

SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION OF MUNICIPALITIES IN ROMANIA – FOSTERING GOVERNMENT PUBLIC RELATIONS

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the use of social media in public administration by applying a public relations approach. Public relations (PR) offer an integrative theoretical and practical strategic framework in the analysis and implementation of communication in public administration, which brings essential contributions to the functioning of democracy. Changes imposed by social media generated new communication practices for governance and public administration services, offering interesting research topics. The present study is substantiated by the conceptual coordinates of modern PR, excellence theory, and its measurement principles. It discusses government PR as a particular area in the field. It reviews the methodology and findings of studies conducted in Romania on the subject of government PR and the use of recent technology in central and local government communication.—The research is based on a content analysis investigating the social media PR on three online platforms, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, for five municipalities in Romania, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Constanța, Iași, and Timișoara. The study offers a descriptive picture of the current Romanian realities and fosters government social media strategic communication analysis, by exemplifying the use of a methodological investigation framework, based on modern concepts of the field of PR.*

Keywords: *public relations, social media, municipalities, communication, measurement, government public relations, Romania*

Introduction

Communication is essential to governance and public administration. Considering the public participation spectrum (IAP2, n.d.), policy communication can take many forms (Răceanu, 2013). The positive approach towards dialogic models of communication offer valuable and necessary tools (Schnell, 2018), especially given the uncertainty that characterizes present times. Recent data show that the democracy index is constantly decreasing. The trust barometer report indicates problematic results, dispersion of authority, with a decreasing level of trust, the government being distrusted in 17 of 28 countries, the European Union being distrusted in 12 of 28 countries, (Edelman, 2024). The use of public relations (PR) in governance and public administration plays a key role in fostering democracy, by enhancing *reputation* (Carpenter, 2012) and building *relations* (Waymer, 2013). PR is a strategic form of communication, which offers a valuable and integrative perspective that could help researchers and practitioners to better examine, understand, and apply efficient offline and online communication for public authorities and public administration. PR activities are not only used for promoting (ideas, services, or entities) but also for building mutual understanding and cooperation, based on trust. Concerning governance and public administration, these are essential coordinates, supporting the efficient functioning of public institutions, and the design and implementation of public policies, for the benefit of the citizens.

Digitalization and the emergence of modern technologies drove changes in governance and in the public sector, potentiating communication, facilitating interactions, and advancing e-governance. The increasing relevancy of social media added to the innovation potential in governmental and administrative activity (Săvulescu and Antonovici, 2017). At the same time, it brought extended pressure on public authorities and civil servants to adopt new practices and adapt to a highly dynamic and less controllable communication public sphere. These new communicational tools offer extended power to their user (Ahva and Heikkila, 2016), translated into both more accessible communication media (Macnamara et al., 2016; Dietrich, 2021), and more pressure to be active (not only respond but also initiate relevant conversation, especially in the case of important public actors, expected to prove managerial profiles and leadership). Government representatives and public administration actors are no exception (Bryer and Zavattaro, 2011). On the contrary, this is an area in which communication is not an optional alternative, but a mandatory one. Data regarding online communication usage at the level of the general public highlights the need for extended online and social media presence, considering the use of this communication environment. According to recent statistics (WeAreSocial and MeltWater, 2024), as of January 2024, there are 5.35 billion internet users (counting a global penetration rate of 66.2% of the world population), 5.04 social media user identities (62.3% of the world population), and almost 70% of the world population is using a mobile device. In Romania, data for 2023 indicated nearly 17.82 million internet users, out of which more than 15.13 million social network users, meaning a penetration rate for social media of 67.3% out of the total population (WeAreSocial and MeltWater, 2023).

Analysis regarding government digital communication, the coordinates of message construction or message dissemination and their results, either at the level of public administration and the final beneficiary (citizens), use constructs and indicators that are the core of PR area (trust, reputation, mutual understanding) and are substantiated in its theoretical framework. However, the PR approach in academic scholarship regarding online communication at the level of public administration is still emerging, internationally and in Romania. This is observable in both quantitative terms (numbers of academic publications on the explicit subject of *government public relations (GPR)*) and qualitative, conceptual ones (PR-focused theoretical and methodological dimensions, and orientation towards the PR-specific instruments and coordinates). Almost three decades ago, Liu and Horsley (2007) argued that GPR is an understudied field in the area of PR, as compared to that of corporate or even nonprofit sectors. Almost two decades later, this goes for GPR focused on social media (GSMPR). The author of this paper argues that this is related to the fact that studies on government communication on social media scarcely use the complex potential of the conceptual corpus provided by PR and do not highlight its value. This paper aims to contribute to filling the gaps by exemplifying the use of PR framework to investigate the practice for five Romanian municipalities.

The research questions are:

- RQ1: How do the municipalities use social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube)?
- RQ2: Which is the magnitude of the relations between the municipalities and citizens on social media?
- RQ3: Are there any correlations between the results?

The findings are useful with respect to public administration communication practices in Romania. In academic scholarship, this is the first published paper in Romania discussing an integrated PR approach for government communication in a comparative investigation of municipalities communication on social media. By focusing on the use of PR framework in analyzing social media communication, it advances its relevancy and value, fostering the field of GPR.

Theoretical framework

Government public relations

Over the last four decades, the reputation of PR practice itself confronted the challenging impact generated by its multiple practices over the years, especially those implying *manipulation* and *spin*. These led to PR gaining a “negative, even sinister meaning, (...) of appearance over substance, misleading information over truth, manipulation over openness” (Grunig, 2007, p.xvi). However, these are outdated coordinates for modern PR which is “an efficient management tool that can be used in public administration to advance the substantive mission of the agency in ways that save money, staff, time, and effort” (Grunig, 2007, p.xvi). As stated by Lee (2021) PR has a very important value in the functioning of public administration of the modern state.

The term *government public relations* (GPR) refers to “both top-level executives and the institutions at the national, regional and local levels, (...) including the presidential, prime ministerial, mayoral or local and regional communication” (Canel and Sanders, 2012). Governmental PR, is an emerging area for practice and research (Lee, 2007; Canel and Sanders, 2012; Lee, Neeley and Stewart, 2021) and offers a fruitful fresh and conceptual approach (Canel and Sanders, 2012). A recent study (Dong, Zheng and Morehouse, 2023) highlights that GPR is a fast-growing field which still lacks a clear definition and theoretical framework but has strong roots in relationship management and a high potential as a subfield of PR research. Based on the main subjects covered in the specialized literature dedicate to GPR, its traditionally established practice translates into (a) media relations, (b) public reporting, (c) responsiveness to the public (by stimulating dialog, engaging citizens, and potentiating accountability), (c) promoting and building outreach (to increase the utilization of public services and products, to foster public services, such as education, to seek voluntary public compliance with laws and regulations), and increase public support (Grunig, 2007).

Latest advances in technology call for an updated approach in the practice and theoretical framework of GPR, including social media activity. A more recently published book explicitly dedicated to the GPR activity (Lee, Neeley and Stewart, 2021) refers to reputation management, media relations, social media management, public relationships through public engagement, monitoring and evaluation of government media and social media engagement, crisis communication in the public sector, strategic communication planning (including the digital dimension), branding in the public sector, ethics.

Modern public relations conceptual coordinates and theory

PR, in its modern form, represents a strategic communication process based on ethics (Grunig, 2013b; Theaker, 2020; Jackson et al., 2022). It combines art and science (Hutton, 1999) and it is meant to build reputation, mutual understanding, and cooperation (Grunig,

2013a; Gregory, 2020). One of the main theories in PR is the *excellence model* (Grunig, 1992; 2013a; Grunig and Dozier, 2003), which brought the most relevant contribution in the field for the last 30 years (Botan and Hazleton, 2010). This emphasizes dialogic, responsible communication, the managerial function of PR, proactive approach, mutual interest and engagement from both the organization and the public, and ethics. Its conceptual framework highlights the role and implementation models of PR. It differentiates between *craft PR* (based on tactical communication) and *professional PR* (based on dialogic interaction, partnership, and strategy) (Grunig and Grunig, 2013).

According to the classical initial theory proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984) and long discussed by scholars in the field over the last decades (Grunig and Grunig, 2013), there is one-way and two-way communication, each manifested into two possible versions, thus resulting four models of PR (Grunig, 2007). One-way communication (asymmetrical) can take the form of either (a) manipulation and propaganda (*press agency* or *spin*), or (b) *transparent public information*. Both are always considered asymmetrical since the sender of the message has most of the control over the communication. Two-way communication can be either (c) asymmetrical, referred to as *scientific persuasion* (based on using the feedback collected from the public to better articulate the message and advance the interests of the sender), or (d) symmetrical (*partnership*), seen as an interaction between two interpreters who share a common interest, respect each other and mutually participate to obtain a satisfying result. Excellence theory (Grunig, 2013a) emphasizes the role of two-way symmetrical communication, meant to contribute to sustainable outcomes, substantiated by mutual interest and responsibility at the level of all the actors involved in the communication. For specific contexts and areas, two-way symmetrical communication and its forms based on partnership were considered to be only partially possible and its implementation rather limited, as in the case of public administration activity (Grunig, 2007).

Studies in the last decades referred to slight advancements of the governmental communication towards the symmetrical model, though emphasizing there are difficulties are faced (Grunig and Dozier, 2003). When referring to public policies, these imply a complex communication process, which sometimes goes through more than one of the phases of the public participation spectrum, including informing, consulting, involving, collaborating with the public, and empowering it (Creighton, 2005; IAP2, n.d.). To obtain positive outcomes, one must properly understand and potentiate PR, to be used at its real value at the level of the public administration. When referring to GPR, there is both the need to deliver results and the pressure to efficiently use the public resources, which makes PR even more difficult to implement than in the private sector (Liu and Horsley, 2007; Canel and Sanders, 2012). Excellence PR imply a *management function* (Grunig, 2013b) for this form of strategic communication. This has two main criteria. First, it points to the expected high-level of competency and professionalism for the PR specialist. Second, it depends on the role of the PR specialist in decision-making (Laskin, 2012; Bussy, 2013), which should be considerable. As stated by Grunig (2007), it is likely that in government entities the PR people held a technician or media role and a medium managerial one which emphasizes the expected association of public administration with the second or third model of communication, thus translating it into a technical rather than strategic role of communication and its process.

Evaluating public relations and communication – beyond identifying communication and public relations models

Considering the dialogic communication theoretical framework, relational paradigm is an important one in the field of PR, portraying the public as a central and active actor rather than a passive one (Botan and Taylor, 2004). It presents an extended *co-creational* role of the PR activity, meant to bring positive outcomes for both the organization and the public, beyond the tactical (instrumental) one, which focuses on attaining the goals of the organization. The relational paradigm implies investigating communication and PR by focusing not only on the organizational behavior and its reflected reputation, but also on the interests and behavior of the public (including his openness toward the communication and interaction), and the type of relational outcome (Hon and Grunig, 1999; Ki and Shin, 2006; Ledingham and Bruning, 2014; Ki, Ertem-Eray and Hayden, 2023).

Researchers investigated positive dimensions of the organization-public relations (OPR), trust, commitment, openness, investment, and involvement (Ledingham and Bruning, 1998), and negative ones, dissatisfaction, distrust, control dominance, and dissolution (Moon and Rhee, 2013). *Government-citizens relations* were particularly explored and the results indicate that they contribute to community building, and that citizens tend to remain in the community when they perceive a positive input from the public authorities. (Ledingham, 2001).

Considering their long-term result rather than immediate impact faced difficulties in arguing the value of their work. Pressed to overcome the measurements based on *advertising value equivalent* (AVE), inappropriate due to the essential distinction from advertising as a communication service meant to build awareness and eventually increase sales, PR professionals established the *Barcelona Principles* which evolved from their first form of 2009 (AMEC, 2010; Burke, 2020). These offer a set of guidelines for measuring the results of PR activity, especially in the present context characterized by modern technology instruments and social media communication environment. The main coordinates for measuring communication and PR are the following: (1) evaluation is necessary and its starting point is the set of SMART objectives that must be set and translated into a clear plan; (2) the assessment needs to consider three dimensions, *outputs* (e.g. press conferences, events, produced content), *outtakes* (effects of the communication, at the level of the audience), and *outcomes* (directly evaluated against the SMART objectives, and necessarily measured at the level of the organization, stakeholders, and society); (3) the evaluation should include both qualitative and quantitative analysis; (4) the evaluation must be conducted for all relevant online and offline channels (AMEC, 2020).

PR measurement is an essential and evolving area of PR, fostering its strategic role. It is substantiated by dedicated specialized literature and a clear terminology (Stacks and Michaelson, 2010; Michaelson and Stacks, 2011; Stacks and Bowen, 2013). The author of the present paper argues that, alongside with valuing the modern PR framework and the strategic approach, these measurement coordinates can potentiate the advancements in GPR as a relevant and complex theoretical and practical area in strategic communication. It can help address and analyze social media communication of public authorities. Even more important, it can support the necessary strategic understanding and potential adjustments towards a more effective communication associated to governance and the administration of public resources, by using a strategic PR planning.

State of the art

Public relations, social media, and government public relations

The new media transformed the premises and practices of PR (Duhé, 2007; 2007), turning the media landscape into a more complex and less controllable one. The *PESO model* (Dietrich, 2014; Macnamara et al., 2016) differentiates between the different coordinates of *paid, earned, shared, and owned media*, stressing upon the importance of ethical communication and main criteria in modern PR activity to distance itself from spin and manipulation. This is essential, considering the challenges and opportunities brought by technology, which organically shift the communication toward a two-way (or multi-way) symmetrical process (Duhé and Wright, 2013). According to a systematic review of 445 articles published in 14 journals from 2006 to 2020 (Wang, Cheng and Sun, 2021), since 2006, social media grew as a research topic in PR. The most frequent research methods were content analysis (33,5%) surveys (23,6%), interviews (9,7%), and mixed methods (9,9%). The most studied social media platforms were Twitter (29,4%) and Facebook (25,6%). The examined topics varied, from organization-PR to fake news, social media influencers, and crisis communication. The highest interest was shown to the impact of the use of social media on PR outcomes, as compared to other research areas on the topic, such as its implementation, the attitude towards its usage, features and functions, specific issues (cultural, health, social and political etc.). Regarding GPR, a recently published article (Dong, Zheng and Morehouse, 2023) offered a systematic review of 155 articles published in essential journals dedicated to PR between 1976 and 2021, aiming to investigate main research trends, key theoretical modes used in research, relationship between theoretical and conceptual frameworks, definition of GPR, and methodological approaches. Most of the articles were published starting 2006. The conceptual network most frequently implied terms related to government, government communication, crisis communication, social media, public diplomacy, and public sector. The most used theoretical PR frameworks, directly influencing the research, there were *relationship management* (23%) and *dialogic theory* (9%), which also have the highest degree of centrality within the analyzed studies. Also, without being directly translated into the research methodology, 50% of the investigated articles mentioned theories such as relationship management, excellence theory and others. However, as Dong emphasizes, 78 of the 155 articles did not refer to any theoretical framework. The most frequently methods used in the analyzed studies are surveys (18%), interviews (33%), quantitative content analysis (27), historical and case studies (24% each), and qualitative or textual analysis (18%). Regarding social media, Dong argues that this is an understudied area within the GPR related research.

Nevertheless, international scholarship provides examples of studies conducted on the GPR topic over the last decade. The mostly focus on the United States realities. The topics are various, such as the use of social media in promoting transparency and participatory government and enhancing democracy (Avery and Graham, 2013; Graham, 2014), its role in crisis communication (Graham, Avery and Park, 2015), or the use and effects of specific platforms (Graham and Avery, 2013; Kim, Park and Im, 2015). Regarding municipality officials, a study conducted in 2013 (Graham and Avery, 2013) investigated 463 American local officials' perceptions and use of social media. It showed that the municipal officials consider it important and it highlighted Facebook and Twitter to be the most used platforms for the analyzed period. Regarding the European realities and research, a study conducted

in the same period (Bonsón et al., 2012) emphasized the advantage of gaining a large audience reach for the local authorities at considerable reduced costs, by using social media.

There are more recent studies, such as the article investigating the use of Facebook by the public authorities of 13 Czech regions (Špaček, 2018), among 112 Slovene state administration organizations (Jukić and Merlak, 2017), or the Lithuanian Municipalities (Sinkiene and Bryer, 2016). However, none of these studies apply a PR framework. There are also examples regarding the Romanian realities (Urs, 2016; Zeru, 2021a; Zeru, Balaban and Bârgăoanu, 2023) that will be referred to in the next section.

Romanian government public relations and government social media communication

Two decades after the fall of the communism regime and more than ten years after the establishment of the PR practices in Romania, researchers started to investigate the value and applicability of PR in the area of public administration and governance (Rogojinaru, 2008; Balaban and Iancu, 2009; Coman, 2009). Rogojinaru (2008) explored the structures, roles and communication strategies of PR in Romanian public institutions. The professionalization of PR at the local level was studied by Balaban and Iancu (2009). Coman (2009) investigated the PR strategies in implementing public private pensions system in Romania. Also, the institutionalization and professionalization of GPR in Romania during 1989–2010 was analyzed by Dolea (2012). Furthermore, the importance of using digital tools at the level of Romanian of local municipalities started to take shape as a research topic in Romania, mostly linked to public administration reforms and the subject of e-governance. The studies were focused on investigating websites as modern forms of communication (Vrabie, 2011; Urs, 2018) and, more recently, their usability, accessibility and automation and the influence of COVID-19 pandemic (Urs and Spoaller, 2022). However, none of these implied a PR framework.

The use of social media in Romanian government communication draw researchers' attention starting 2016. A comparative study (Balaban et al., 2016) on 48 administrative institutions in the Romanian historical region of Transylvania comparatively analyzed the use of new media tools (websites, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and YouTube pages), for the years of 2011 and 2015. The results showed a change in the usage of social media platforms. In 2011 they were used as a follow-up for website-based communication but in 2015 they started to gain more importance. The results of the interviews conducted with communication representatives from analyzed public institutions indicated that the advantages of using social media are seen and accepted. However, the study highlighted the lack of a strategic approach in generating social media traffic and some partially critical positions towards communicating on these platforms, portraying them as less appropriate for the institution they represent, since they do not properly inspire the expected sobriety and seriousness for a public institution.

The particular use of Facebook platform was investigated for 48 Romanian city halls (including the 6 districts in the Romanian capital) for a period of 454 days (2014-2015) (Urs, 2016), to compare the results with the e-government development index, developed and presented in the same study. The research did not use a PR approach, but it has relevant conclusions for the present paper. In the case of Timișoara, Deva, Bucharest, Giurgiu, and Iași, the e-governance development index was corelated with the public's engagement ranking on social media. The study showed that, considering the investigated period (ten

years ago), on average, the Romanian local authorities did not prioritize their online presence and did not integrate social media activities and e-government as important interconnected components of qualitative governance.

A descriptive image of the presence and type of communication on social media of Romanian central government actors was offered by another study (Gherheș, 2017), focusing on 11 ministries, between January and March 2017. It concluded that Facebook is the main platform used by the ministries, but the content is not adapted to the two-way communication, which makes it rather an alternative to the traditional website. The number of followers was identified as low. The other alternative platforms (YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, Pinterest, and Flickr) are used sporadic and inconsistent, only by some of the ministries, mostly by duplicating the content posted on Facebook.

More recently, systematic analysis regarding the use of Facebook were conducted for the period of November 2019-February 2020 (Zeru, 2021a; 2021b), investigating the activity of specific central government actors (The Government of Romania, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, Ministry of Education and Research, and Ministry of Health). These examined the characteristics of the content posted by the authorities and the factors influencing the citizens' interactions with these posts. Bonson Ratkai matrix (Bonsón and Ratkai, 2013) was used to analyze engagement of the public, as a sum of the scores for reactions (likes), comments, and shares. The results highlighted that the public is rather oriented toward a low interaction (mostly likes, and shares over comments). Regarding the activity of the authorities, the number of posts does not necessarily influence the engagement rate (e.g. the Government has the highest number of posts but the lowest rates for interactions; the opposite, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has the lowest number of posts but it registered higher engagement rates than other institutions with a higher number of posts). The study revealed associations between the type of content posted on social media and engagement of the public. The use of images, videos, and storytelling are indicated to stimulate public interaction. On the contrary, the presence of the political factor negatively influences the engagement of the public (19 times less engagement in the cases mentioning the name of the dignitary, as compared to those that do mention it, and 5 times in the cases of naming the party).

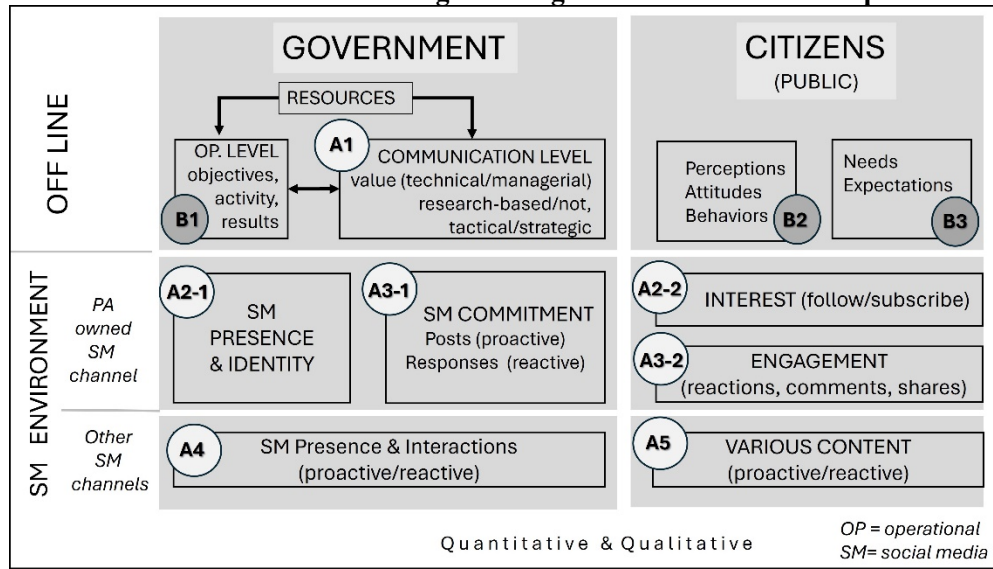
The latest published article (Zeru, Balaban and Bârgăoanu, 2023) presented the result of a research referring to the period of April 1st July 31st 2021, analyzing the communication on Facebook of The Government of Romania and five ministries (adding the Ministry of Transportation as compared to previous studies). The study uses a taxonomy from governmental studies (DePaula and Dincelli, 2016; DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018), differentiating between four types of communication, namely impression management, push, pull, and collaboration. These have a correspondence to the classical four models introduced by Gunig and Hunt (1984). The findings show that most of the investigated content lay in the area of public information and transparency and less in the area of collaboration. There is a lack of engagement from citizens with respect to the posts published by the central government actors on their official Facebook pages. As shown by previously published studies, the number of posts is not a necessary criterion for gaining more engagement. However, professionalization is important. Two of the analyzed entities have an internal framework for the implementation of their social media activity and the study shows that they have more diverse messages and a higher rate of interactions with the audience.

As a conclusion, based on the previously presented extensive review of the studies published on the topic, the author of this study emphasizes that the emergent GPR area has a high potential to rapidly develop, both at the level of its implementation by the public administration actors, and its research, especially fostered by the social media realities. However, at least in Romania, the topic of government communication on social media does not use the full potential offered by the PR framework. Only two (Balaban et al., 2016; Zeru, Balaban and Bârgăoanu, 2023) of the cited papers published in Romania use concepts associated to the theoretical background of PR, and only one is namely addressing the practice of PR (Balaban et al., 2016). The present study aims to fill this gap, advancing the PR-substantiated research on the social media activity of the government authorities.

Methodology

Conceptual framework

The aim of the study was to investigate social media activity and effects as a component of the PR process, for five local government entities, to illustrate the quantitative dimension of PR measurement on social media. To clearly state the framework of the research and the realism of the objectives, the author of the present paper emphasizes the role of such research, which is not meant to give an evaluation of the entire PR activity for the analyzed entities. To illustrate the research options on the topic of government social media PR, Figure 1 was designed to capture the integrated framework of modern PR. According to dialogic approach, both the level of the communicator and the one of the publics must be considered and analyzed. According to Barcelona Principles, a complete measurement must include qualitative and quantitative approach and must refer to all types of results: *outputs*, *outtakes*, and *outcomes*. According to Barcelona Principles and the excellence model and its associated measurements, communication characteristics are not limited to the visible content on social media, thus a complete research must investigate its foundations (by analyzing the existence, structure and role of the PR department (management function or just technical status), and if the activity is based on research and planning). All these constitute the core research dimensions for evaluating PR social media activity. Additionally, to offer an integrated picture regarding the PR premises and impact, other topics could bring valuable insights, such as the public institution operational objectives and results, the public needs, expectations, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, including (and more importantly) in the offline environment. All these complete the integrated framework, indicating the evaluation of reputation and PR of the analyzed entity. Overall, considering its desired management function, the final outcome of public relations is measured at the level of the quality and impact of governmental benchmarks. Such a complex study was not yet conducted, and its possibility depends on both the research design and available data, which must be collected online and offline (for A1) (Fig.1).

Figure 1. Research areas for the investigation of government social media public relations

The present study is a pilot one, addressing points A2-1, A2-2, A3-1, and A3-2 and it is mostly aimed at investigating the quantitative dimension. The role of the analysis is not the give a complete evaluation of PR, but to explore the activity on social media for the municipalities included in the study, and to draw conclusions regarding the extent of the interactions, based on the exposure and commitment of the public authorities, and the interest and engagement of the public. *Table 1* summarizes the operationalization of the concepts and the scheme of indicators used in the study.

Table 1. Research dimensions and indicators

	GOVERNMENT (SENDER)	PUBLIC (RECEIVER)
Premises	EXPOSURE	AUDIENCE
<i>General coordinates</i>	Existence of SM profile Interconnected profiles (link on website & between the 3 platforms) SM identity – name and image (accessibility, recognizability, representativity, relevancy, coherence & unity)	Number of followers/ subscribers
<i>Specific period***</i>	Hashtags	Reach * (estimated)
Interaction	COMMITMENT (S)	ENGAGEMENT
<i>General coordinates</i>	Total number of posts (since created) Frequency of posts	Total interactions since created **
<i>Specific period***</i>	Total number of posts in the analyzed period Frequency of posts (D) Type of posts	Engagement rate/day Eng/post (Avg. engagement) Engagement/reach (D) Type of engagement (reactions, comments, shares)
<p>* Reach is an estimated value.</p> <p>** From the analyzed three platforms only YouTube offers data regarding the total number of views since the profile was created</p> <p>*** The analyzed period was March 15th – April 28th, 2024, based on data availability through the use of SocialInsider</p>		

(D) = descriptive data; are not considered when calculating the general dimensions, but only referred to within the microlevel analysis.
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The investigated population

The study analyzes the social media activity for five municipalities in Romania. These were selected considering the number of inhabitants, based on recent data provided by the latest Romanian census (2021): Bucharest (1,716 mil), Cluj-Napoca (286.000), Iași (271.700), Constanța (263.800), and Timișoara (251.000). Besides the population criteria, these are important Romanian cities, considering other characteristics, such as their administrative, cultural, and historical importance. Among the five analyzed municipalities, Timișoara has the lowest number of inhabitants. However, it was designated with the title of European Capital of Culture for 2023. Also, in the latest years, media coverage highlighted the digital dimension regarding Timișoara community, referring to its intense IT activities, and the city digital platform, created in 2021.

Data collection and steps of analysis

The social media analyzed platforms are Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube since these are used by all the investigated municipalities. The collection of data implied both manual and automatic process, and the quantitative analysis was statistically processed. The steps involved in the process were the following:

- i. First, the profiles of the analyzed municipalities were identified, by searching on the investigated platforms, on Google, and on the official websites of the municipalities. The general data was manually extracted (links, identity elements – name, photo, date when the profile was created, number of posts – for Instagram and YouTube, number of followers, and total views – YouTube, the interlinked dimension among profiles of the same municipality and their presence on the official webpage).
- ii. For a more detailed analysis, the content for a determined period was investigated. The collection of this specific data for the analyzed period was performed with the use of *SocialInsider*, a platform for social media data analysis, previously used in scholarly academic research. The retrieved data included posts, their characteristics (type and, for YouTube, duration), comments, shares, reactions, engagement metrics, reach, and impressions. However, the free version offered by the platform only allowed a limited time frame for the investigated data, which is a limitation of the present study. The data collected with the use of *SocialInsider* was further validated, by comparing it with the original online social media content. A total of 660 posts were collected from all three platforms, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, for the five municipalities for the investigated 30 days period.
- iii. After checking, clearing, and organizing the data, they were prepared for coding.
- iv. For the general data, a thematic analysis was performed to identify the relevant coordinates.
- v. Frequency analyzes were applied to the coded data to generate descriptive results and the correlation between certain results was analyzed.
- vi. The final results were processed to be integrated into the general analysis scheme (see Table 1).

Results and discussion

The data analysis results for the general presence and activity on social media and for the particularly analyzed period are summarized in *Table 2*, organized by platform.

Table 2. Activity for the 15 social media profiles since when they were created and during the analyzed period (March 15th – April 18th, 2024*)

*2024 (15.03-18.04)	Bucharest	Cluj-Napoca	Constanța	Iași	Timișoara
Posts on Instagram and YouTube	972	1733	1882	1091	49
Total Fans	47452	45231	124649	75029	14836
Total posts *	181	115	155	146	63
Overall Eng./Day*	735	426	438	274	269
Overall Eng./Post *	261	241	91	64	128
FACEBOOK					
FB profile created	16.08. 2016	28.05. 2017	28.11. 2014	11.11. 2013	27.06. 2016
Total months	91,5	82	113	126	93
Facebook Fans	44813	39560	117625	70428	13925
FP posts *	103	68	145	130	63
FB Avg Posts/Day *	3,4	2,3	4,8	4,3	2,1
FB Engagement *	18426	9431	13140	8214	8082
FB Eng./Post *	178,9	138,7	90,6	63,2	128,3
FB Eng./Day *	614,2	314,4	438	273,8	269,4
FB Eng./Page *	41,118	23,84	11,171	11,663	58,03
FB Avg. Eng./post *	0,401	0,355	0,078	0,09	0,913
FB Comments *	3157	765	2442	941	807
FB Avg Comm./Post *	30,65	11,25	16,84	7,24	12,81
FB Shares *	1097	1037	895	511	528
FB Avg reach/post *	3028	3676	1609	1031	2836
FB Post Reach (k) *	194	156	145	84	111
INSTAGRAM					
Insta profile created	Feb. 2022	May 2020	July. 2017	June 2018	Jan. 2023
Insta total months	26	47	81	70	15
Instagram followers	1869	4241	6185	2391	883
Instagram total posts	801	1271	733	165	40
Average /month	31	27	9	2	3
Insta total posts*	59	35			
Insta Avg Posts/Day*	2	1,2			
Avg Hashtags/Post*	0,983	0,486			

Hashtags (nr.) *	41	17			
Instagram Eng*	2889	3030			
Insta Eng./Post*	49	86,6			
Avg Eng./ Day*	99,6	104,5			
Engagement /Profile*	154,57	71,496			
Insta Avg Eng./Post*	2,62	2,043			
Insta Comments*	16	23			
Insta Av.Comm./Post*	0,3	0,7			
Likes (nr)*	2873	3007			
Avg Likes/Post*	48,7	85,9			
Total posts reach*	110955	79127			
YOUTUBE					
YT profile created	09.02. 2023	04.07. 2016	29.08. 2016	18.07. 2016	19.10. 2021
Months since created	14	5	91	93	30
YouTube Subscr.	770	1430	839	2210	28
Total posts	171	462	1149	926	9
Average posts/month	12	92	13	10	<1
YT Video Views	83425	270482	152937	438815	1367
Total posts in per.*	19	12	10	16	
Video Length (sec.) *	35393	17953	43873	30203	
Avg Video seconds*	1863	1496	4387	1887	
YT Avg.Videos /Day*	0,7	0,4	0,3	0,6	
YT Video Views*	11534	9323	701	3022	
YouTube Eng.*	627	193	2	15	
YT Eng./Post*	33	16,1	0,2	0,9	
YT Avg Eng./Day*	21,6	6,7	0,1	0,5	
Eng. Rate/Channel*	81,641	13,497	0,238	0,679	
YTAvg.Engt. /Video*	4,297	1,125	0,024	0,042	
YT Comments*	123	5	0	15	
YTAvg.Comm./Post*	6,47	0,42	0,00	0,94	
YT Likes*	504	188	2	0	
YT Video Views	11534	9323	701	3022	

Exposure

Among the 15 analyzed social media profile, the first created was in 2013 (Iași, Facebook) and the last in 2023 (Timișoara, Instagram). The first that appeared were the Facebook profiles and the last the ones on Instagram, following the general trend, and the interests of the target audience. In the case of the Municipality of Iași, the Instagram profile was not

updated to a business profile, implying that, if using platforms for social media reporting and benchmarking, this cannot be analyzed, thus it was not included in the study.

The **interconnection** of the social media profiles of each municipality is a relevant element with respect to their accessibility and ease of recognition. It is an indicator for having an official power voice in the public sphere. Social media increases confusion risks, which are undesired especially for public authorities, either if they are created as fake identities, due to malintent, or generated by various users, without a clear agenda. There is a medium to low rate of interest for this aspect, as the SM profiles of some municipalities are not indicated on their website, and interconnectivity between their three social media profiles is only partial. Facebook is the only platform partially interconnected (indicated on the websites of the municipalities and including a link to the website or the other profiles). Timișoara is the only example with low to very low interconnectivity between profiles (no social media platform is indicated on the website, there is a link on Facebook to the website and on YouTube to the website and Facebook). Also, in the case of Timișoara, some other unofficial profiles, generated by users, exist, which makes it more difficult for the potential additional public to rapidly identify the account.

Regarding **online identity**, firstly, the social media profile names are easily identifiable, as all the municipalities use a simple format (primaria X, Municipiul X, or Primaria Municipiului X). Secondly, the **visual identity** was analyzed considering profile photo (on all 3 platforms) and cover photo (for Facebook and YouTube). Along with the significant role in the recognition of the public actor, these are branding components, and are relevant for reputation. Both in terms of **image representativity** and visual **unity**, all municipalities have superior results. For profile photos, 14 of the 15 profiles use a graphical designed image, representing the city coat of arms or a modern minimalist logo (Bucharest – all 3 profiles, Iași – YouTube). The coat of arms could score higher rates for city reputation on a scale of personal attachment at the level of the public, especially for its inhabitants. The logo could be perceived more as an indicator of modern and more professionalized communication. However, this is correlated with the perceptions of the public (Fig.1- B2), and since the present study did not include any data, based on interview or questionnaires, exploring these hypotheses, such factors were not considered in the analysis. Iași Instagram profile uses a photo of the city hall building, which is less appropriate for the official institutional identity, since it is not particularly created to serve this purpose. It could generate risks since anyone could take a photo of the place and use it in the same way and might be less easily recognizable for non-inhabitants or less frequent visitors to the city.

Regarding the **cover photo**, 14 of the profiles use photos with relevancy in relation to the city specificity, its community life or history. Timișoara YouTube profile is the only exception, using a graphically designed image with the name of the city in its identity blue color scheme. Although it scores high in terms of clarity and relevancy, it is less personal, as compared to the others. For some of the profiles the photo cover is not only a representative image but has also an additional communication role, targeting promotion of the city and of municipality administrative activity and results (Cluj-Napoca, Facebook – promoting the event organized for celebrating the National Day in Romania, Iași, Facebook– promoting the newsletter – and YouTube – promoting the new logo, and the invitation to subscribe, Timișoara, Facebook – promoting one of the music concerts organized in 2023 when the city had the title of European Capital of Culture).

Coherence, the next indicator for visual image indicates above average scores for all five municipalities. However, there are some differences between their logos on their three platforms. Bucharest uses the same logo but on YouTube it is uncolored. Timișoara has a different color for its logo background on each platform. Iași has the lowest score, considering the various visual representations it uses.

Overall audience

Considering, for each of the five municipalities, the total number of fans, followers, and subscribers since the social media profiles were created, the values are usually correlated to the municipality history on the platform, with few exceptions (*Table 2* and *Figure 2*). Facebook is the most popular platform. Overall, Constanța has the largest total audience, followed by Iași, Bucharest, and Cluj. Timișoara has the lowest audience (*Figure 3*).

Figure 2. Total audience for each of the 15 social media channels since created

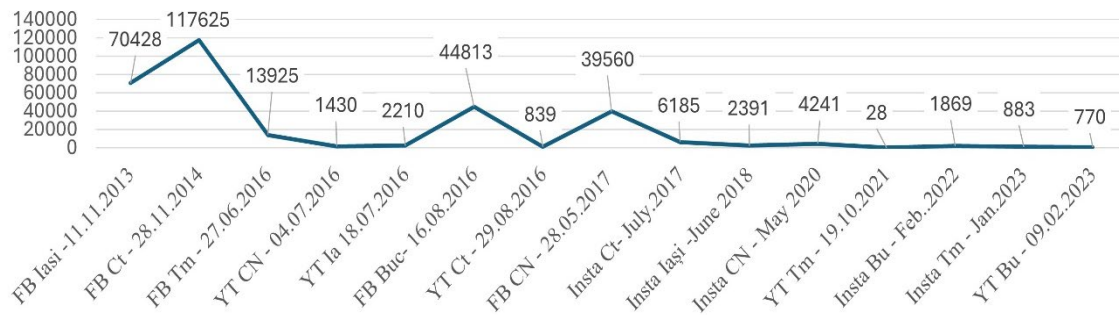
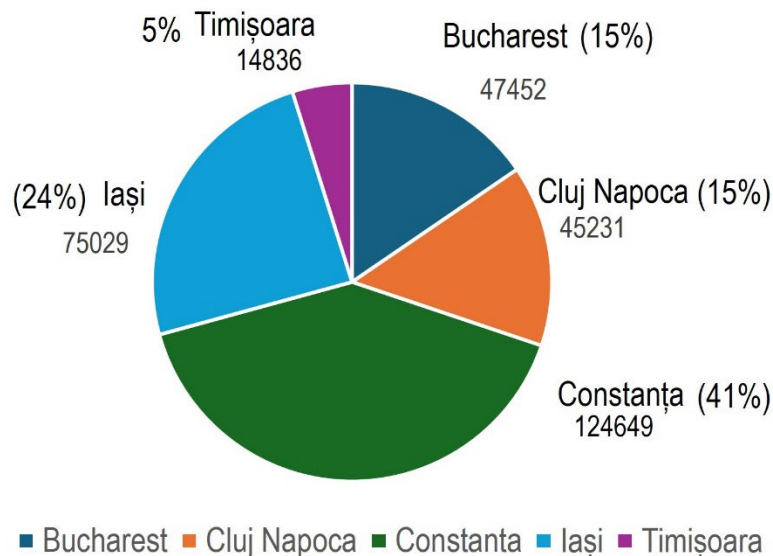


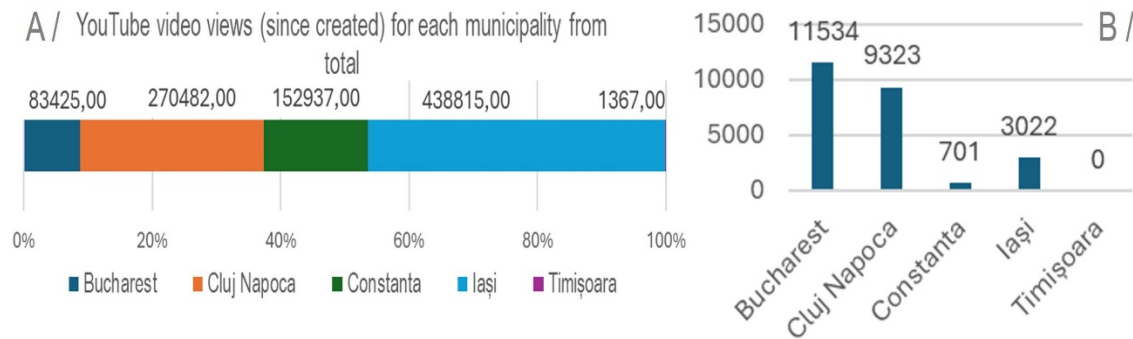
Figure 3. Aggregated total audience for the social media profiles of the five municipalities



For YouTube there is available data regarding the number of views of the published videos. Unlike the reach metric, this is not an estimation, but a real number. As indicated in *Figure 4* and *Table 2*, Iași has the highest total YouTube video views rate, followed by Cluj-

Napoca, Constanța, and Bucharest. Timișoara occupies the lowest position. For the analyzed period, the results are different, except for Timișoara (Fig.4)

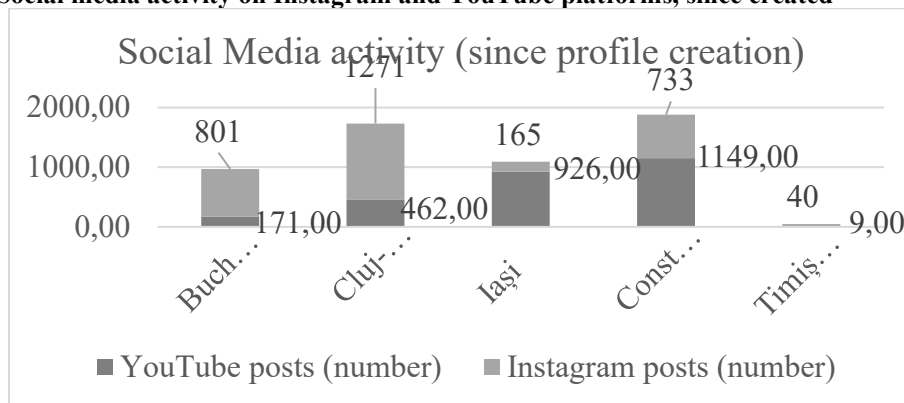
Figure 4. YouTube video views for each municipality
(a) from total, since profile was created & (b) during the analyzed period



Overall commitment of the municipalities on Instagram and YouTube

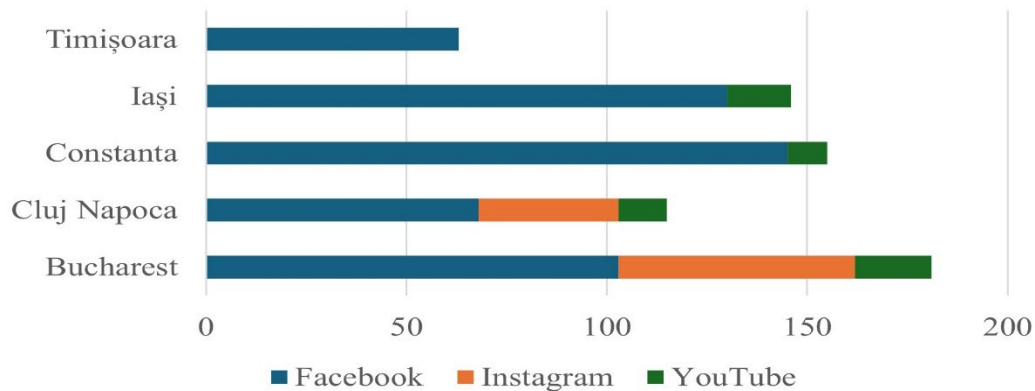
Considering the available data from Instagram and YouTube, the quantitative analysis regarding the total number of posts since the moment the profiles were created indicate that these are not correlated to the history of their on the investigated channel (Figure 5 and Table 2). Constanța and Bucharest have the highest total number of posts, which is inverted as compared to the date the profile was created. The Instagram channel of Constanța municipality was created a long time ago (2013) but it is used less than its YouTube channel, which was created three years later (2016). Also, considering Instagram platform, in the case of Iași, the profile was the second one created among all 5 municipalities in the study, but it counts extremely rare posts, and none for the last month.

Figure 5. Social media activity on Instagram and YouTube platforms, since created



Commitment during March 15th -April 18th, 2024

For the specific analyzed period, the total activity on social media for all five municipalities on all three analyzed platforms counted 660 posts (Facebook 77,2%, Instagram 14,24%, and YouTube 8,64%).

Figure 6. SM activity of the 5 municipalities during Mar. 15th- Apr. 18th, 2024

Bucharest Municipality had the highest overall posts rate (34% out of all for the 5 municipalities), followed by Constanța and Iași (20% of all 5), Iași (20% of all 5), Cluj and Timișoara (13% of all 5).

As regards the type of content, on Facebook, where most of it was distributed by the municipalities, albums were dominant (60%), followed by photos (22%) and videos (16%), and an insignificant percentage was represented by reels and status (1% each). For YouTube, the average length of the videos was 40 minutes.

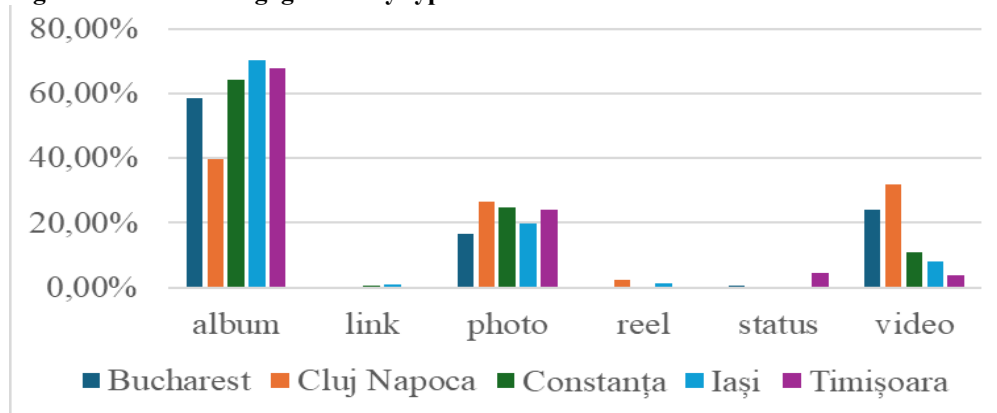
Hashtags are valuable potentiators for promoting the posted content and they are correlated to the image and reputation of the municipality using them. They are also connected (positively or negatively) by the organic online linkages of the tagged posts with other discussions in the online environment, which use the same hashtag. Considering the analyzed period, based on the data collected from Instagram, Bucharest municipality used 20 hashtags, among which the most frequent also receiving the highest rates of public online average engagement. These were related to its identity (*#pmb*, *#bucuresti*) and core responsibilities (administration of the public space - lakes, parks, leisure, consolidation of buildings), followed by investments, environment, biodiversity. In the case of Cluj municipality, for the analyzed period, among the 14 hashtags used, the three most frequent were also the ones with the highest average engagement rate. These were related to identity coordinates (*#cluj*, *#clujnapoca*, *#romania*), followed by those related to the community, live within the community, and EU (e.g., *#comunitateunita*, *#comunitate*, *#urbanconect*, *#eu*, *#fondurieuropene*). However, since there were not enough data for all municipalities, this indicator was not included when calculating the final results.

Engagement during March 15th -April 18th, 2024

Overall, Bucharest had the highest engagement rate, followed by Constanța, Cluj-Napoca, Iași, and Timișoara. However, considering the commitment of the municipalities on social media, the engagement by post still indicates Bucharest in the first position, followed by Timișoara, Cluj-Napoca, Iași, and places Constanța last. A higher number of posts does not necessarily translate into a proportional engagement. Considering the overall analysis for the three platforms, Facebook has the highest total engagement rate by day (614) and average engagement (engagement by post) (120), followed by Instagram (102 /68), and YouTube (7,23/12,55). Regarding the types of engagement, the results highlight likes, followed by comments on Facebook. Cluj-Napoca is an outlier, with an average of 86

likes by post on Instagram, followed by Bucharest with a rate of 31 comments by post on Facebook. Regarding average shares for the content posted on Facebook, the first position is occupied by Cluj-Napoca (15), followed by Bucharest (11), Timișoara (8), Constanța (6), and Iași (4). These offer an evaluation of the efficiency of the municipalities' activity on social media. In the case of Cluj-Napoca and especially Timișoara, the high average does not necessarily indicate better results, in the same way as in the case of Iași and Constanța, do not indicate low results, but rather more (or less) efficiency.

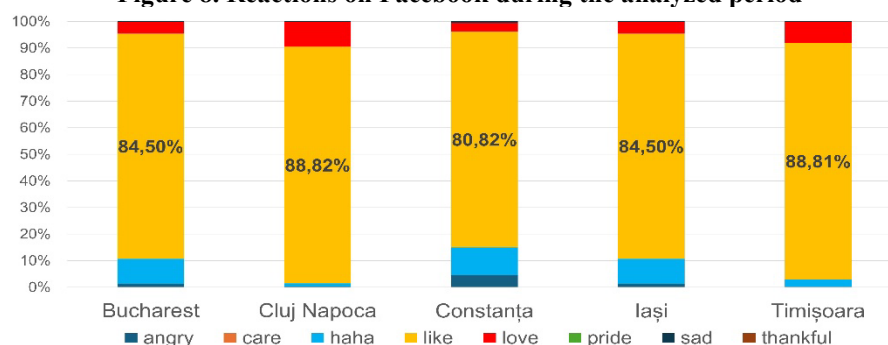
Figure 7 Facebook engagement by type of content



Considering Facebook posts, most of the engagement/post is received for albums, followed by videos and photos (Figure 7), correlated to the number of disseminated content, thus indicating an efficient approach and alignment to public interests online.

Regarding the type of reactions used by the public on Facebook when interacting with the posted content, most of them were „like” (85%), with only a little rate for “ha-ha” (6,7%) and “love” (overall 5,9%). Out of the total “ha-ha” reactions, there is a distinctive manifestation for Constanța, Bucharest and Iași (near 10% each, out of their total reactions.). During the analyzed period there were no reactions of “care”, “pride” or “thankful”. However, “sad” and “angry” had a low but existent percentage (1,41% and 0,22%).

Figure 8. Reactions on Facebook during the analyzed period

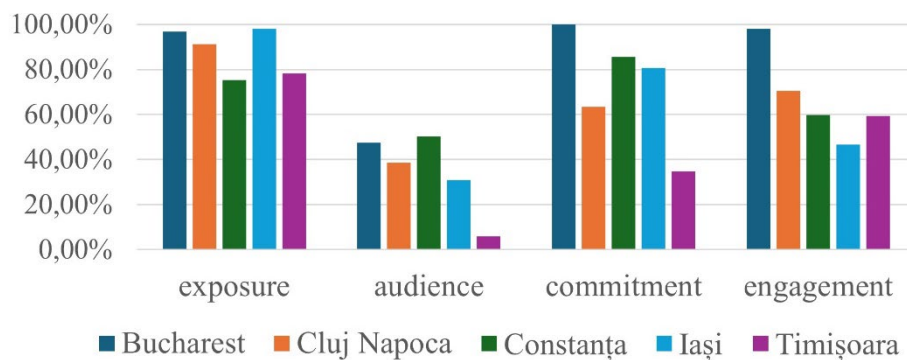


Overall social media activity in the analyzed period

As a final step of the research, data were aggregated to generate an integrated score for each of the four analyzed dimensions, taking into consideration the overall numbers for all

three platforms, for each of the municipalities. First, to make it comparable and possible to aggregate, all data was transformed into percentage, by referring to the highest value among all five municipalities as the maximum 100% for each of the analyzed indicators. Secondly, the score for each of the four dimensions was calculated. Exposure was resulted as an average of its indicators. Audience was calculated as an average between the percentage corresponding to the number of total fans (subscribers or followers) and the percentage for the total reach associated for the analyzed period. The final results may be influenced by the fact that reach is an estimated value. For YouTube, the corresponding percentage for the available number of total views was considered. Commitment resulted on the basis of the percentage for the number of posts during the analyzed period. Engagement was calculated as an average of the percentage corresponding to three engagement metrics, total engagement rate (to capture the general value), average engagement (to relate it to the number of posts), and engagement by reach (to include the value of the estimated total audience). The results are presented below. However, at this point they only illustrate a proposed model, which needs advanced testing to investigate its validity. The author of this study stresses once more that these results do not indicate the quality of relationships between the investigated municipalities and their public, but their extent or degree.

Figure 9. Aggregated results on the four investigated dimensions



Conclusions

Social media communication activity is an important coordinate in government PR but is still emerging as a practice and research topic. The present study was aimed to advance the discussion regarding the relevancy and usability of a PR approach in the investigation of social media communication for entities in local government. Following an extensive review of the relevant theories and published articles, it emphasizes the role of an integrated approach, identifying the particular areas for researching the topic. Regarding the published online content, it proposes a methodological framework including the investigation of *exposure*, *interest*, *commitment*, and *engagement* as four complementary areas associated to the dialogic approach, relational paradigm, measurement principles, and strategic dimension of public relations. The conducted study, using content analysis for investigating the Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube profiles of five municipalities illustrate the use of quantitative coordinates of social media PR research, as a component of the extended framework of GPR measurement. The results highlight the degree of the social media

relations between the analyzed municipalities and their public. The conclusions are in line with previously published research, showing that public authorities mostly use Facebook. However, especially YouTube and, to some extent, Instagram are potentially growing valuable channels for government communication, generating relevant engagement in some of the cases. The rate of social media content (commitment) is not necessarily influenced by the history on social media (exposure) for the analyzed municipalities, and neither is the overall audience or the engagement of the public.

The limitations of the present research are derived from its research design. As a pilot study investigating GPR by using a conceptual framework substantiated by the theoretical and conceptual coordinates of public relations, it was mostly meant to illustrate the approach. There are four main limitations and necessary future developments proposed. First, the investigated period should be wider, to lead to more relevant and valuable conclusions and to allow extensive comparisons between the analyzed actors. For the same purpose, a larger number of public authorities should be investigated. Third, a qualitative dimension of the research is mandatory, to access more insightful conclusions regarding the posted content and the generated engagement. Fourth, the validity of the proposed model needs to be further tested, by using more numerous data. Additionally, a new study investigating the strategic dimension and planning of the social media activity at the level of the internal PR departments' teams within the government, is necessary to depict a clearer picture regarding the practice in Romania. The paper offers a descriptive image of the local realities for the investigated period, and it highlights the value of the PR approach in government communication, thus contributing to the field of government public relations.

Abbreviations

PR - public relations

GPR – government public relations

M - municipality

CH – city hall

PA – public authority/public authorities

OPR – organization-public relations (specific to public relations theory)

PO – profit-based organizations / NPO – nonprofit organizations

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