

## KEY FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE ONLINE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY OF ROMANIAN BRANDS

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**Abstract.** *Organizations are focused to constantly change their communication strategy in order to be in trend with the social and technological development. The pressure to be up to date, innovative and presenting something new every time are engaging with their public is even bigger in online communication. This study takes a close look at organizational and social factors that influence online communication strategy in Romania. Qualitative analysis was conducted based on 10 communication briefs from 10 different brands whose daily activities are based in Romania. By coding relevant quotations from the documents analyzed we have identified which are the organizational factors and which are the social factors that influence online communication strategy of brands that are part of multinational corporations in Romania. New routes of development in practice have been identified as well as new areas for research.*

**Keywords:** *communication strategy; social factors; organizational factors; online channels; cultural influence; Romanian brands.*

### Introduction

The public relations practice is growing rapidly around the world due to the technological changes. But this growth is uneven because public relations practice and education are concentrated in the United States and Western Europe (Botan, 1992, p.149) and are less advanced in the rest of the world. However, due to the rising of the internet, many major companies have now the possibility to conduct business in more than one country, including Romania, so they are called *multinational corporations* (MNC's). Therefore, MNC's are working with local public relations practitioners in order to achieve their business goals.

In the context of a more local communication, it is crucial for public relations practitioners to understand the most relevant factors in building the communication strategies. Therefore, this article takes a closer look to the factors that influence the communication strategy. First, a literature review will support the idea that there are two important types of factors that are influencing the communication strategy: social factors and organizational factors. On the basis of the factors mentioned in the literature review, a qualitative analysis study was conducted in order to explore 10 communication briefs belonging to 10 important Romanian brands with activity in areas such as food, beauty, telecom, health, gas and oil, financial, entertainment or software.

Analyzing the documents helped to identify the most relevant factors that are influencing the communication strategy in the Romanian market as well as new areas for research.

### Literature review

Technological and social pressure force brands to constantly change the business strategy. In online communication, the pressure to react now, in a creative way, with a low budget and high results is even bigger. But even under the pressure of time, a good communication strategy begins with a good formulation of it (Allio, 2005). Coman considers that a strategy should be determined by the following organizational factors: financial resources, public, business objectives, context and qualities of the public relations practitioners (Coman, 2006, p. 98). Following this line, researchers have identified others organizational factors such as organizational structure, informational system, type of leadership, managers, budget or motivation (Pearce & Robinson, 2011).

It's important to note that this list of organizational factors is not exhaustive, on the contrary, it could include others factors as well depending on the communication purpose such as organizational culture, company dimension, regional or global influence, legal regulations, the type of activity, type of product, market or competition. This is the reason why, when it comes to communication strategy, researchers propose a *holistic theoretical model*. Okumus (2001) has organized the factors that could influence the communication strategy in four categories in order to present his holistic theory: (1) *content* – strategic decision, implementation; (2) *context* – it could be intern (organizational structure, organizational culture, organizational learning) and extern (environment and social behavior); (3) *process* – planning, resources, human resources, communication, monitoring, feedback and external partners; (4) *results*. But *the holistic model* presented by Okumus could be improved by including one more step between context and process and it should be the *communication channel*, which has the potential to influence how the message is transmitted to the public.

But research is more focused on organizational factors that are influencing the communication strategy and less on the social factors that could have an input in the public relations practices such as nature of culture, for example. When thinking about culture and public relations, the theoretical framework of Geert Hofstede (1997) comes to mind, which has been considered a good start for understanding the dynamics of intercultural and organizational communication and public relations. Hofstede identified five cultural variables that influence communication and relationships in organizational settings: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/ femininity, individualism/ collectivism and Confucianism or long term orientation (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2012).

Sriramesh and Verčič (2003) believe that it is important for public relations professionals to be able to predict the best way to practice public relations in a particular country or region (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003). Both authors also support the idea of identifying the relationships between public relations and other environmental variables in order to increase the ability to predict which strategies and techniques are better suited to a particular organizational environment. In their theoretical framework based on anecdotal evidence, they described five interrelated factors that influence public relations practices: (1) *political system* – public relations practices depending on

the level of public opinion in each country; (2) *level of economic development* – closely linked with the political ideology because political conditions affect economic decision-making in every country and vice versa; (3) *level of activism* – is important for practitioners to establish the nature of activism and determine how it influences the public relations activities in that country; (4) *nature of culture* – communication influences and is influenced by culture; logically, culture affects public relations and public relations help alter culture; (5) *nature of media system* – media relations represent an important focus for a public relations practitioner in order to establish a positive relationship (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2013). These five environmental variables have the potential to identify the uniqueness of the context for public relations practice in each nation or culture, thereby also affecting the choice of public relations strategies and practices.

In intercultural communication it is important to highlight some of the most important topics of analysis and discussion consisting in the cultural differences between cultures like national identity, cultural identity, and cultural identification, nonverbal communication, perceptual differences (time, status, trust), gender identification (masculinity/ femininity), experiences of discrimination, individualism vs. collectivism, a sense of *otherness* when interacting in unfamiliar cultures, religions and ideological differences, negotiation of friendship and kinship, ethical questions, linguistic differences, code switching and others (Martin & Nakayama, 2010; Samovar & Porter, 2003). From the standpoint of a public relations professional tasked with creating messages for multiple publics and negotiating relationships among diverse stakeholders, it might be best to take a *generic approach* in order to understand public relations situations in the global environment (Kent & Taylor, 2011).

Public relations practitioners have understood that the first thing that one has to do before communicating about anything is to conduct research, whether the message is supposed to be created for an internal group like the stakeholders or for an external group like the stakeholders. *The generic approach* has been proposed by Kent and Taylor (2007) as a model for preparing for intercultural public relations situations because it emphasizes genuine understanding of cultures and communication rather than simply convincing to act as the practitioner wants.

According to the two authors, a public relations professional who is interested in communicating with intercultural publics should engage in six activities: (1) *identify features of the situation* – the practitioner needs to take a broad approach to understanding the rhetorical situation that happened before, to estimate what are the expectations of the public and which specific norms and values will influence public's interpretation of the message; (2) *identify the intended audience effects* – this is the step when it is important to clarify the goals of the organization's actual communication and trying to overcome ethnocentrism in order to understand others cultures and not judging them by our own cultural standards; (3) *clarify the motivational intent of the organization and publics* – the goal of the third step is to find where the interests of both the organization and the public intersect; (4) *examine how meaning is created* – suggests that practitioners should examine the archetypal or symbolic nature of language and communication in the culture and learn about cultural archetypes, heroes, villains, social and political leaders in order to be better prepared to succeed in intercultural contexts; (5) *examine strategic considerations* – includes issues such as respect for elders, the role of government, religious and social features, trust and perception of time and it is

equally important to understand the nature of the media system; (6) *use communication principles and theory to understand how culture influences organizations and communication* – is actually the most important principle highlighting that understanding theory, how people think and understand ideas and the process of meaning making is essential to effective intercultural communication (Kent & Taylor, 2011, p.56).

*Contingency theory* is based on the premise that there is no one best way of managing organizations and practicing public relations that is optimal for all situations and argue that different strategies and practices should be considered for different environmental contexts in order to find an optimal fit (Yoonheung & Glen, 2005, p. 173). The theory emphasizes situational and environmental factors that have an impact on how public relations are practiced and it has the potential to provide a more holistic picture of public relations practices by considering *national identity* and social and cultural factors.

Even though all these studies have been reporting that cultural differences have an impact on public relations practices (Kinzer and Bohn 1985; Kent & Taylor, 2011; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2013; Zerfass et al., 2008), in Romania few public relations practitioners are showing their interest in the role of nature of culture in the process of communication with the publics. But this is an idea to be debated in the following research sections.

### **Research questions**

Given all this factors listed in the literature review and influenced mostly by the top management decisions, we have launched an empirical research in order to understand the most important factors that influence the communication strategy for Romanian brands. In order to find out, we have suggested the following research questions:

Q1: Which are the most relevant organizational factors that are influencing the online communication strategy for Romanian brands?

Q2: Which are the social factors that are influencing the online communication strategy for Romanian brands?

Q3: Which are the share between organizational factors and social factors when it comes to online communication strategy on the Romanian market?

### **Methodology**

In order to address the issues at hand, a qualitative approach was applied. In the context of analyzing which are the factors that are influencing the communication strategy in Romania, we have conducted a qualitative study with focus on answering the research questions and generalizing new routes of development in public relations practice.

The study was conducted in Romania and was based on 10 communications briefs sent by MNC's digital managers to public relations specialists in order to build a communication strategy for their brands. The documents were selected by selective sampling based on one single condition – the communication brief to be dated between 2016 and 2017 in order to have the certainty of recent results in the practice of public relations. It is important to be noted that we had access to this documents through the partnership between a local digital agency and his clients (MNC's) and so the names of

the companies are confidential as well as the full content of the documents. If it is imperative to access the briefs in order to demonstrate the validity of this study, a special request will be sent to the researchers in order to verify the authenticity of the results.

Therefore, this phase of the study comprised a set of 10 communication briefs representing a cross section of brands with activity in areas such as food, healthcare system, beauty, financial system, software, entertainment, telecom or gas and oil. The literature review and the expertise of the members of the research team contributed to the development of a qualitative coding of selective quotations from the documents. In order to have an easy access to the big picture and revealing the meanings and the relationships between the codes we used ATLAS.ti, specially designed software for qualitative and mixed methods data analysis. Each communication brief was added to ATLAS.ti in order to identify all the factors mentioned in the document with the purpose to be considered in the online communication strategy built by the public relations specialists. Therefore, all documents were operationalized by using the factors mentioned in the literature review and their definitions. We need to keep in mind that the essence of the interpretative documents is reconstructed rather than being clearly identifiable. This limitation of the qualitative content analysis method derives from the ambiguity of language and epistemological boundaries.

## Findings and discussion

### ***Organizational key factors that influence online communication strategy for Romanian brands (RQ1)***

When it comes to the question of which are the most important factors that influence the communication strategies of Romanian brands, the organizational ones are certainly the most often mentioned. Through *organizational factors* we are referring to the factors that depend by the brand only, MNC's being the only entity that could control variables. Each communication brief mentions an average of 9 organizational factors that could influence the message transmitted to the public. Which are the organizational factors that matter the most for the communication strategy of Romanian brands? Sorted by the number of mentions after coding the quotations based on the literature review, we reached the following factors: business objective, product, market, social insight, global influence, company dimension, competition, brand values and brand personality, brand history and local influence (Graphic 1).

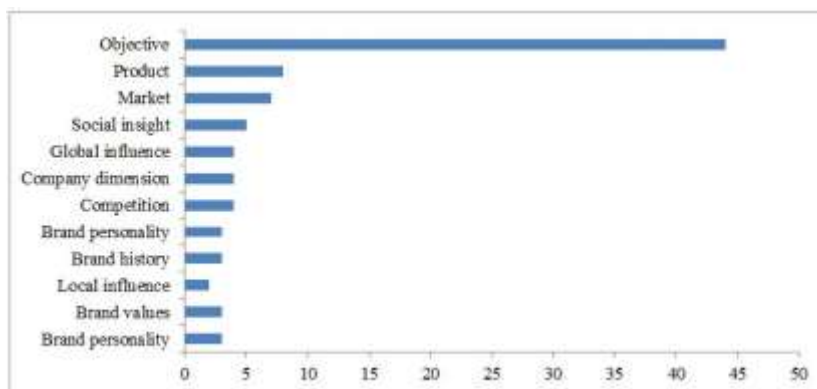
All the documents analyzed mentioned an average of 4.4 business objective, which means that the purpose of communication is the most important factor when it comes to strategy. 9 out of 10 documents mentioned awareness as one of the main objective of the communication strategy, which means that, besides the fact that we're talking about international brands, the communication managers consider that the brands still have an awareness weakness in the market context (Graphic 2).

"Increase on both organic and paid reach" (Entertainment).

"Generate awareness for the problem and for the solution" (Software).

"Create awareness through social media" (Chocolate).

"Increase brand visibility and awareness" (Financial).



**Graphic 1. Organizational key factors that influence online communication strategy for Romanian brands**

On the other hand, 7 out of 10 companies wish to build a community in order to engage with the customers. This is the evidence that technological and social pressure force brands to constantly change their business strategy in order to establish a closer relationship with their publics.

“Establish a communication bridge between brand and his followers” (Financial).

“Build the everyday conversation” (Beauty).

“Create an online channel in order to engage with our customers” (Food).

The product and the market are important factors as well, described in the communication briefs, but we consider that it should be the center of communication without which no public relation practice would be possible. Instead, we would like to take a closer look to the *social insight*.

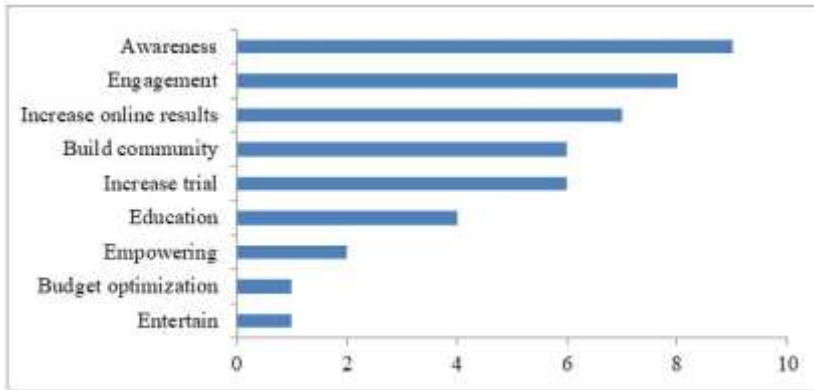
Only half of the briefs mentioned the social insight’s influence on the communication strategy. In order to build a strong message, we consider that it is imperatively important for the brands to understand the environment including the social context and the social behavior, which means having a social insight about the publics. Of course, by having social insights, the brands have to assume a role of researcher and be interested in knowing both their stakeholders and stakeseekers.

“I am buying online because I’m looking for promotions/discounts and sometimes prices are lower when one buys online” (Financial).

“I want to experience all that life has to offer and I work hard in order to achieve all my wishes” (Telecom).

“1 of 10 users who visit adult websites is younger than 10 years old” (Software).

Global and local influences are as well mentioned in the documents, but only in the context of the market share (global or local) and the brand history.



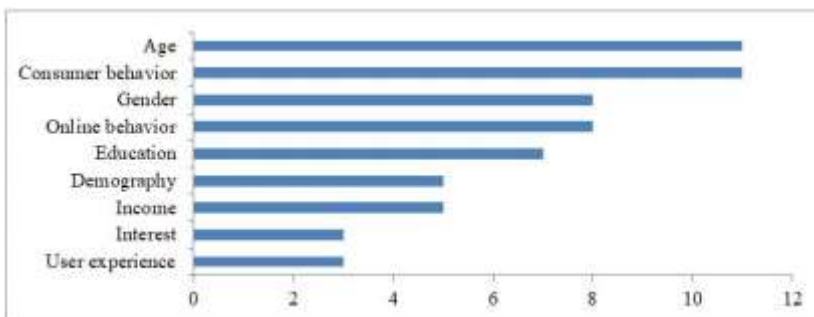
**Graphic 2. Main business objectives**

***Social key factors that influence online communication strategy for Romanian brands (RQ2)***

Social factors are referring to the variables that cannot be controlled by the organization because they are influenced by the external public of the brand only. Each brief communication mentioned an average of 6.1 social factors considered by the digital managers that could influence the communication strategy and, as a result, they are relevant for the brand. Based on the literature review discussed in the section above, we coded the relevant quotations from the briefs and identified the following social factors, listed by the number of total mentions: age, gender, consumer behavior and online behavior, education, demography, income, interests and user experience (Graphic 3).

All documents pointed out that the age of the targeted public is one of the most important factors when it comes to the matter of creating the main message of the campaign. It is followed by the gender, a factor that is referring to both males and females (exception for the beauty brand whose message is addressed to women only).

On the other hand, the research revealed that only 6 out of 10 briefs mentioned the consumer behavior, even if we are talking about online or offline behavior.



**Graphic 3. Social key factors that influence online communication strategy for Romanian brands**

“The consumers are now, more than ever connected globally, obsessed with sharing makeup experiences or products and driven by education” (Makeup).

“The consumers are interested in the health of the family, take care of them and wish for a normal life like they have seen abroad” (Health).

“The consumers think that having the latest products and services gives others a good impression on them” (Telecom).

“For the consumers, YouTube is the place to go when they want to learn the newest trends in makeup, Facebook is the online TV from where they find out about the newest things, whereas Instagram is a driver that captures the user’s attention” (Makeup).

“The consumer would rather buy online because he can compare prices easier” (Financial).

“By developing social networks, the consumers are viewed as in trend by people in their community” (Telecom).

Age, gender, demography and education and the level of income are social factors that co-occurrence. The co-occurrence refers to the co-existing of two or more codes in the project; two coders are used on the same quotation and we can examine how many times they are co-existing helping us identify relations between the quotations. By coding the documents, we observed that social factors like age and education co-occurred in 6 situations while education and the level of income co-occurred in 4 situations, which means that half of the brands wish to communicate with the same target: 25-55 years, medium-high education, medium-high income.

“Target: men and women, 25-50 years, medium to high education, medium to high income” (Gas and oil).

“Target: men and women, 21-45 years, medium-high income, urban and rural with high education” (Financial).

“Target: 25-60 years, medium-high studies, incomes above average” (Food).

**Table 1. Co-occurrence between age, gender, education and income**

	Education	Income
Age	6	3
Gender	4	2

***Which factors are most important when it comes to engaging with the external public (RQ3)***

A look to the overall research results shows that organizational factors are more often mentioned than social factors. Experience shows that in Romania, companies are mostly focused on the business objective and don’t have a holistic overview in order to consider all the factors that could influence the communication strategy for a brand. Even though all these studies have been reporting that social and cultural differences have an impact on public relations practices (Kinzer and Bohn 1985; Kent & Taylor, 2011; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2013; Zerfass et al., 2008), Romanian brands did not overcome the traditional public relations practices and continue to communicate with their public only by changing the message and the communication channel, not the brand strategy overall.



**Table 2. The share between organizational factors and social factors**

	Education	Income
Age	6	3
Gender	4	2

## Conclusions

Various materials have been collected in this qualitative study, which analyzed 10 communication briefs belonging to international brands with activity in the Romanian market. The study clarified a wide range of answers to questions referring to the factors that influence the online communication strategy in the Romanian local context. One of the results is that MNC's are not ready to invest in research in order to find the most valuable insights for their stakeholders. This shows that online communication is still a recent field in Romania, where MNC's continue to be interested in the organizational factors in order to achieve the business objective.

Nevertheless, our research was able to identify a number of overlapping issues which could be interpreted as cornerstones for developing a public relations function in practice and might inspire future research. This study could be as well interpreted as a wakeup call: technological and social pressure force brands to constantly change the business strategy in order to be relevant for their public. When the brand changes the communication channel it should consider to change the strategy as well based on a strong research about their stakeholders and their online behavior.

Throughout this study we were able to identify that the cultural factors have to be considered in the communication strategy because they are not even mentioned in the communication briefs written for the public relations specialists, even if communication influences and is influenced by culture (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003).

Therefore, there is a trend to achieve the company's objective through mass messages send through online channels. This is considered to be a more effective tactic that implies fewer resources and brings higher results. However, it was not demonstrated how efficient this strategic decision is, considering the initial objective of the company and the fact that this strategy is based on unique messages. In addition, the pressure of the digital trends and technological innovations created a gap between the quality of the message and the pressure to send the message in real time. Everything has to happen *now*, and what today is new, tomorrow will be already old-fashioned. Therefore, user's behavior is changing constantly, influenced by the high number of changes implemented in the online channels and by the speed with which these changes are implemented globally.

In this context, the final purpose of the research will be to bring a new perspective upon the digital communication strategies in Romania, by identifying the most important factors that influence the final message from the brand to the client. Also, the results have the potential to contribute to a new future research and create a connection between the classical theoretical models of public relations and future new possible models, with focus on the communication channel and the characteristics of the targeted public.

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