

The social communication tools and citizens' relationship with local governments. A comparison of Georgian and Polish cities

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## **The social communication tools and citizens' relationship with local governments. A comparison of Georgian and Polish cities**

The aim of this paper is to explore the impact of digital tools' application by citizens and the perceived usefulness of social media, on the relationship between the citizens and local authorities. The data was gathered in April-September 2020 through a survey (CAWI) among citizens of Poznan, Poland (n=502), and citizens of Kutaisi, Georgia (n=504), and analyzed with structural equation modeling. The findings show that the intensity of digital communication tools' usage for the purpose of participation in the city matters and the usefulness of social media contribute to the lasting relationships between citizens and local authorities in both countries. The novelty of this research concerns the comparison of two countries with different levels of development. Moreover, the research has been conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and evidenced the growing popularity of digital tools, as well as the citizens' readiness to adopt novel communication methods to participate in city matters.

**Key Words:** *digital communication tools; participatory city governance; relationship marketing*

**Track:** *Public Sector and Non-Profit Marketing*

## **1. Introduction**

Social media platforms have gained higher importance and became a dominant digital communication channel during the last decade. The role and power of social media has been even more obvious and recognizable amid Covid-19 pandemic, as people felt the unheard-of urge and necessity to connect with one another, read and share up-to-date information. Statistics show that well over 4.6 billion people have been active internet users by October 2020, which sums up to 59% of the global population. For this massive internet penetration, mobile has played a significant role as the internet channel was accessed in this way by 91% of total internet users worldwide (www.statista.com). Furthermore, 3.96 billion people have accounted as social media users, with a 10% yearly increase in 2020.

The rise of social media constitutes a paradigm shift for marketing (Marchand et al., 2020). In the marketing literature, significant attention of researchers was given to the role of digital tools in engaging customers in the branding process (Kim et al., 2008; Porter et al., 2011; Gensler et al., 2013; Wirtz 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014). At the same time, the public management literature highlights the importance of online tools in increasing stakeholders' engagement and participation in public management activities. The internet gave citizens the power to make an impact on the process of decision-making, including the local branding decisions (Boulianne 2009; Davis 2010; Mandarano e. al 2010; Zheng 2017, Bolivar et al. 2019).

Therefore, the main objective of the study is to understand the impact of social media application and their perceived usefulness on the relationship among the citizens and local authorities.

## **2. Background and hypotheses**

The primary characteristics that describe social media are engagement, connectedness, participation, conversation, and openness. The simple information spread, and awareness building have been elevated to collaboration, interactivity, and multi-side communication by Web 2.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Campbell et al. 2011). Social media has turned into a powerful digital multipurpose communication tool that helps a brand to establish and strengthen the digital voice, engage customers, and build unique customer relationships (Rose et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2012). According to many researchers, the use of digital technologies also significantly increased the level of citizens' involvement in public affairs and consequently fostered digital democracy (Linders, 2012). Therefore, we argue that the intensive use of social

media technologies will lead to strengthening relationships between the local authorities and citizens.

### *2.1 Perceived social media usefulness*

Various scholars in management science have studied individuals' attitudinal drivers towards particular online behavioral intentions and discovered that the level of their virtual engagement is directly correlated with the perception of usefulness of the tools compared to the traditional communication channels (Wu & Chen 2005; Liao et al. 1 2007; Casalo et al., 2010; Alharbi, Kang, 2014).

Previous studies on the Technology Acceptance Model have identified two major factors that influence the intensiveness of online tool usage (Davis, 1989). The first is the perceived ease of use, which refers to the user's belief on how the usage of this tool will make the experience seamless and convenient. The second is perceived usefulness, which brings more rational factors in place, and refers to the belief that the tool helps user enhance his or her operation performance. There can be various factors creating and shaping the user perception toward a particular tool, such as intuitive navigation, overall ease of use, and user-friendliness (Gefen et al., 2003). According to the authors, above-mentioned characteristics of online tools determine the effective building and strengthening of relationships with customers.

### *2.2 Strength of citizens' relationship with the administration*

The essence of governance concept is defined by replacing complex hierarchical structures and mechanisms into the more decentralized mechanisms and processes to fuel collaboration in the public sphere both internally and externally (Rhodes 1996; Hajer & Wagenaar 2003a, Bovaird and Löffler, 2003).

Governance principles have also been reflected in the city branding context, which proves that place branding is a complex network establishment between local authorities, private sector, and citizens united for a common purpose to develop a place brand (Giovanardi, 2012; Eshuis, Braun & Klijn, 2013; Pasquinelli, 2013). All these mentioned actors provide a significant contribution to place brand identity via engaging and initiating discussions, sharing new opinions and perspectives, which empowers them to shape the city brand (Houghton & Stevens, 2010).

The fundamentals of successful relationship marketing rely on establishing, developing, and maintaining lasting relational exchanges (Morgan and Hunt;1994). The primary idea of

relationship marketing is value creation, which is achieved via communication and interaction among different stakeholders (Grönroos, 2012; Gummesson, 2017). The studies about digital tools' influence on forming strong relationships are popular. By providing citizens with various tools for interacting with government, citizens are given an opportunity to closely engage with city management activities which increases their confidence toward local authorities and determines the long-term relationship strength (Im et al. 2014; Bracken, 2015; Steinhoff et al. 2019).

Moreover, according to "COVID-19 Digital Sentiment Insights" survey by McKinsey & Company, almost 12 million new users have started using online services in Central and Eastern Europe as a result of the imposed lockdown restrictions amid the pandemic (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Thus the pandemic has stressed the importance of digital communication and stimulated public sector to develop the tools and skills related to it.

Based on the above review, the following hypotheses have been suggested:

**H1. The greater the intensity of social media use, the stronger the citizens' relationship with the city.**

**H2: The greater the perceived social media usefulness, the stronger the citizens' relationship with the city.**

### **3. Study method**

As a study group, the citizens from two cities, Poznan (Poland) and Kutaisi (Georgia), have been selected. These are twinned cities from 2009 who actively cooperate in joint projects, which has been the primary reason for picking them for the study. Contrary to big urban hubs and capital cities which have a high portion of the migrant population, the peripheral areas are mainly inhabited by locals where place brand identity is strongly expressed, which has been another important reason of selecting these cities. Moreover, Georgia is an emerging economy in Europe, with new attempts to modernize local governments across all the cities. Contrary, Poland is a mature economy, however also with a post-transformation heritage, where the city of Poznan has considerable experience in building and developing citizen participation policies.

The studies in both countries have been carried out via online interview method (CAWI) with the help of local research agencies via their web panels with users ranging between the ages 18-65+. It is notable that both of the studies have been conducted in the active pandemic period between April-September 2020. A random sampling technique has been applied, and 504 surveys were conducted with the inhabitants of Kutaisi (Georgia), and 502 surveys were

carried out in Poznan (Poland). The structure of sample for each age and gender group reflected the entire population of each country.

Structured questions with Likert-type scales have been included in the study questionnaire (Malhotra, 2006), which consisted of ca. 30 closed and semi-open questions. Firstly, SPSS 24 has been employed for analyzing collected data for the preliminary analysis, and as the next step, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with IBM AMOS, ver.25 has been performed.

The studied constructs were measured using both existing and adapted scales. To measure the "intensity of social media use," a question asked respondents which digital tools they were using for the particular level of city brand management: for presenting ideas, for promoting their city, and for evaluating city brand. Each question has included yes/no answers.

To measure the "perceived social media usefulness" the respondents were asked to evaluate social media offered for use by the City Hall. The evaluation was based on five different criteria: ease of use, transparency, ease of communication with the municipality, user-orientation, and safety.

To measure the "relationship strength" the study adopted four items from (Morgan & Hunt, 1994): "My trust toward the local government has increased during past two years," "I want to be more actively involved in the communication with local government," "The communication with local government is useful for me," "I participate in the activities/events organized by city hall, several times a year." The items were rated on seven-point Likert scales ranging from 1 ("I strongly disagree ") to 7 ("I strongly agree").

## 4. Main results

### 4.1 Kutaisi, Georgia

Regarding the subsample in Kutaisi descriptive statistics for each studied item are shown in Table 1. As for the intensity – most citizens use digital tools for participation in city promotion (mean: 1.04) The highest score for perceived usefulness was 5.51, indicating the best evaluation of the dimension “ease of digital media use”.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Studied Variables in Kutaisi, Georgia (n = 504)**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
	Statistic	Statistic		
<b>Intensity of use</b>				
narz 5.Digital tools for participation in city brand co-creation	0.79	0.736	0.947	2.050
narz 7.Digital tools for participation in city promotion	1.04	0.773	0.876	1.612
narz 9. Digital tools for participation in city band evaluation	0.59	0.627	0.769	0.533

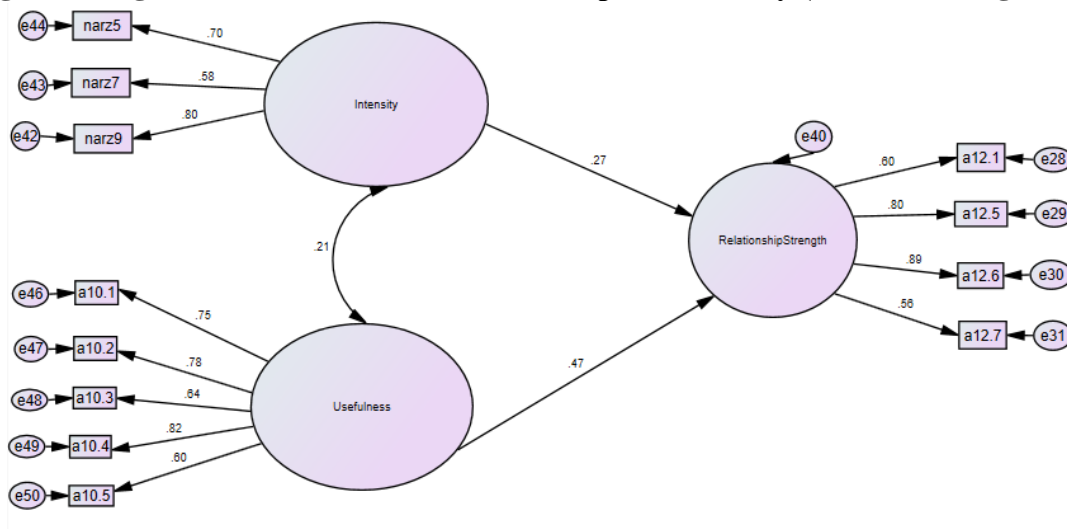
<b>Perceived usefulness of tools</b>				
a 10.1 Social Media - Easy to use	5.51	1.512	-0.875	0.225
a 10.2 Social Media - Transparent	4.65	1.713	-0.421	-0.499
a 10.3 Social Media - The ease of communication with municipality	4.40	1.798	-0.194	-0.816
a 10.4 Social Media - User-oriented	4.78	1.711	-0.507	-0.357
a 10.5 Social Media - Safe	4.32	1.882	-0.224	-0.863
<b>Relationship strength</b>				
a12.1 My trust toward the local government has increased during the past two years	3.80	2.149	0.043	-1.331
a12.5 I want to be more actively involved in communication with local government	4.34	2.188	-0.323	-1.243
a12.6 The communication with local government is useful for me	4.23	2.141	-0.247	-1.258
a12.7 I participate in the activities/events organized by city hall, several times a year	3.07	2.020	0.505	-1.008

Source: Own study.

Cronbach's Alpha has been employed for testing the reliability of the scales, which allowed the thorough examination of consistency for question items measuring the particular variable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The scale measuring "Intensity of use" has a good internal consistency ( $\alpha=0.726$ ). The scales measuring "Perceived usefulness of tools" and "Relationship strength" had an excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha =0.802$ ;  $\alpha =0.828$ ).

As a next step, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis has been performed for examining the structure and correlation among variables within the proposed conceptual model (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Digital tools and citizens' relationship with the city (Kutaisi, Georgia)**



Source: Own study. Note: Item full names are included in Table 1.

The results of SEM analysis indicate a satisfactory fit of the model constructed for the Georgian subsample. The incremental fit indices such as CFI (0.951), NFI (0.923), TLI (0.925) are above the acceptable level of 0.9. The RMSEA indicator has an acceptable value 0.55 (0.043; 0.067) moreover  $\chi^2=129.170$ ;  $df=51$ ( $p=0.00$ ) (Hooper et al. 2008). The dependent

variable "Relationship strength" is positively influenced by both of variables "Intensity of use" (standardized estimate = 0.27,  $p < 0.001$ ) and "Perceived usefulness of tools" (standardized estimate = 0.47,  $p < 0.001$ ).

#### 4.2 Poznan, Poland

Descriptive statistics for each item are shown in Table 2. The highest score for perceived usefulness of digital tools in Poland was 4.79, indicating the best evaluation of the dimension "ease of digital media use", similar as in Georgia. As for the intensity – most citizens use digital tools for participation in city brand co-creation (mean: 4.63).

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Studied Variables in Poznan, Poland (n = 502)**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
	Statistic	Statistic		
<b>Intensity of use</b>				
narz 5. Digital tools for participation in city brand co-creation	4.63	3.632	0.631	-0.448
narz 7. Digital tools for participation in city promotion	2.58	2.252	0.797	-0.058
narz 9. Digital tools for participation in city brand evaluation	2.78	2.426	0.595	-0.718
<b>Perceived usefulness of tools</b>				
a 10.1 Social Media - Easy to use	4.79	1.487	-.419	-.125
a 10.2 Social Media - Transparent	4.61	1.515	-.427	-.097
a 10.3 Social Media - The easy of communication with municipality	4.44	1.544	-.309	-.312
a 10.4 Social Media - User-oriented	4.38	1.497	-.263	-.176
a 10.5 Social Media - Safe	4.63	1.536	-.327	-.274
<b>Relationship strength</b>				
a12.1 My trust toward the local government has increased during the past two years	4.07	1.683	-0.194	-0.548
a12.5 I want to be more actively involved in communication with local government	4.12	1.686	-0.275	-0.657
a12.6 The communication with local government is useful for me	4.21	1.567	-0.241	-0.389
a12.7 I participate in the activities/events organized by city hall, several times a year	4.42	1.716	-0.374	-0.596

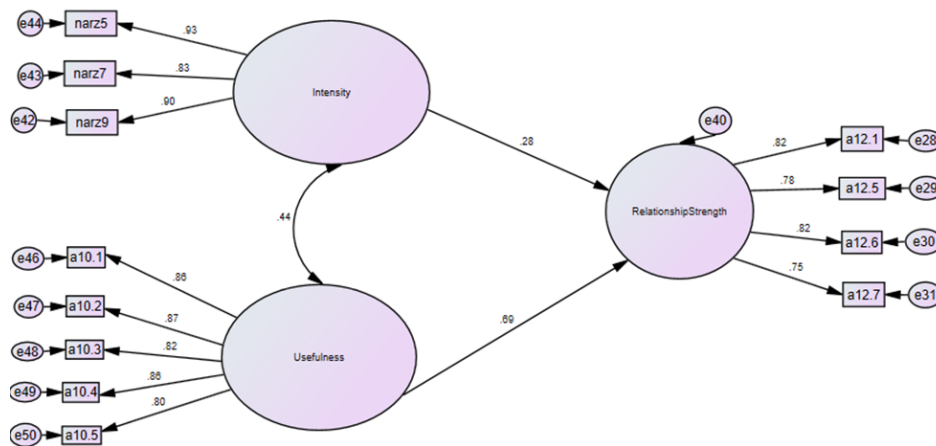
Source: Own study.

The reliability indicators for the scale items measuring "Intensity of use" ( $\alpha = 0.893$ ) and "Relationship strength" ( $\alpha = 0.868$ ) are classified in the very good range of Cronbach's alpha values. The reliability indicator for the scale measuring "Perceived usefulness of tools" has an excellent value ( $\alpha = 0.920$ ).

The results of SEM analysis indicate a satisfactory fit of the model constructed for the Polish subsample, as well. The incremental fit indices such as CFI (0.979), NFI (0.967), TLI (0.968) are above 0.9. The RMSEA indicator has an acceptable value 0.56 (0.44, 0.068); moreover  $\chi^2 = 131.391$ ;  $df = 51$  ( $p = 0.00$ ).



**Figure 2. Digital tools and citizens' relationship with the city (Poznan, Poland)**



Source: Own study. Note: Item full names are included in Table 2.

The dependent variable "Relationship strength" is positively influenced by both "Intensity of use" (standardized estimate =0.28,  $p < 0.001$ ) and "Perceived usefulness of tools" (standardized estimate =0.69,  $p < 0.001$ ).

## 5. Implications of study

The study indicates that rapid development of digital communication tools has elevated citizens' participation into different dimensions. Starting from the least sophisticated level – spreading information about governments' decisions, up to the most comprehensive way of participation – empowering citizens to have the final say during the decision making (Mossberger et al. 1 2008; Tsarchopoulos et al., 2018, Zheng, 2017, Bolivar et al., 2019).

The study showed that in both Georgia and Poland, social media constitute a popular tool used for participation in city matters. Statistics show that 74.3% of Georgian population (emarketing.ge, 2020), and 50% of Polish population (socialpress.pl, 2020) use Facebook, and the presented study supports these findings. We have also shown that Facebook and similar tools are more intensively used by citizens in Georgia than in Poland, which is quite surprising. It can be explained by the fact that access to the internet and usage of social media platforms have been drastically increasing in emerging countries in the past five years, whilst they have reached a plateau in developing countries (Pew Research Center, 2019). In the emerging geographies access to internet and ownership of mobile devices, which are major stimulators to wide access to social media, have been boosted in recent 5 years, and impacted fast-growing popularity of social media platforms across developing nations (Coleman, et al 2016). As for the connection between the use of the above tools and the relationship with the city authorities, it was supported in both cities. Thus, we have supported previous studies showing that

establishing strong citizen-to-government cooperation is the result of digital tools acceptance (Linders, 2012; Bracken, 2015). In addition, in both studied cities the perceived usefulness of social media was an even more important stimulator of relationship with local authorities, than the intensity of their use.

Based on our research, two major recommendations can be drawn for helping the government authorities in building lasting relations with citizens:

- Intensiveness of digital tools usage – governments should identify the tools already trusted and popular social media among their audience, and employ those tools to a higher extent, to maximize the chances of feedback, high citizen participation and commitment.
- Perception of usefulness – such characteristics as: ease of use, transparency, ease of communication with the municipality, and safety encourage citizens to use particular tools and to get involved in the city brand management process. Consequently, local authorities should take into consideration the above-mentioned features of online tools and develop their quality. This would increase the potential chances to cooperate with citizens in making public decisions.

Our conclusions are limited by the context of the study. Therefore, future studies should focus on other cities (countries) which may lead to different results. Furthermore, as we focused only on the social media, it would be interesting to analyze the other digital tools (e.g., websites, CRM platforms) and their role in relationship marketing in the municipal context.

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