

THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION ON PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS SCHOOL

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Abstract

The field of education implies the daily running of complex and layered communication processes in order to ensure the functioning of the system, and with the appearance of digital technologies, digital communication has become a part of everyday life in educational institutions. For schools, the most appropriate channel of communication with the public is a website, which also poses a legal obligation, in order to ensure visibility in the public space and improve the reputation of the school. The most important members of the public with which school employees interact are parents with whom relationships of partnership and collaboration are established. Since there is no established office or employee in the educational institutions in the Republic of Croatia in the field of public relations, it is teachers, experts and associates who take on this important role, despite having no formal education in the field of public relations. Posts on the website influence the parents' attitudes towards school, which is the subject of this paper that discusses which elements of the website are more important in creating the attitudes of parents towards school. The aim of the research is to determine how digital communication influences the creation of parents' attitudes towards school, whilst also examining teachers' attitudes towards the same elements for comparison purposes. The question "How do website posts affect parents' attitudes toward school?" raises the problem of the presence of sufficient awareness of the school staff about the impact of website posts on parents' attitudes toward school, given the lack of continuity and standardization of the task. The research questions of this paper focus on examining the impact of online posts on the creation of parents' attitudes toward school and therefore a parent survey questionnaire and a teacher survey questionnaire were created. Opinions about the content, visual characteristics of the site and the dynamics of publication were examined. The hypothesis that posts on a website have a significant impact on parents' attitudes toward school has not been confirmed, but research has shown that parents do have a positive attitude towards posts on a website, that they trust teachers and school principals, and that they place more importance on the visual component, while the teachers find the content that is posted on the website to be more important. The research has shown that teachers are taking a responsible and professional approach to posting on the school website in an effort to inform the public and build the school's reputation. This paper represents a significant scientific contribution given that the field of public relations in education is largely unexplored. The results open up the possibility of further research and extension of research to secondary education or the specific characteristics of web pages.

Keywords: computer, supported collaboration, digital communication, school, parents, teachers.

1 INTRODUCTION

Conversation is what makes a person human being and the result of conversation is human life. Everything we are, what sets us apart from other living beings on earth, which enables us to emerge, survive and develop, is connected to conversation. It defines us as human beings, through words we create the world around us, in us, we build relationships, we break down obstacles. [1] Communication skills have developed and positioned themselves in society over the course of historical development. At the same time, with the development of communication, society was slowly evolving into a communication society, in which a human being becomes the center of social relations, and this position is enabled by excellent communication skills and available technology. [2] Communication is getting new significance and new dimensions with the appearance of digitalisation, getting the prefix *global* and changing the rules of communication. Digital culture becomes part of the culture of society, imposes its rules, gathers its audience and sets virtuality as the imperative of digital discourse. The specificity of digital culture is that it brings together all kinds of art and assumes that consumers have the education and culture they need to participate in digital processes. [3] A basic characteristic of digital communication is the fact that sending information and receiving feedback happens in real time. Digital communication users are different from "old" users in that they are active, dynamic, demanding, publicly critical, impatient, using and creating content. [4]

Fast and transparent access to the information, easy and simple learning and content creation are just some of the benefits of digital media and digital technology, while at the same time the digital world carries with it the dangers of receiving unwanted, dangerous and inappropriate content. [5] With the appearance of digitalisation and introducing digital communication, such communication has become daily, expected and official in educational institutions. Communication in educational institutions is the most important and powerful tool to ensure the system's flowability and processes, which are characterized by complexity and the most important step in communicating with the public for schools is to segment the public, where parents are the most important public. Tomić [6] believes that every educational institution must recognize parents as an important public and understand the importance of quality communication with parents, who should be classified as allies and friends so that effective and meaningful channels and tools for communication with them are constantly being contemplated. One of the main channels of communication with parents is the school's website, which is also a legal obligation. Scott says: "The press release program is functioning as an effective website." [7, p. 101] The same author emphasizes the necessity of being rich in content in the website, considering that content is not the only thing worth considering. The essential aspects of a good website are design, colors, convenience and appropriate technology. [7]

Publication obligations on the web pages of elementary schools in the Republic of Croatia derive from the laws and regulations governing the school's functioning. Respecting the legal obligations and in an effort to make the school visible in the public domain, schools publish information, news, photos, videos on their websites intended for the public and parents as a target group. Being open to parents means respecting parents as the first and most important participants in the educational process, sincere cooperation that solves problems and acts in accordance with the view that the welfare of the school is a mutual benefit of both teachers and parents. [8] Based on communication with school staff, daily contacts, information they receive from their children, non-verbal cues, and communication with the public, parents create a cognitive image of the school and create attitudes towards it. The overall attitude of parents towards the school is influenced by a number of elements, and one of them is certainly digital communication through the school's website. Eagly and Chaiken define Hewstone and Stroebe's attitude as "a psychological tendency expressed by evaluating an object with a degree of approval or disapproval." [9, p. 196] It follows that values and beliefs that result in a positive or negative evaluation of a person or object are involved in shaping the attitude.

For a quality and developed relationship between parents and school, the key factor is the trust that parents form based on their attitudes towards school. According to Rawlins, Rotter considers trust as a belief, expectation, or feeling that is deeply rooted in one's personality or nature so Rotter defined trust as "the expectation of an individual or group that he or she may rely on an individual's word, promise, verbal, or written statement, or groups." [10] The importance of trust in public relations is particularly emphasized by Tafrá-Vlahović, pointing out that there is a new model in public relations - a model of trust building, which differs from the previous models in two important aspects. The first aspect is that the organization refers to each individual individually, and the second aspect is that the organization does not focus only on influencing the opinion, attitudes or perceptions of the public, but also encouraging them to act and advocate. [11] As a result, an individual who has confidence in the organization will be its supporter and advocate and will take concrete and useful activities that will result in increasing the organization's reputation in the public.

In the context of this work, a trusted parent will be a quality partner in the education process, an active participant in school activities, an associate in problem-solving situations, and a participant in the exchange of experiences and information with school employees. The subject of this research is parents' attitudes towards school based on digital communication through the school's website, and the aim of the study is to determine how digital communication with the website affects parents' attitudes towards school. Starting from the problem and the aim of the research, hypotheses, given below, have been put forward to test whether digital communication through the elementary school website influences parents' attitudes towards school.

H1. Posts on the website have a significant impact on the creation of parents' attitudes towards school.

H2. The visual component of the website significantly influences parents' attitudes towards school.

2 METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted using a survey questionnaire on a sample of parents of primary school students in Varaždin County of the Republic of Croatia. The research included two samples. The first sample were the parents of students from 40 primary schools. Due to the comparison of the results of the survey and the fact that school teachers are also the creators of the website, a survey was conducted on a sample of teachers and expert associates of the same primary schools.

The introductory part of the parent survey outlines the purpose and the aim of the research, the importance and contribution of completing the digital communication and emphasized the guaranteed anonymity of the answers. The survey contains 24 questions, three of which are socio-demographic (gender, age and level of education). Closed-ended questions are a combination of multiple choice, dichotomous, and 5-point Likert-type questions, with 1 (one) indicating complete disagreement or least importance and 5 (five) complete agreement or highest importance. Of the total number of questions, the survey contains one multiple-choice question, thirteen multiple-choice questions with only one answer, two dichotomous questions, and eight Likert-scale questions. The survey was created using the Google Form.

The survey was conducted in the period from January 31 to February 10, 2020 with the consent of primary school principals. A link to the survey has been posted on the school's website, and classmasters were simultaneously sending messages to parents asking them to complete the survey in groups of Viber and WhatsApp applications.

3 RESULTS

483 parents completed the parent survey. The survey was completed by parents of students of all grades, grades 1 to 8, with the highest number of parents whose children went to grade 2 (17%) and the least parents whose children went to grade 8 (8%). In most cases (91%), the mothers of the students filled in the questionnaire. Most of the parents surveyed belong to the age group of 31-40 years (63%) and the age group of 41-50 years (27%). Most parents (62%) have secondary education, 18% have university degrees, 5% have only primary school, and 1% have a doctorate. Parents' responses to the frequency of school website visits range from "very rare" to "several times a day". 40% of parents indicate that they visit the school's website several times a month or once a week, and 45% of parents visit their school's website several times a week or once a day. There is a smaller proportion of those who do it less frequently or more often than stated.

Table 1. Website visit frequency.

	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
very rarely	43	8,9
several times a month	117	24,2
once a week	78	16,1
several times a week	148	30,6
once a day	68	14,1
several times a day	29	6,0
Total	483	100,0

Parents evaluate the school website's transparency quite high. On a scale of 1 (least transparent) to 5 (most transparent), the average estimate is 4.07. In addition, it is evident from the percentages of individual assessments that slightly less than 80% of parents rated the site's transparency with grades 4 and 5.

Table 2. Transparency of the school website.

<i>%</i>					<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>		
0,2	3,1	19,0	44,3	33,3	4,07	0,81

Parents evaluate the importance of publishing photos related to the event with a relatively high score. On a scale of 1 (least important to me) to 5 (most important to me), the average estimate is 3.92. Additionally, it is evident from the percentages of individual assessments that about 70% of parents rated the importance of publishing event photos with ratings 4 and 5.

Table 3. The importance of publishing photos with the event.

% 1					M	SD
2	3	4	5			
5,2	3,5	20,1	36,4	34,8	3,92	1,07

Parents' average ratings are high for most of the characteristics of a website. The importance of the features was rated on a scale of 1 (least important) to 5 (most important). For most of these features, the average rating is about 4. The exceptions are the "presence of photos" for which they gave a medium importance rating and the "presence of video content" for which the importance rating is the lowest.

Table 4. The importance of website features according to parental assessment.

	% 1					M	SD
	2	3	4	5			
comprehension of the published text	1,0	10,8	7,5	26,3	54,5	4,22	1,05
publication of news and information on time	1,0	11,2	10,6	26,1	51,1	4,15	1,07
content of the publication	0,8	11,4	8,3	37,5	42,0	4,08	1,01
objectivity of the text	1,7	10,4	10,6	36,9	40,6	4,04	1,04
the speed of reaching the desired content	1,2	11,0	10,6	45,1	32,1	3,96	0,99
the visibility of all the content the site offers	1,0	12,0	14,7	50,3	21,9	3,80	0,95
the presence of photographs	3,9	14,5	34,2	38,9	8,5	3,34	0,96
the presence of video materials	16,1	26,5	36,4	18,2	2,7	2,65	1,04

Most parents (78%) consider the announcement on the school's website to be concise, with sufficient information. Only 9 respondents (1.9%) thought the publications on the website were long and contained too much unnecessary content.

Table 5. The quality of publications on the website according to parents.

	f	%
concise, with enough information	379	78,5
concise but lacking information	62	12,8
long, with enough important information	33	6,8
long, with too much unnecessary content	9	1,9
Total	483	100,0

Parents rated the importance of individual elements of the site on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important). Parents' average scores are relatively high for "menu transparency" and "visibility of the all elements on the cover page" and are about 4. The remaining elements were rated as average, meaning the remaining elements were neither important nor unimportant.

Table 6. Parental opinion on the importance of website elements.

	% (Rating)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
menu transparency	2,3	11,0	8,1	44,9	33,7	3,97	1,03
visibilty of the all elements on the cover page	1,7	12,8	8,5	50,1	26,9	3,88	1,00
the amount of monthly / weekly posts	5,0	14,7	26,3	42,0	12,0	3,41	1,04
links to other content	5,8	13,5	24,8	46,6	9,3	3,40	1,02
font size and type	10,8	17,8	25,5	38,3	7,7	3,14	1,13
colours	14,7	19,5	26,7	34,4	4,8	2,95	1,15

Parents evaluated on a rating scale from 1 (not least affecting) to 5 (significantly affecting) whether the school's web pages influenced their attitude towards the school. The average parental estimate obtained is relatively low (2,6). In addition, data on the percentage of individual assessments show that half of parents gave a low rating (1 and 2), a quarter of parents a neutral assessment, and a quarter of parents a higher estimate (4 and 5) of the impact of school websites on their attitude towards school.

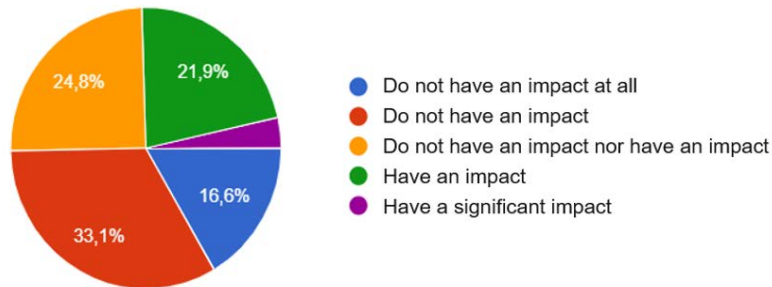


Figure 1. Parents' opinion on the impact of the website on creating parents' attitudes towards school.

Half of the parents (51%), when it comes to information related to the school, most trust the teachers of their school, a third (33%) trusts the school website and 13% trusts the principal of their school. A very small proportion of parents trust most other sources.

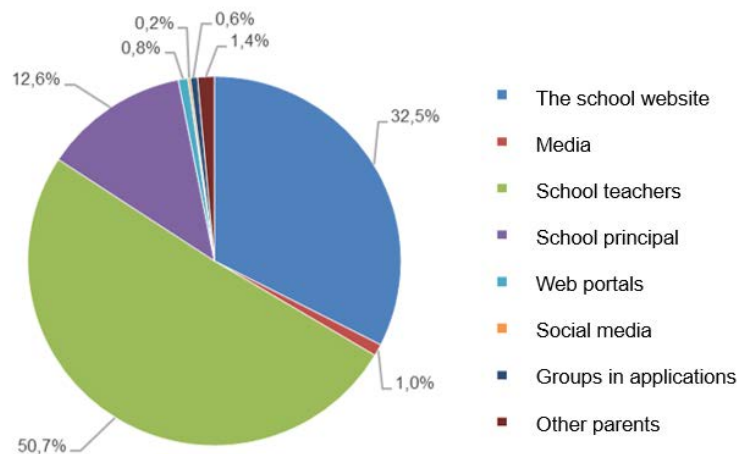


Figure 2. Whom parents most trust.

Parents had divided opinion on whether informing the parents on the site was sufficient, with 41% saying it was sufficient, 39% saying that additional written notice was needed and the rest were not sure.

Table 7. Parents' opinion on whether informing parents on the website is sufficient.

	f	%
Yes	199	41,2
No, additional written notice was needed with the information on the website	187	38,7
Not sure	97	20,1
Total	483	100,0

3.1 Discussion

The analysis of the results of the empirical research provided insight into how digital communication with parents of primary school pupils influences their attitude towards school.

Hypothesis 1, which states that publications on the site have a significant impact on the creation of parents' attitudes towards school by conducting research and analyzing the results has not been confirmed. When asked about the impact of pages on creating attitude, half of parents give a low rating, a quarter of parents are neutral, and a quarter of parents have a high rating. The average rating is relatively low - 2.67. From the results of other questions related to Hypothesis 1, it can be concluded that parents give mostly positive evaluations when asked about their affinity for school, so that 51% of parents trust teachers when it comes to school related information, and 33%, which is one third, trusts the website, while 13% trust the principal. The following information about a positive attitude towards school is a relatively high average grade (3.67) by which parents evaluate teacher focus on parents when it comes to publishing online. Accordingly, 41% of parents think that information on the school website is sufficient, while 39% think that additional information is needed.

Hypothesis 2, which states that most parents consider the visual component of the site to be more important in creating a parental attitude towards school, by conducting research and analyzing results has been confirmed. The questions related to this hypothesis were generally answered by parents with higher scores than the questions related to the content. The importance of the visual elements of the website was rated highly: transparency (4.07), presence of photos (3.92), content visibility (3.80), font size and type (3.14), colors (2.95). From this, it can be concluded that for most parents, the visual component of the website for creating attitude towards school is important.

4 CONCLUSIONS

483 parents participated in the survey. Given the large number of respondents, the results obtained can be reflected on the population. Based on the high response of parents, it can be concluded that parents are happy to participate in activities organized by the school, especially in situations where they can express their opinions. Although the first hypothesis was not confirmed by the research, the results answered questions related to the field of digital communication with parents through the elementary school website. Parents believe that posts on a website do not have a significant impact on attitude creation, but results that show very high estimates when it comes to the quality of posts on a website are interesting. Also encouraging are the results that say that parents most trust, in this order, teachers, the website, the principals. This is also logical because the frequency of their communication is in such proportions. This research did not provide a straightforward answer as to whether information is sufficient on the website alone, as parents answered the same question in different contexts in the range of 59% (sufficient information) to 39% (I need to look for additional information). The percentage of 39% is not negligible because it means that 40% of parents do not receive complete information or do not receive it on time, so they have to seek information in other ways.

The results of this research could be of great importance to teachers, expert associates and principals who are the direct creators of the content and visual solutions of the school's website. The results could be interpreted and translated into a form that would serve as a guide to the creators of elementary school web pages. Since there is no public relations activity in schools, this important and responsible role is played by teachers and under current regulations, that cannot be an integral part of their school timetable. The results of this study confirm that, despite the inability to standardize public relations jobs in primary schools, teachers carry out this work very responsibly, expertly and professionally.

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