

Improving Communication. Case study: Anti-COVID Speech for Young People

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Abstract: *The paper “Improving Communication. Case study: Anti-COVID Speech for Young People” focuses on the contemporary discourse generated by and addressed to the young generation, with emphasis on the digital setting, the public discourse and the current pandemic. The aim of this paper is to identify up-to-date communication techniques meant to facilitate communication with young people. At a time when young people feel at home in the virtual world, communication needs to adapt and communicators need to assess how to best convey information so that the intended message is received correctly. Moreover, given that we are currently experiencing an unprecedented pandemic, it is even more important for communicators to find the right way to be heard. In order to assess best practice when communicating with young people, we first need to ascertain their own specific way of interaction. To this aim, in this paper we shall first analyse several articles written by and for young people according to an analysis grid, in order to identify specific communication features. Then, we shall discuss the findings of a quantitative analysis of anti-COVID communication during the pandemic, which we performed by means of an anonymous questionnaire addressed to young people aged 18-35. The results of these two research approaches will determine what young people expect from public discourse and the best ways to convey information efficiently to this age group, especially in a time of crisis such as the current pandemic. Therefore, this paper addresses a present-day issue, in an attempt to identify efficient communication methods that reach the young generation and improve overall public discourse.*

Keywords: *communication, young people, pandemic, public discourse.*

1. Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to establish an efficient way of communicating with young people in a public speech setting as well as in other settings where information needs to be accurately conveyed. The young generation has strayed from traditional interaction and lives in a fast-paced, ever-changing world of instant communication through digital and virtual means. This means that the already established ways of conducting public discourse will not attract young people's attention and will likely fail in having the information promoted further by this age group. Therefore, in this paper we will try to identify the communication methods preferred by the young generation and the ways in which interaction with young people can be improved in times of crisis.

2. Expert sources consulted

The corpus for this paper consists mainly of electronic sources, as the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic is novel and has not yet been covered in recognized published, printed books. However, the theoretical part of the paper has been based on printed sources on the topics of communication, public discourse (mass-media) and the digital setting.

Fârte (2004: 139) defines communication as "a collective act governed by a set of rules" which leads us to assume that, if we abide by the rules we should achieve efficiency. He also states that the concept of communication is based on the act itself which "is related to change in the world" (Fârte 2004: 139). This means that we should regard efficiency in communication as a responsibility that could impact our world and it is thus imperative that we make the right choices in terms of context, meaning and use of language. However, these choices will be dependent on the type of communication we wish to create. Although the areas of choice widely remain the same, particular consideration needs to be paid to the context as it determines the

evolution of our discourse. Public communication will have a different framework to the average interaction between two people, as it lacks the possibility of immediate feedback. Information comes from a single source and is transmitted to a large audience through means that do not allow feedback (Agabrian, 2008). Moreover, the context that surrounds public communication relies heavily on the means used to convey the message. So, if the means of transmission change, as media tends to do quite rapidly, the framework changes. For example, public communication that used to be delivered only through television, can now be transmitted online and offers the possibility of live interaction, users making comments during transmission. New technologies are now available to anyone, but in public communication only the issuing body is able to control access (Popa, 2002). More often than not, public communication tends to be mistaken for mass media, showing how powerful the means of transmission are in the public perception. However, the term mass media explains its own meaning through the origin of the words – media comes from Latin and means tools and mass refers to a large audience, therefore the significance of this term lays in the instruments used to communicate a message rather than a type of communication. Agabrian (2008: 86) explains this term as “an array of instruments through which communication takes place in modern society”. This paper has focused on this type of communication as well as mass media due to the target group of people it attracts. The continuous development of technology has been very well received by young people and continues to be used to seek information and to interact with others. This leads us to the next theoretical aspect we explored, that of the digital setting for communication. Badău (2008: 1) compares this setting to the likes of the industrial revolution in terms of development and impact as basically another world has been created on top of the real one and the consequences are global. Within this new setting, social media seems to be most popular, with statistics showing a staggering 3.2 billion users in 2020, in Romania

only (<https://www.businessdays.ro/blog/tehnologie-inovatie/25-statistici-privind-social-media-in-2020>, last accessed on 03.05.2021). Furthermore, for young people, the daily use of the Internet and the virtual world is not only a choice nowadays, but also a necessity. The dominant status of digitalisation is mainly determined by the multi-tasking features of technology, which can achieve more than one function at the same time, with no human errors (Stănciugelu et al, 2014). Therefore, the professional area of our lives is now placed in the digital setting as well and it can only stand to reason that communication processes should now take this aspect into consideration.

3. Research methods

I. Article analysis: the aim of this research method is to establish how young people convey information to one another, which are their preferred narrative elements and what they use to draw attention to the topic. This analysis relies on a framework presented in the table shown in the Results section, which illustrates how many elements are found in each text. The aspects that we looked at are the following:

- The display of information – is information summarized or detailed?
- The meaning – is there denotation or connotation? Is the relayed meaning close to reality or is it used figuratively?
- The language – some articles are written entirely in Romanian, others in English, whereas some use both languages
- The purpose – narrative text (it relays a succession of events), descriptive (it describes objects or people), informative (it conveys ideas and facilitates understanding), argumentative (it presents a point of view), and procedural (it provides scientific description)
- The choice of using paragraphs or not
- The use of visual elements and images
- Elements of coherence: clarifying, referential, interpersonal, subjectivity and attitude-wise

- The use of dialogue
- Functionality of the text: subjective, neutral, emotional, impersonal, motivational.

This analysis grid allowed us to identify the most common aspects and highlight their importance in young people's communication. This will provide a benchmark for the way discourses addressed to this age group should be formulated in order to achieve an efficient response.

II. Quantitative analysis: A questionnaire was used to ascertain young people's perspective on communication during the current pandemic. The questionnaire comprises 16 questions of different types (open and closed questions, multiple choice questions, rating scale questions), addressed to young people aged 18-35. First, we focused on some demographic data, which gave us an idea of where the respondents stood in the pandemic setting and how they could be affected by it. This, in turn, helped us assess the importance of appropriate and effective communication for this category of people. Then, we looked at various aspects of public pandemic discourse to determine how it was received by young people and if the information had been accurately relayed. Lastly, we wanted to find out where young people seek information in times of crisis and what suggestions they could make to improve current communication.

The findings arrived at following these research approaches allowed us to compile a set of suggestions meant to improve communication for young people and withstand the current issues surrounding the COVID 19 pandemic.

4. Results

The first research method consisted of analysing nine articles on cyberbullying, written by young people. They have been selected from the website mediadigitala.ro and assessed according to a grid of narrative aspects detailed in the table below and applied to each text. The titles of the

articles are provided at the top and the analysis grid in the left pane. Each aspect in the grid that has been identified in one or more texts is marked by an “x”.

| Titles/ Analysis grid | What is cyber bullying & how do we face it? | Cyber bullying | Online haters | Online harass ment | Youth & children. cyberbul lying victims | Haters & cyberbul lying | Cyberbu llying or virtual violence | Victims' online blaming & its effects | Hate speech (cyberbu llying) |
|--------------------------|--|-------------------|------------------|--------------------------|--|-------------------------------|---|---|---------------------------------------|
| Summarised | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X |
| Extended | | | | | | | X | | |
| Denotation | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Connotation | | | | | | | | | |
| Romanian | X | X | | X | X | | X | X | X |
| English | | | | | | | | | |
| Ro + En | | | X | | | X | | | |
| Informative | | | | | | | X | | |
| Expositional | X | X | X | | | X | | X | |
| Explanatory | | | | X | | | | | X |
| Argumentative | | X | X | | X | | | X | X |
| Narrative | | | | | | | | | |
| Procedural | X | | | | | | | | |
| Paragraphs | | X | | X | X | X | | X | |
| Lack of paragraphs | X | | X | | | | X | | X |
| Verbal | | X | | X | | | | | X |
| Imagistic | | | | | | | | | |
| Visual | X | | X | | X | X | X | X | |
| Explanatory | | | | | | X | | | X |
| Referential | | | | X | | | | | |
| Coherence | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | X |
| Interpersonal | | | X | | X | | | | |
| Attitude-wise | | | | | | | | | |
| Subjectivity | | | | | | | | | |
| Relational | X | X | | | X | | | | X |
| Rhetorical | | | | | X | | | X | |
| Dialogue | | | | | | | | | |
| Motivational | X | | | | | | | x | |
| Orality | | | | | | X | | | |
| Emotional | | | x | | | X | | | |
| Subjective | | | | | | | | | |
| Neutral | | | | | x | | X | | X |
| Impersonal | | X | | x | | | | | |
| Motivational | X | | | | | | | | |

At first glance, it can be noticed that most articles are summarised, with no other connotations than what was intended and are predominantly written in Romanian, although some include the use of English words that have been adapted to the Romanian language by the use of the indefinite article. This shows a desire to emphasize how important it is to have a correct understanding of the message. The information presented has been obtained from different sources but has then been relayed concisely, so that the reader is not lost in irrelevant details. The lack of connotation and the choice of language ensures clarity, leaving no room for misunderstanding. Moreover, the texts are mostly informational, providing accurate data from trustworthy sources. This, as well, conveys trust and shows that young people do take information seriously. However, the most striking aspect is the vast use of visual elements and images to enhance the message and facilitate understanding. As the subject matter of these articles is cyberbullying, which is a big issue for today's youth, it has to be graphically represented as well in order to truly show the suffering it causes and to develop a feeling of empathy in the reader.

In terms of discourse analysis though, these articles have brought to light a series of aspects that appear to be commonly used by young people and can serve as a benchmark for public discourses addressed to young people in the future. These are listed as follows:

- The use of English words in combination with Romanian ones or adapted to the Romanian language, such as *speech-ul* and *cyberbullying-ul*. These are used as keywords and are part of the titles. Young people are used to speaking this way and they often do so when interacting online.
- The display of a shocking image before the text to draw attention to what is about to be told and to illustrate the seriousness of the topic.

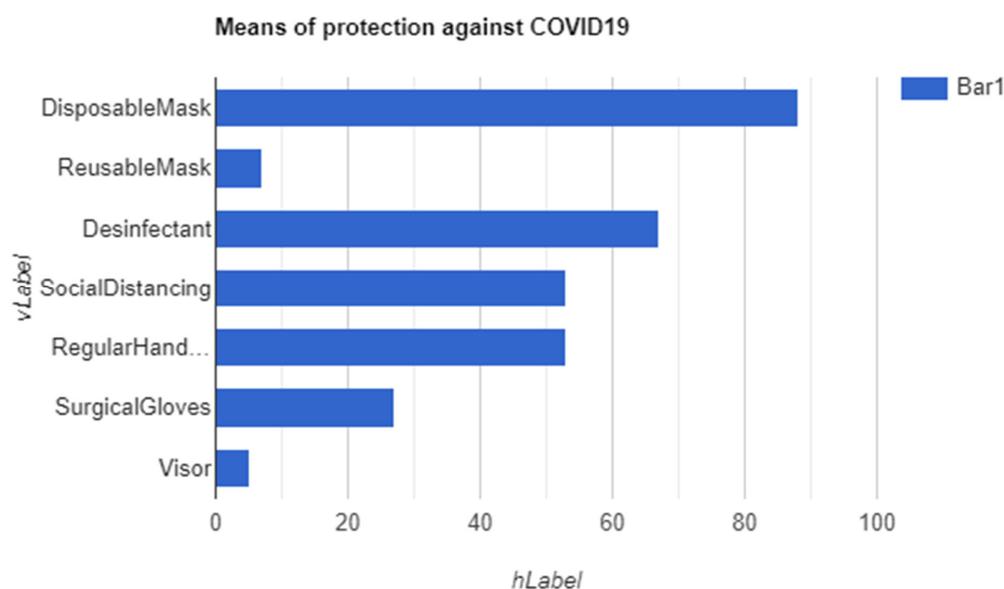
- The use of exhortations, urging the reader to do the right thing, such as: *Stand up for yourself! Don't allow your child to be the victim of cyberbullying!*
- The use of rhetorical questions, such as: *Are you sure you haven't caused this in any way?* This type of questions are not intended to get answers, but solely to illustrate a stereotype in victim questioning.
- The use of bold and italic fonts to highlight certain terms and ideas.
- The use of keywords in paragraphs.
- The use of charts to illustrate statistical data.
- The clear and concise display of information through bullet points.
- The use of storyboard-type images to create a framework.
- The use of bright and intense colours to highlight words; predominantly used colours tend to be red, blue, green and yellow
- The use of hashtags - in order to make a message stand out, young people use the hashtag symbol in front of it. They are widely used on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram and their meaning is very clear to this age group.

All these techniques have the purpose of creating a big impact on the reader, who will have a good understanding of the information relayed and will quickly identify the intended message.

The second research approach was quantitative and consisted in a questionnaire addressed to young people aged 18-35 in order to ascertain their perception of current anti-COVID communication. The questionnaire comprises 16 questions and has been answered by 85 young people. The first questions concerned the area they live in, gender, employment, marital status as well as their professional background. Their answers were used to establish the impact that the current pandemic could have on the respondents as it could influence their answers. We could conclude that most respondents were single, unemployed, with a medium level of education and living in the urban area. This points to their lack of dependents, such as children, and suggests that the threat of COVID-19 and

the restrictions imposed by the government during this pandemic have not affected them greatly. This is, however, good news for research as their answers are not influenced by their personal experience and their view of the current situation, and thus there is a higher chance that they will be objective in answering the questionnaire.

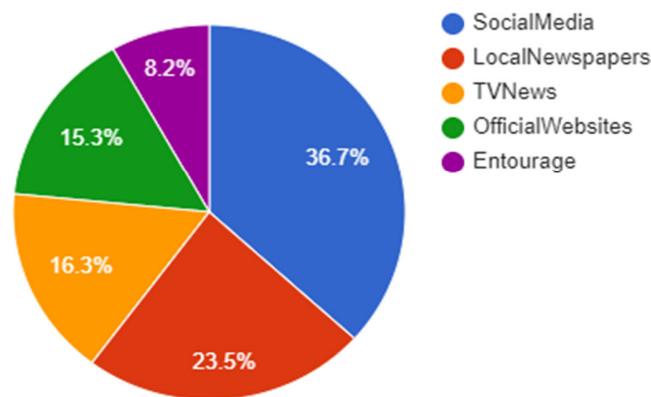
In our questionnaire, we focused mainly on three key aspects: the means of protection chosen by young people, where they seek information regarding the ongoing pandemic and what suggestions they have to improve the current public discourse. The results of the questionnaire have been turned into percentages and illustrated through graphs and pie charts to provide a visual representation and hence, a better understanding of the data.



As shown in the graph above, the respondents have chosen the disposable mask as the most used means of protection from the virus, closely followed by disinfectant and social distancing. The multiple-choice answers also included the use of reusable masks but it seems that young people are not keen on using them, preferring disposable masks instead. These results point to an association with the medical environment where the disposable mask is used daily, sometimes hourly, and they suggest that young people trust scientifically proven means of protection rather than creating their own or straying from the norm.

As for the choices young people make when it comes to finding information on current issues, especially in times of crisis such as the current pandemic, the results illustrated in the following pie chart indicate that the go-to place for young people is social media, even for important information. This is due to the immediate access to information provided by social media platforms and, of course, to their interactive character, which makes them a lot more appealing compared to traditional communication. The second choice is local newspapers, which also trend online nowadays so they offer the same speedy response to the information needs of young people. TV news channels unfortunately have only made it to third place in terms of preference, with many respondents stating that they feel confused by too much information offered on the news. Even though, in times like these, most people turn to the news channels for up-to-date information, it seems that young people do not find these reliable sources of information.

Information Sources



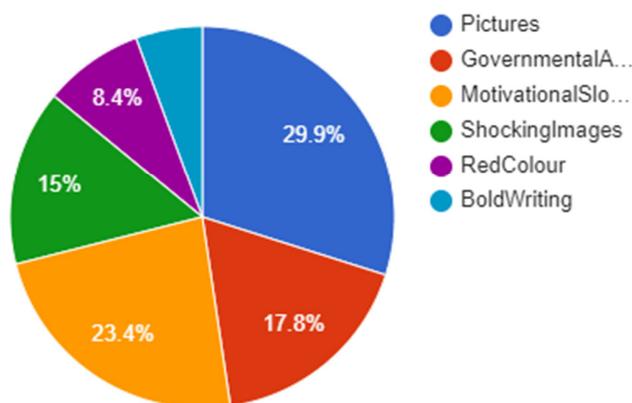
We also asked the respondents to choose, out of six possible answers, a maximum of two suggestions for improving public discourse on anti-COVID communication. This was aimed at determining the most important elements communication should have in order to be effective. According to the results shown in the pie chart below, it seems that young people believe that graphic images/pictures should become an integral part of pandemic communication. The visual representation of a message facilitates understanding and helps the reader remember the information as s/he relates it to the image. Next, the respondents suggested motivational slogans to draw attention to the content and to relay the message clearly. These are normally catchy and easy to remember and pass on to other people. The choice was, however, governmental authenticity, which strays from the marketing view that the first two choices seem to relate to. This suggests that, although young people wish to receive information in a concise and interactive manner, they also want it to be official and reliable. They do not want to be misguided in their beliefs and they also do not want

to sift through an abundance of information to find what is relevant and what not.

As with the analysis of the articles, the questionnaire has also highlighted a few findings that should be taken into account when communicating to young people:

- Exposing young people to an abundance of information leads to

Suggestions for presenting COVID19 Information



confusion; when they become overwhelmed, they are unable to process the message accurately.

- Misguiding and misinforming is very frustrating for young people but they tend not to get involved in arguments over what they consider right or wrong.
- The most important elements for an anti-COVID discourse to be effective are images, motivational slogans and governmental authenticity.
- The main source of information for young people is social media.
- Young people seek clear and concise information.

- Young people wish to be informed from official and accurate sources, so they can be sure that the information is correct.

Overall, our research proves that, in order to gain the interest of young people, communicators have to address certain aspects that ensure the desired impact. The results of both research methods we applied are fairly similar, which suggests a pattern in the way information should be transmitted to this age group.

Conclusion

The theoretical findings of this paper have provided insight into the way the communication process should be conducted in order to be effective and have provided us a better understanding of public communication as well as of the digitalisation of interaction nowadays.

The research part of the dissertation paper will not only consolidate the theoretical findings but will also identify new techniques to improve current communication. With a focus on young people, I will analyse texts written and addressed to youth so I can have a clear picture of what elements of the communication process are important to them. I will then continue research, though a questionnaire that will narrow the focus to young people's perception of the pandemic communication, in particular the discourses that urge people to protect themselves from COVID-19.

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