functional value is defined as "the perceived utility acquired from an alternative's capacity for functional, utilitarian, or physical performance." (Sheth et al., 1991) One of the significant functions of live streaming commerce is to resolve the product uncertainty brought about by traditional e-commerce. Earlier research has been carried out in studying the relationship between utilitarian motivations, in both technologies-related and product-related perspectives, and consumers' purchase intentions and engagement. However, earlier studies either focused on a generalized view of live streaming commerce or considered fashion and cosmetics as the specific context. In the context of live streaming commerce selling groceries, we could see live streaming commerce's hosts follow the steps

Table 1. Summary of related studies in live streaming commerce

Scholar	Topic	Theoretical perspective	Independent variables	Dependent variable
Chen et al. (2017)	Grassroots internet celebrity live streaming” activating IT-mediated lifestyle marketing services at e-commerce websites	Human-computer interaction	Information transmission, interactivity, communication visibility, presence	Purchase Intention
Cai et al. (2018)	Utilitarian and hedonic motivations for live streaming shopping	Consumer motivation theories, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)	Utilitarian and hedonic motivations	Purchase Intention
Li et al. (2018)	What drives people to purchase virtual gifts in live streaming? the mediating role of flow	Flow theory	Interactivity, social presence, curiosity, social media dependence	Consumption intention of virtual gifts in live streaming
Wang et al. (2018)	Factors influencing product purchase intention in taobao live streaming shopping	Elaboration likelihood (ELM) model	Perceived popularity (source attractiveness), hedonic and utilitarian, interactivity (argument quality)	Purchase Intention
Cai and Wohn (2019)	Live streaming commerce: uses and gratifications approach to understanding consumers’ motivations	Uses and gratifications theory	Enjoyment of interaction, Substitutability of personal examination, Need for community, Trend setting	Purchase Intention
Chen et al. (2019)	The influence of e-commerce live streaming on lifestyle fit uncertainty and online purchase intention of experience products	Mean-ends chain of lifestyle (MECL) theory	Value Transmission, Vicarious Experience Learning, Product Presentation	Purchase Intention
Xu et al. (2019)	The investigation of hedonic consumption, impulsive consumption and social sharing in e-commerce live-streaming videos	Stimulus–organism–response paradigm	Attractiveness of broadcaster, para-social interaction, information quality	Purchase Intention
Park and Lin (2020)	The effects of match-ups on the consumer attitudes toward internet celebrities and their live streaming contents in the context of product	Celebrity endorsement and matchup hypothesis	Utilitarian attitude and hedonic attitude, celebrities attractiveness and trustworthiness	Purchase Intention
Sun et al. (2020)	How live streaming influences purchase intentions in social commerce: An IT affordance perspective	IT affordance	Visibility, metavoicing, guidance shopping	Purchase Intention
Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut (2020)	The role of live streaming in building consumer trust and engagement with social commerce sellers	Value theory, trust	Utilitarian, hedonic and symbolic values	Customer engagement

Table 1. Summary of related studies in live streaming commerce (continued)

Zhang et al. (2020)	The impact of live video streaming on online purchase intention	Construal level theory (CLT) and psychological distance	Live streaming strategy, psychological distance and perceived uncertainty	Purchase Intention
Clement Addo et al. (2021)	Customer engagement and purchase intention in live-streaming digital marketing platforms	Trust, and loyalty	Customer engagement (Likes, visits, chats, exposure time)	Purchase Intention
Lu and Chen (2021)	Live streaming commerce and consumers' purchase intention: An uncertainty reduction perspective	Signalling theory, uncertainty theory, trust	Physical characteristic, value similarity	Purchase Intention

such as product display, cooking demonstration, and product tasting. Thus, it is proposed that:

*H1a: Live streaming commerce perceived functional value.*

*H1b: The perceived functional value is positively related to consumer purchase intention online.*

Epistemic value is acquired from “an alternative’s capacity to arouse curiosity, provide novelty, and satisfy a desire for knowledge.” (Sheth et al., 1991) Previous studies find out that in scenarios like tourism and e-Learning services, their epistemic value positively correlates with people’s usage intention (Ray et al., 2021). In the case of live streaming commerce for grocery, sellers are seen sharing non-product related and novel content such as trendy tips, current diet trends, and nutritional advice that fits the current market trend to arouse people’s interest and curiosity in both the live streaming and the products selling. Hence, it could be hypothesized that:

*H2a: Live streaming commerce perceived epistemic value.*

*H2b: The perceived epistemic value is positively related to consumer purchase intention online.*

An alternative acquires the conditional value of an option due to the specific situation or set of circumstances facing the choice maker (Sheth et al., 1991). Conditional benefits, such as offers and discounts that individuals could obtain when watching or engaging in live streaming, enhance people’s purchase intention online and engagement in social media. From previous research, it has been proven that price promotion and the promotion time pressure have a direct positive impact on consumers’ impulse buying behaviours, as consumers are sensitive to price discounts, and the reduction of commodity prices could stimulate their desire to purchase more (Huang and Suo, 2017). It is commonly seen that sellers adopt strategies like providing limited time-offer during the live streaming, such as offering discount promo-code, and Game-Prize, that is employing games, such as word guessing, fortune wheel, and drawing straw, in exchange for rewards such as gift, vouchers, and discount, to boost people’s engagement and purchase intention online (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2021). Thus, based on the findings by previous studies, the third set of hypotheses comes as below:

*H3a: Live streaming commerce perceived conditional value.*

*H3b: The perceived conditional value is positively*



related to consumer purchase intention online.

### The Uses and Gratifications Theory

The uses and gratifications theory (U&G) has been widely used to understand media consumption, and has been now used to provide insights into the uses of new communication technology (Rubin, 1994; Chen & Leung, 2015). Thus, the U&G theory is also adopted in this research to study the possible motivations behind people consuming live streaming commerce, as not only a sales tool or service but also as a kind of media, an emerging communication media for sellers and buyers in the online shopping market. In addition, earlier studies used the U&G theoretical perspective to point out that social and psychological factors may drive people to shop online or participate in social commerce. While social interaction, enjoyment and boredom alleviation were gratifications associated with social commerce and live-streaming commerce (Yang and Li, 2014; Cai and Wohn, 2019).

Social interaction occurs when people interact and connect with others. Live streaming commerce enables real-time interaction between the hosts and the audiences and among audiences. According to previous studies on social commerce, social media such as Facebook and Instagram is commonly utilized in performing live streaming commerce due to their reachability and convenience. Part et al. (2009) found that social networking sites like Facebook and YouTube are used for socializing and seeking gratification. Live-streaming commerce, especially via social media, support interaction to assist online transactions and enhance the online shopping experience (Liang and Turban, 2011; Marsden, 2010; Shen and Eder, 2011; Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut, 2020). Previous research has discussed the antecedents of social media performing live streaming on consumer behaviours, likewise to live streaming commerce, since social interactivity is expected to have a positive influ-

ence on purchase intention, it is predicted that:

*H4a: Live streaming commerce perceived social interaction gratification.*

*H4b: The social interaction gratification is positively related to consumer purchase intention online.*

According to the U&G theory, enjoyment is a major determinant, which refers to the fun and hedonic pleasure that people gain from the media. In the context of live streaming commerce. Previous research shows that the hedonic values perceived by live streaming (e.g., enjoyment and favourability) could significantly drive people's consumption and engagement. Studies drawn from the uses and gratifications theory have proved that enjoyment could cause people's purchase intention and engagement in live streaming commerce. These led to the prediction below:

*H5a: Live streaming commerce perceived enjoyment gratification.*

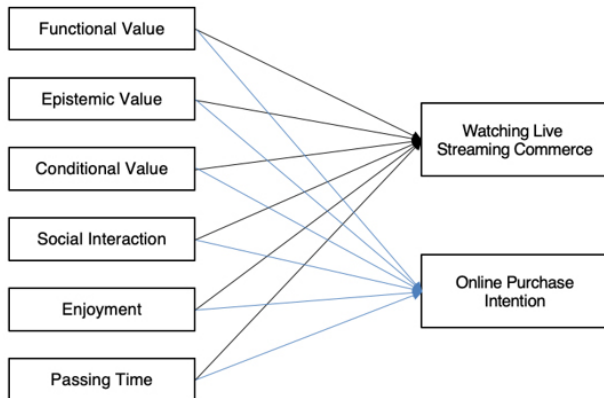
*H5b: The enjoyment gratification is positively related to consumer purchase intention online.*

In the U&G theory, people seek relaxation and escape from boredom, and media are presumed to function for people to pass the time (Ruggiero, 2000). Passing time refers to having nothing better to do than just kill time, which was positively related to social media usage supported in earlier research (Yang and Li, 2014). During the pandemic, the time people stay at home increased due to the measures to control the spread of the virus, and according to Digital 2022 for Hong Kong, more than 90 percent of people spend their time watching online videos. Thus, passing time gratification is expected to be a motive to watch live streaming commerce and to have a positive effect on online purchase intention; the following assumptions are made:

*H6a: Live streaming commerce perceived passing*

*time gratification.*

*H6b: The passing time gratification is positively related to consumer purchase intention online.*



(Figure 1. Proposed research framework)

## Research Methodology

### Measure of Constructs

According to KPMG's study in 2020, the pandemic has accelerated the online purchase of essential goods, and consumers significantly spent less on luxury and non-essential products and relocated the spending to day-to-day necessities, such as groceries and personal hygiene products. To investigate the relationship between live streaming commerce strategy and purchase intention online, we examine the consumption values and gratifications of live streaming based on HKTVmall, a leading e-commerce platform that has been steadily developing live streaming commerce in Hong Kong, with more than eight hundred thousand users in 2021 and HK\$3 billion of revenue generated in 2021. Its live-streaming commerce has been performing on two major platforms: Facebook and mobile apps, which integrate live-streaming features with the mobile e-commerce platform. Moreover, according to HKTVmall's report, groceries (53.8%) and houseware (6.6%), are contributing to a massive percentage of its gross merchandise value. Thus,

HKTVmall is studied as the targeted platform in this research.

An online questionnaire was developed with reference to earlier studies and consisted of four sections: a screening question on whether the respondent has watched or participated in the HKTVmall live streaming; their consumption values and their willingness to purchase online from live streaming commerce; uses and gratifications; participants social media usage; and respondent's personal information. A five-point Likert scale from "Strong Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5) was adopted for the measurement of the items on consumption values and gratifications. Furthermore, participants' monthly spending on online shopping, frequency of watching live streaming, social media and live streaming channels usage, and choice of payment and delivery methods were asked to understand their online shopping habits and watching live streaming.

### Data Collection and the Sample

An online quantitative survey using the snowball-sampling technique was adopted for the study and conducted from Nov 5 to Nov 19, 2021. Only the respondents who had watched live streaming in HKTVmall before were appropriate for this research. After removing the responses from participants who had never watched the live streaming commerce of HKTVmall, 149 questionnaires out of the total of 257 questionnaires collected were valid for analysis. The qualitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS.

The demographics of respondents are shown in Table 2. Of the 149 respondents, 50.3% were females, 47.7% were males, and the dominant respondent's age group is middle age between 25 to 54 (70.8%). According to the traffic analysis of HKTVmall, which 47% are female and 53% are male, and 71.4% are aged between 25 to 54. The distribution of gender and the age



Table 2: Demographics of respondents

Demographic	Description	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	71	47.7
	Female	75	50.3
	Not to disclose	3	2
Age	Under 18	2	1.3
	18-24	24	16.1
	25-34	21	14.1
	35-44	36	24.2
	45-54	48	32.2
	55-64	13	8.7
	65+	5	3.4
Monthly spending on online shopping	Less than 500 HKD	44	29.5
	500 - 1500 HKD	43	28.9
	1500 - 2500 HKD	38	25.5
	2500 - 3500 HKD	15	10.1
	3500 - 4500 HKD	3	2
	More than 4500 HKD	6	4

group of respondents aligned with the reported demographic of HKTVMall on groceries and household goods selling.

## Results

### Factor Analysis and Reliability Testing

Factor analysis and reliability testing were conducted to ensure that all research constructs were reliable (Henson & Roberts, 2006). The factor analysis was performed for the first research question to determine the motivations for watching live streaming commerce. A varimax rotation was adapted to enhance the interpretation of factors. The results are shown in Table 3. The KMO and Bartlett's Test shown in Table 4 confirmed the reliability of the data, with the Kaiser value scored at .906. The significant value is zero which indicates that the variable is relevant.

### Statistics

To evaluate the factors affecting the watching of

live streaming commerce, the mean with standard deviation is calculated and shown in Table 3.

### Consumption Values

Among all factors, respondents indicate agreement on all the consumption values (function value, epistemic value, conditional value) as their motivation to watch live streaming commerce, all with a mean value above 3. While the conditional value, representing the occasional and conditional benefits offered by live streaming commerce, is with the highest mean of 3.66. On the contrary, functional value, representing the informativeness and usefulness of live streaming commerce, is with the lowest mean of 3.54. Thus H1a, H2a, and H3a are supported.

### Uses and Gratifications

According to the results shown in Table 3, among the gratifications, only enjoyment, which refers to the entertaining and hedonic feelings gained,

Table 3: Factory analysis of motivations for live streaming commerce

Functional value (Mean= 3.54, SD= 0.68)						Mean	SD
Live streaming commerce provides more information and details on the product	1					3.62	.74
Live streaming commerce gives you a better sense of the actual quality of the product	.767	1				3.56	.8
Live streaming could ease the uncertainty of shopping online and make me feel more secure	.638	.764	1			3.42	.878
Live streaming commerce are convenient to use	.619	.583	.511	1		3.58	.689
I am more willing to buy the products, when more product details are provided in the live streaming	.68	.67	.716	.566	1	3.53	.882
Epistemic value (Mean= 3.65, SD= 0.68)							
Live streaming commerce provides novel and interesting information	1					3.59	.814
Live streaming commerce allows me to know more about what is trendy in the market	.69	1				3.66	.795
I am willing to watch the live streaming if it provides me with different novel/trendy information	.665	.603				3.78	.743
I am more willing to buy the product if the live streaming provided me with extra novel/trendy information	.654	.571	.721	1		3.56	.825
Conditional value (Mean= 3.66, SD= 0.96)							
I would watch the live streaming of the products that provide me with promo code or discount	1					3.88	.944
I would participate in game or quiz in the live streaming of the products that provide me with promo code or discount	.72	1				3.42	1.169
I am more willing to buy the product if there is a promotion provided in the live streaming	.724	.773	1			3.72	1.019
Instead of other similar products, I would purchase the products if they on the live streaming with discount/promotion	.664	.759	.897	1		3.61	1.131
Social Interaction (Mean=2.37, SD= 1.08)							
I watched a live streaming commerce as I enjoy chatting during the live streaming	1					2.37	1.117
I watched a live streaming commerce as I like interacting with the hosts	.945	1				2.36	1.103
I watched a live streaming commerce as I can interact with other people online	.899	.909	1			2.38	1.106



Table 3: Factory analysis of motivations for live streaming commerce (continued)

Enjoyment (Mean= 3.35, SD= 0.83)							
Watching live streaming commerce makes me feel happy	1					3.4	.853
Watching live streaming commerce relaxes me	.92	1				3.32	.887
I watched a live streaming commerce as it is interesting	.806	.857	1			3.33	.881
Passing time (Mean=2.71, SD= 0.11)							
I watched live streaming commerce when I have nothing better to do	1					2.66	1.173
I watched live streaming commerce because it gives me something to do to occupy my time	.851	1				2.71	1.147
I watched live streaming commerce because it passes the time when I am bored	.885	.905	1			2.77	1.159

Table 4: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	.906
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	3668.268
df	231
Sig.	0

is scored with a mean above 3 at 3.35. However, both social interaction and passing time scored a mean below 3, and the factor of social interaction reflects participating in live streaming shopping as a channel to socialize and communicate is with the lowest mean of 2.37. Therefore, in regards to the gratifications, only enjoyment is proven to motivate participants to watch the live streaming commerce, and H5a is supported. While social interaction and passing time are not the motivation to watch live streaming, H4a and H6a are rejected.

**Bivariate Correlation**

The critical variables were put into bivariate correlation with the frequency to purchase after watching the live streaming as a dependent variable for the second research question. According to the results generated from the bivariate cor-

relation shown in Table 5, all the key variables significantly correlate to consumers' purchase intention online.

**Consumption Values**

With bivariate correlation analysis, all consumption values are proven to have a significant correlation with purchase intention online. Among all the consumption values, the functional value is shown to have the strongest correlation with purchase intention online (coefficient = .556,  $p \leq .001$ ). In contrast, conditional value has the weakest correlation with online purchase intention (coefficient = .516,  $p \leq .001$ ). However, all the consumption values result in a coefficient higher than .5. Thus it is shown that all the consumption values strongly correlate with online purchase intention.



Table 5: Inter-correlations among Key Variables

	FV	EV	CV	SI	EM	PT	PI
Functional Value	1						
Epistemic Value	.794***	1					
Conditional Value	.718***	.807***	1				
Social Interaction	.367***	.257***	.173**	1			
Enjoyment	.749***	.753***	.773***	.372***	1		
Passing Time	0.151	0.099	-0.009	.662***	.316***	1	
Purchase Intention	.556***	.521***	.516***	.422***	.650***	.293***	1
N = 149. * p ≤ .05. ** p ≤ .01. *** p ≤ .001.							

Table 6: Linear Regression Models on Purchase Intention (Mean=2.36 SD= .939)

	Standardized coefficients
Functional Value	.096
Epistemic Value	.003
Conditional Value	.055
Social Interaction	.209*
Enjoyment	.457***
Passing Time	-.004
Gender	-.206**
Age	.011
Adjusted R2	.48***
N = 149. * p ≤ .05. ** p ≤ .01. *** p ≤ .001.	

**Uses and Gratifications**

Enjoyment is the most substantial variable (coefficient = .650, p ≤ .001), not only among all the gratifications but also among all key variables. On the contrary, passing time is shown to have the weakest correlation with purchase intention online among all key variables (coefficient = .293, p ≤ .001).

**Regression Analysis**

The main motivations are put into a regression analysis as independent variables and set participants' purchase frequency after watching the live streaming as dependent variables. The results are shown in Table 6. Also, demographic informa-

tion is put forward to see whether there is an effect on motivations. Among the demographic factors, gender is strongly related to purchasing after watching the live streaming commerce, and males are inclined to buy after watching the live streaming commerce.

**Consumption Values**

Despite a significant correlation between the consumption values and online purchase intention, all the consumptions values do not display a significant effect on online purchase intention in the regression model, as shown in Table 6. Thus H1b, H2b, and H3b are rejected in the regression model.



### Uses and Gratifications

Within the gratifications, the regression analysis shown in Table 6 supported the results of social interaction and enjoyment that both gratifications are positively and significantly related to purchase intention. Enjoyment has the most potent positive effect on purchasing intention (coefficient = .457,  $p \leq .001$ ). Thus H4b and H5b are supported in regression results. Still, the gratification of passing time does not significantly affect purchase intention under the regression model. Thus H6b is rejected in the regression analysis.

### Discussion

#### Motivations for Watching Live Streaming Commerce

The three consumption values (functional, epistemic, and conditional) and the enjoyment gratification are seen as the motivations for respondents to watch the live streaming commerce. Respondents show high agreement on live streaming commerce process function value, epistemic value and conditional value. This indicates that the utilitarian value (revealing product authenticity, information seeking, and convenience), trendsetting value, and condition benefits (offers, discounts, and games with prizes) are solid motives for people to watch live streaming commerce (Cai and Wohn, 2019; Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut, 2020).

Enjoyment is a gratification supported to motivate people to watch live streaming commerce. The result of this study aligned with previous research, that consumers intend to have hedonic value, fun, and enjoyment when participating in live streaming commerce (Cai and Wohn, 2019; Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut, 2020). The characteristics of live streaming commerce, which support real-time interaction with the hosts and among the audiences, allow people to gain hedonic feelings while watching in live

streaming commerce.

Social interaction is rejected to be a motivation for people to watch live streaming commerce. One explanation for social interaction being rejected as the motivation is generational diversity. Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon (2001) stated the generation differences in using the internet, that people of different ages can view social interaction differently in the context of live streaming commerce.

Regarding passing time being rejected as a motivation for people to watch live streaming commerce, it could be explained by the lifestyle people perceive in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is well known for its fast-paced lifestyle and long working hours. Despite live streaming often lasting for an hour or more, only a few numbers of customers would stay for the whole period, and the number of viewers seems to decline with time (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2020). This implies that live streaming could easily lead to boredom if it lasts long. Also, especially after the pandemic, Hong Kong people focus more on health, thus taking desirable physical activities during their spare time (Wang et al., 2021).

#### Factors Driving Online Purchase Intention

The results of the regression models showed that the two gratifications, enjoyment and social interaction, are significantly and positively related to purchase intention. Enjoyment is proven strongly and significantly related to online purchase intention, and it is suggested that the reason for enjoyment being significantly associated with buying intent is the enjoyment gained from the live streaming commerce with the participation of celebrities. From earlier studies, it has been proven that enjoyment is strongly and positively related to consumer purchase intention in the scenario with celebrity, which could arouse people interest and feeling, and the attractiveness of the celebrity is also positively associat-



ed with consumers' choice to buy (Park & Lin 2020; Cai and Wohn, 2019; Cai et al., 2018). In live streaming commerce, celebrities or KOLs are recruited to host live streaming, especially when the live streaming commerce occurs at Facebook. Therefore, leveraging tactics with renowned people could lead to a strong and positive relationship between the enjoyment gained via live streaming and online purchase intention. While enjoyment is proven to have an effect on both intention to watch live streaming commerce and purchase online, it could imply that enjoyment works not only as of the motivation for people to consume live streaming commerce but also as a reward that urges people to purchase online.

In regards to social interaction, although is not seen as a motivation for participants to watch the live streaming commerce, it is proven that it has a significant and positive impact on online purchase intention. Social interaction is a vital factor affecting consumers' purchase intention, as proven by the previous study on social commerce, a new e-commerce paradigm that consumers rely on the online recommendations of friends and acquaintances via social media and live streaming commerce (Yang and Li, 2014; Cai and Wohn, 2019). In the context of live streaming commerce, characterized by its real-time interactivity, especially via social media platforms, and has been proven by earlier research that social interaction positively influences purchase intention (Cai and Wohn, 2019). Hence, the results in this study supported that the social interactivity of live streaming commerce is positively related to consumers' online purchase intention.

Despite all the consumption values being proven to be the motivation for people to watch live streaming commerce, none of them has a significant effect on consumers' online purchase intention from the regression model. This could be due to the grocery purchasing habit perceived by

people in Hong Kong. With a dominant percentage of goods sold in HKTVmall being necessary (grocery, household, mother, and baby products), people tend to shop offline in Hong Kong. Although home and commercial building delivery is still the most preferred payment method, picking up at the O2O HKTVmall stores is also seen as a favourable option, with a mean score of 3.22. Meaning that a proportion of people still tend to go to a physical store for purchasing. It is possible that respondents only want to gain the information via watching the live streaming and then buying offline, thus the purchase intention response generated could be randomized, not resulting in a significant cause and effect shown. Another explanation is that perceived consumption values affect purchase intention under specific conditions, but not all conditions. Wongkitrungrueng et al. (2020) suggested that sellers adopted a different and wide-ranging approach in live streaming commerce, while the differences in practice could lead to further consumption tendencies. Also, due to the diversity in generation in the research, participants react differently to diverse content. Therefore, the effect of consumption values on consumers' online purchase intention may differ under different scenarios.

### Conclusion and Future Research

This research makes several contributions to the extant literature on live streaming commerce. This study extends the investigation of motivations for people to watch live streaming by including the theory of consumption value, which has not yet been explored previously. Earlier research has applied different theories to examine the antecedents of online purchase intention in live streaming commerce, including IT affordance (Sun et al.), celebrity endorsement and match-up hypothesis (Park and Lin, 2020), consumer motivation theory (Cai et al., 2018), flow theory (Li et al., 2018), and signalling approach (Lu and Chen, 2021). This study adopts the theory of consumption values, which applies

to predict consumption behaviours, to study further the effect of the live streaming imposed on consumption intention, where the results find out that consumption values, including the function value, epistemic value, and conditional value, are motivations for people to watch live streaming commerce, with the conditional value being the most decisive factor.

The pandemic has accelerated the shift in consumer behaviour and popularised the utilization of live streaming commerce. In the shortcoming future, live streaming commerce is expected to gain even more prominence in the digitalized consumer market. This research conveys positive results when applying the U&G theory to the context of the relationship between live streaming commerce and online purchase intention. Implying that live streaming commerce a media product, supplies the enjoyment and social interaction, that consumers are searching for. Hence making the gratifications significant reasons, and even being treated as rewards, affects people's online purchase intention online and choice-making. While enjoyment perceived by live streaming, not only is a motivation for people to watch live streaming commerce, but it also has the most strong and positive influence on purchase intention online. These implicit the vitality of the enjoyable feature of live streaming commerce. For instance, the employment of celebrities or KOLs as the host, and security of content quality, which included product-related content (product review, demonstration, usage tips, price information) and non-product-related content (content relevant to customer interests and lifestyle, trends) (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2020), are essential in keeping customers' interest in the products prospectively.

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**2022 EXTENDED  
ABSTRACT**

# From Situational Appraisals to Collective Action: An examination on Asian Americans' Engagement in Collective Action during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Introduction and Purpose of the Study


The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a global health crisis but has also uncovered many underlying societal issues of disparity, inequity, and injustice. In the United States, along with the vast spread of COVID-19 is the uptick of hate incidents, discrimination, and racist attacks against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). According to Stop AAPI Hate, a total of 10,370 hate incidents were reported from March 19, 2020 to September 30, 2021 in the United States. These hate incidents took place in various forms that ranged from individual acts of verbal harassment, shunning, physical assaults, to civil rights violations such as workplace discrimination and refusal of service. This study, in this regard, sets out to examine the factors and mechanisms that drive Asian Americans' engagement in collective action in combating anti-Asian discrimination and racism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Literature review

Scholars from various fields have conducted studies that examined the anti-Asian rhetoric

during political campaigns, the use of social media on Asian Americans' well-being, mental health issues among Asian Americans, and so on (e.g., Lee & Waters, 2021; Yang et al., 2020). Apart from addressing the immediate impact during the pandemic, scholars have also noted that the uptick of hate incidents against Asian Americans has its historical roots. The portrayal of Asians as the "Yellow Peril" and "perpetual foreigners," along with the pervasive "model minority" myth, has resulted in Asian Americans' voices on their experiences of discrimination being delegitimized and silenced. This has further led to limited empirical research evidence on the impact of racial discrimination among Asian Americans, especially when it comes to activism and collective action (Lee & Waters, 2021). The knowledge on collective action—the action that aims at changing the status of a disadvantaged group—could be especially instrumental as community members, activists, and scholars continue exploring viable measures to combat anti-Asian discrimination and racism at individual, institutional, and societal levels.

Drawing on insights from the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) (Kim & Grunig,



2011), societal risk reduction motivation model (SRRM) (Cho & Kuang, 2014), and collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2008), this study proposes a model that comprises perceptual, cognitive, emotive, and motivational factors that could drive Asian Americans' online and offline collective action in combating anti-Asian discrimination and racism.

### Methodology

An online survey was conducted in August 2021 among 505 Asian Americans residing in the U.S. at the time of the study. Participants were recruited via Dynata survey panel, representing diverse ethnic backgrounds among the Asian American communities spanning across 41 states in the U.S.

### Results and Conclusions

Results revealed the perceptual, cognitive, emotive, and motivational factors that drove Asian Americans' online and offline collective action. Perceptual factors including Asian Americans' involvement recognition, their perceptions of self-efficacy, group efficacy, and governmental efficacy fostered situational motivation to combat anti-Asian discrimination and racism. The emotive factor of discrimination-inflicted arousal also generated Asian Americans' situational motivation. Asian Americans' motivational state, in turn, facilitated their online and offline collective action in combating discrimination and racism. Given that this study particularly pertains to the context of anti-Asian discrimination and racism during COVID-19, future research could further test our model among other marginalized communities and in different sociocultural contexts to enhance its theoretical and practical utility.

### Practical and Social Implications

For public relations professionals, activists, policy makers, and the society at large, findings from

this study suggested a multi-facet approach that encompasses consideration at perceptual, cognitive, and emotive levels in gauging Asian Americans' online and offline collective action. By providing an integrated framework that delineates the process from situational appraisals to collective action, this study helps shed insights on the role public relations could play in advocating for social change and creating a more humane and just world.

**Keywords:** *Racial Discrimination, Collective Action, Asian Americans, Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), COVID-19*

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# WHEN BROUGHT TOGETHER BY GOOD FOOD WE ARE ALWAYS IN GREAT COMPANY

Good food leads to good conversation and the creation of good ideas.  
Good food brings about good moments that connect us.  
That is why it is important for us to take the time and sit behind  
the same table. When we are brought together by good food,  
we are always in great company.

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our sustainable  
development  
goals together.



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# This is our home. A region of opportunities.

Here are our families, friends, co-workers, neighbours, strangers we know, sportsmen we root for, innkeepers who know how we take our coffee ... Here are our thoughts and our hearts.

That's why we can see what this region is capable of and recognize the potential where nobody else does.

We want to take care of our home the best we can and thus improve the quality of life in this region. Because where others see just a spot on the map, we see a region of opportunities.

For whatever may come.

## NLB Group

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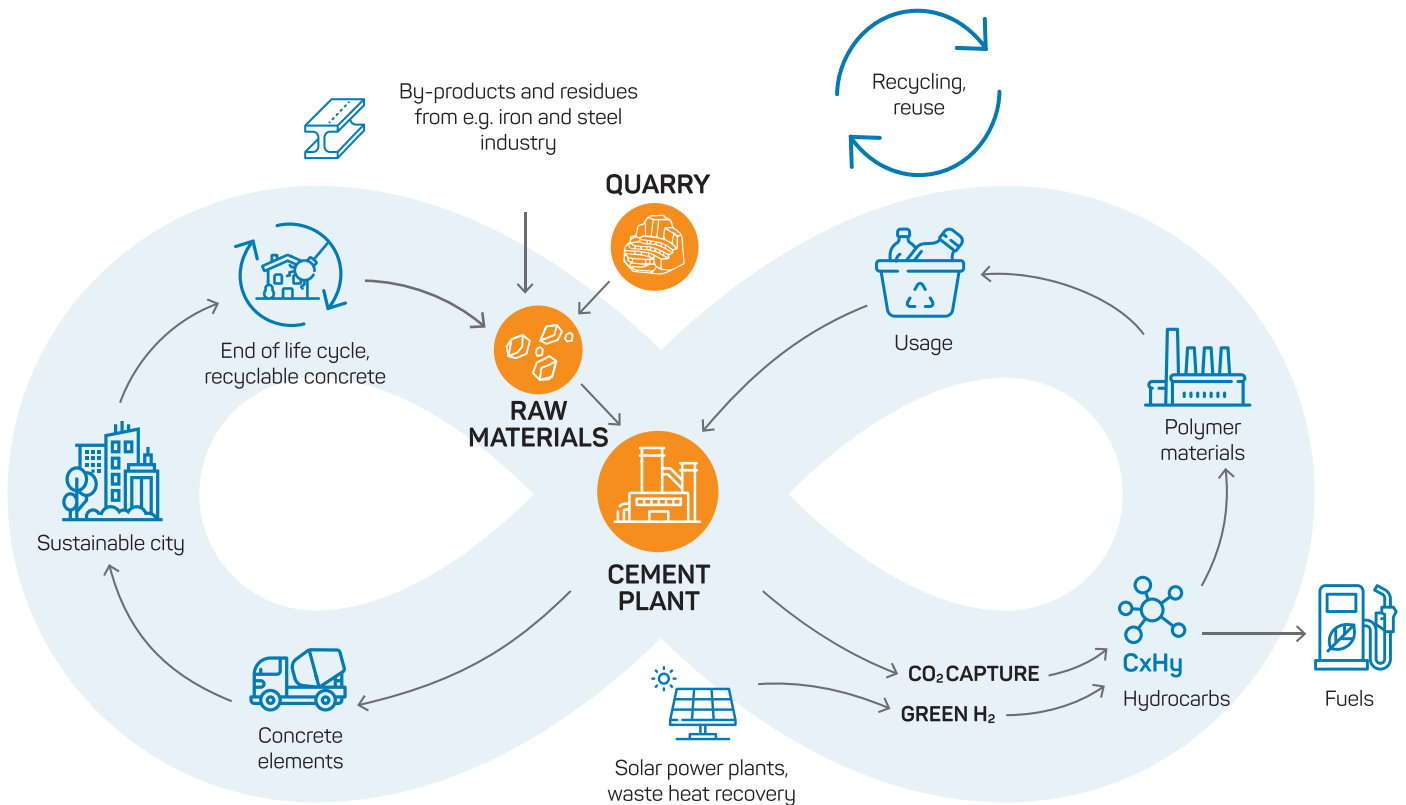
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