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WHY 'POSITIVITY' MATTERS FOR GOVERNMENT–COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

Abstract. *The discipline of public relations is concerned with how relationships between organisations and publics are formed and maintained and, in a relational perspective, proposes several cultivation strategies organisations can apply to build quality relationship outcomes. This study was designed to further test the relationship cultivation strategy of positivity in the context of government–community relationships. Using in-depth interviews, the aim was to compare the opinions of both relational partners with regard to the level of positivity in the mentioned context. Another objective was to explain how positivity contributes to the relational outcomes of trust and satisfaction in building positive government–community relationships. The results show the relational partners disagree on the government's enactment of the relationship cultivation strategy of positivity. Citizens evaluated the government's positivity as poor compared to the government itself, which considered its interactions with citizens were highly positive. The findings reveal that positivity importantly contributes to trust and satisfaction in building constructive government–community relationships.*
Keywords: *relationship management, public relations, trust, satisfaction, positivity, government–community relationships*

Introduction

The strategic communication between an organisation and its stakeholders is a traditional focus of public relations research. However, in the last three decades, relationship management has emerged as the dominant paradigm and seen public relations shift focus onto relationships. In these 30 years of relationship management research, the earliest studies concentrated on defining relationships (Broom et al., 1997, 2000; Brunner, 2000; Hon and Grunig, 1999; Ledingham and Bruning, 1998), identifying

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dimensions for evaluating the quality of relationships (Huang, 1997; Grunig and Huang, 2000; Hon and Grunig, 1999) and designing scales with multiple items and dimensions to measure relationships (Huang, 2001; Ki, 2006; Ki and Hon, 2007; 2009; Kim, 2001). Among all the different relationship management models and measurements tested in various organisational settings, the model proposed by Hon and Grunig (1999) and Grunig and Huang (2000) is the most frequently tested and used to study a range of organisation–public relationships.

The mentioned model outlines how relationships between organisations and publics are formed and maintained. Three stages for evaluating relationships are included in the model: relationship antecedents, cultivation strategies, and relationship outcomes. Several strategies are also defined within the model that organisations can employ to develop quality relationships. The proposed strategies for cultivating relationships are: access, positivity, openness, assurances of legitimacy, networking and sharing of tasks. A number of relationship outcomes representing the consequences of effective relationship cultivation strategies are listed. The dimensions of a quality outcome of a relationship are: trust, commitment, satisfaction and control mutuality.

While studies have tested the model on various different organisation–public relationships, no attempts have been made to study and measure the individual cultivation strategies and their effects on the relationship outcomes. Thus far, there has been no investigation of how the relationship cultivation strategies of access, positivity, openness, assurances of legitimacy, networking and sharing of tasks contribute to relationship outcomes like trust, control mutuality, commitment and satisfaction.

It is contended (Hon and Grunig, 1999; Grunig and Huang, 2000) that several relationship cultivation strategies (e.g. access, positivity, openness, task sharing, networking, assurances) can produce better relationship-quality outcomes (e.g. control mutuality, satisfaction, trust, commitment). This article seeks to further investigate the relationship cultivation strategy of positivity in the context of government–community relationships. Using in-depth interview data collected from civil servants and Albanian citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia, this study had two primary objectives. First, to compare the opinions of both parties in such relationships with respect to the level of positivity in government–community relationships. Second, to explain the contributions made by positivity to the relational outcomes of trust and satisfaction in building constructive government–community relationships.

Literature review

The public relations discipline is concerned with how relationships between organisations and publics are established and maintained. Although the strategic communication between an organisation and its stakeholders has been a traditional focus, in the last three decades the emergence of relationship management as the dominant paradigm in the discipline has changed the focus over to relationships. The relationship management perspective argues the overriding goal of public relations is to create, sustain and promote long-term relationships between an organisation and its various publics (Ferguson, 1984).

After this paradigm shift, most research work within the relationship management perspective has concentrated on organisation–public relationships and studying the factors which affect them. The very first studies chiefly looked at defining relationships (Broom et al., 1997, 2000; Brunner, 2000; Hon and Grunig, 1999; Ledingham and Bruning, 1998), identifying dimensions to be considered while evaluating relationship quality (Huang, 1997; Grunig and Huang, 2000; Hon and Grunig, 1999) and designing scales with multiple items and dimensions to measure relationships (Huang, 2001; Ki, 2006; Ki and Hon, 2007, 2009; Kim, 2001).

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Public relations scholars have also "looked to the literature on interpersonal communication for concepts that can be adapted or modified for a theory of organization–public relationships" (Grunig and Huang, 2000: 36). Grounded on research on interpersonal relationships and conflict resolution, the relationship management perspective of public relations identifies strategies organisations can adopt to cultivate relationships with publics and outcomes that measure the quality of the relationship between an organisation and its public(s) (Hon and Grunig, 1999). In particular, Hon and Grunig (1999) and Grunig and Huang (2000) propose a theory and a model that outlines how relationships between organisations and publics are formed and maintained. The model they put forward proposes several antecedents to relationship development, strategies for establishing and maintaining relationships, and relationship quality or the outcomes of those relationships.

Cultivation strategies cover the strategies used to build and sustain quality organisation–public relationships. According to Grunig and Huang (2000), the concept of relationship cultivation describes the way organisations communicate with publics and how they manage conflicts to build positive relationships or restore damaged ones. Grunig (2002: 4) defined cultivation strategies as the "communication methods that public relations people use to develop new relationships with publics and to deal with the stresses and conflicts that occur in all relationships". Cultivation strategies

guide organisations on "how to communicate with publics in order to maintain a relationship with those publics" (Hon and Grunig, 1999: 13). Hon and Grunig (1999) and Grunig and Huang (2000) conceptualised six relationship cultivation strategies organisations can apply to build and maintain their relationships with various publics: access, positivity, openness, assurances, shared tasks, and networking.

Relationship outcomes represent relationship quality or the consequences of effective relationship cultivation strategies (Grunig and Huang, 2000). These outcomes are considered to be key indicators and dimensions representing the quality of organisation–public relationships. Although scholars (Grunig et al., 1992) have identified a variety of dimensions that determine the state of a relationship, Hon and Grunig (1999) and Grunig and Huang (2000) argued that research in interpersonal communication and the psychology of interpersonal relationships shows the following four outcomes are essential indicators and dimensions capturing the quality of organisation–public relationships: trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality.

This study only considers the relationship cultivation strategy of positivity and the relationship outcomes of trust and satisfaction, as explained in greater detail below.

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Positivity

The cultivation strategy of positivity is studied in both the interpersonal communication and public relations literature. In the interpersonal communication literature, Canary and Stafford (1994: 15) described positivity as "any attempt to make interactions pleasant". Canary and Stafford (1994) identified certain actions that compose positivity, such as cheerful and nice behaviour, courteous and polite communication, and uncritical behaviours toward partners. The results of some interpersonal communication studies (Canary and Stafford, 1992; 1993; Stafford and Canary, 1991) show positivity is a critical predictor of control mutuality and trust.

In the public relations literature, Hon and Grunig (1999: 14) defined positivity as "anything the organization or public does to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved". Positivity refers to the actions taken by both parties in the organisation–public relationship to make the relationship pleasant and more enjoyable. Ki and Hon (2009: 12) defined positivity as "the degree to which members of publics benefit from the organization's efforts to make the relationship more enjoyable for key publics".

A handful of studies explore relationship cultivation strategies and their role in producing positive organisation–public relationships (Hung, 2003; Ki, 2006; Waters, 2007; Bortree, 2010; Sisson, 2017; Men et al., 2017).

Hung (2003) compared the relationship cultivation of Taiwanese and Multinational companies and found that, regardless of nationality, the three strategies used in building relationships are positivity, sharing of tasks, and cooperating. Her findings reveal the best way to enhance relationships with publics is to make them feel they enjoy the relationships and to stay together with publics until their problems are resolved. Ki (2006) discovered that positivity and cooperation were the strategies multinational and Taiwanese companies relied on to build trust, control mutuality, commitment and satisfaction with their Chinese publics. Ki also found the use of positivity as a cultivation strategy was a significant factor predicting control mutuality, satisfaction and trust. Bortree (2010) studied relationship management with adolescent publics, yet her study established that positivity did not predict the level of trust in a relationship between teen volunteers and a volunteer organisation. Nevertheless, in this study positivity had the next strongest direct relationship with commitment, albeit the relationship was weak. Waters (2007) also found that positivity was a significant positive indicator of donors' trust, satisfaction, commitment and control mutuality. Sisson (2017) suggested that positivity and networking strategies are significantly associated with dimensions of trust. In this study, positivity, when used, was shown to have a significant association with two dimensions of trust; namely, integrity and competence. Men et al. (2017) studied how start-up companies cultivate relationships with publics in China, with their data showing that, among the cultivation strategies, companies rely on positivity to cultivate relationships. Their findings also stress the importance of making sure relationships remain enjoyable, positive, gratifying, and fun for the stakeholders.

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Trust

Trust simply refers to the confidence of one party that they can be open and honest with another party (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Verčič and Grunig (2000) concluded that organisations cannot exist without trust. In addition, trust or the lack thereof has a measurable impact on the financial health of an organisation (Paine, 2003). Trust is required by stockholders, employees, consumers, governments and communities. Without trust, stockholders will not buy stock, employees will not work, consumers will not buy products and there will be a fear of government interference in the organisation's mission (Grunig and Huang, 2000).

In public relations literature, Grunig and Grunig (1998: 4) defined trust as "the extent to which both management and publics express willingness to make themselves vulnerable to the behaviour of the other – confidence that the other party will take its interests into account in making decisions".

Morgan and Hunt (1994: 23) state that trust is the "confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity". In public relations research, trust is considered a complicated concept with several underlying dimensions (Hon and Grunig, 1999; Welch, 2006). Hon and Grunig (1999) identified three dimensions to be considered while measuring the full spectrum trust: (1) integrity, the belief that an organisation is fair and just; (2) dependability, the belief that an organisation will do what it says it will do; and (3) competence, the belief that an organisation is able to do what it says it will do.

Trust in government or political trust is mainly studied in political science research. Political trust is considered "a central indicator of public's underlying feeling about its polity" (Newton and Norris, 2000: 53). Miller and Listhaug (1990: 358) defined political trust as the "judgment of the citizenry that the system and the political incumbents are responsive, and will do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny". More recently, Marien and Hooghe (2011) contend that low levels of political trust might undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of the government's action and its ability to implement legislation.

Relational satisfaction

Satisfaction in public relations research is widely acknowledged as a crucial attribute of relationship quality (Ferguson, 1984; Grunig and Huang, 2000). Ferguson (1984) stated that the degree to which both the organisation and its publics are satisfied with their relationship is a vital measure of the quality of the relationship between the organisation and its strategic public (Grunig and Huang, 2000). Grunig and Huang (2000: 45) held that "unlike control mutuality and trust, which involve cognitive dimensions, satisfaction encompasses affection and emotion".

Hon and Grunig (1999: 3) noted that "a satisfying relationship is one in which the benefits outweigh the costs". They further defined satisfaction as "the extent to which one party feels favourably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced" (Hon and Grunig, 1999: 20), while adding that satisfaction can also occur when one party believes that the relationship maintenance behaviours of the other party are positive.

Research Questions

As suggested in the literature reviewed above, much research focuses on exploring and verifying the relationship dimensions identified by Hon and Grunig (1999) and Grunig and Huang (2000). While studies have tested certain models on different organisation–public relationships, thus far there

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has been no examination of how the relationship cultivation strategies of access, positivity, openness, assurances of legitimacy, networking and task sharing add to relationship outcomes like trust, control mutuality, commitment and satisfaction.

The purpose of this research is partly to fill this void. The article seeks to further investigate the relationship cultivation strategy of positivity in the context of government–community relationships. Two research questions are developed in order to accomplish the study's two primary objectives. The first research question aims to compare the opinions of both parties in these relationships regarding the level of positivity in government–community relations. The second research question aims to explain the contributions made by positivity to the relational outcomes of trust and satisfaction in building positive government–community relations. To achieve the objectives of this study, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: What is the level of positivity in the relationship according to: (a) the government, and (b) Albanian citizens in North Macedonia?

RQ2: How does positivity contribute to trust, and satisfaction with the relationship?

Research Methods

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This research is a qualitative inquiry with qualitative in-depth interviewing used as the main research method. In total, 39 interviews were conducted, 12 interviews with Macedonian civil servants, 8 interviews with Albanian civil servants, and 19 interviews with Albanian citizens.

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions. Grunig (2002) provided qualitative methods for assessing relationships between organisations and publics. The qualitative interview questions developed by Grunig (2002) were used to develop the interview questions about trust and satisfaction. The questions relating to positivity were based on Hon and Grunig's (1999) and Ki and Hon's (2009) quantitative measures of relationship cultivation strategies, while ensuring they reflect the same dimensions and operational definitions of positivity as the quantitative questions.

To assess positivity, respondents were asked how often they had interacted with civil servants. They were asked if the government regularly provides information to Albanians in the country, which kinds of information they usually receive, and how useful they regard this government information. In addition, the questions intended to evaluate how courteous civil servants are while interacting with Albanian citizens, the effort they make to ensure their interactions with Albanian citizens are enjoyable, and how cooperative they are in handling the concerns raised that part of the population. The last set of questions concerning positivity asked civil servants and

Albanian citizens about any disagreements and dissatisfactory interactions between them, and how cooperative the parties had been while handling these disagreements.

The process of data analysis included an interpretive and reflexive reading of the data. In interpreting and drawing conclusions, self-understanding, a critical common-sense understanding and theoretical understanding were employed. As suggested by Wolcott (1994: 36), while interpreting data the researcher goes beyond all the pieces of information and begins to ask "what is to be made of them". Wolcott also warns researchers to neither ignore their theoretical framework nor provide interpretations that bear no relationship with the proposed study purpose.

In the data analysis, Miles and Huberman's three interlinked processes (1994) were followed: data collection, data reduction, and data analysis and display. During the *data collection* process, in order to reduce the data each interview was listened to repeatedly. The transcribed interviews were enhanced with additional notes and comments that might have been missed. An ongoing comparison of one interview with the previous interview was also regularly made to identify any significant points to ask the next participants to comment on. The *data reduction* process started by transcribing the interviews. Although a verbatim transcription of the interviews was made, important data and issues that arose during the transcription were highlighted. In addition, the qualitative data analysis software used in the transcription enabled comments or memos to be added to items of data that were highlighted and deemed important for use in the final stage of the analysis of displaying the data and drawing conclusions. Likewise, the *data analysis and display* were not done manually but relied on qualitative data analysis software widely known as CAQDAS (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software). Atlas.ti was used to make the process of data analysis easier. As Gibbs (2013) argues, qualitative data analysis software does not analyse, but instead mainly helps organise the analysis and manage the data. Atlas.ti was mostly used in the process of transcribing documents, archiving and coding. The software facilitated the easy coding and revising of codes during the analysis. Moreover, since the interviews were conducted in either the Macedonian or the Albanian language, Atlas.ti was helpful for creating memos, comments and quotes in English which assisted in the accuracy of reporting the findings.

Findings

Overall, the results show the relational partners disagree on the government's enactment of the relationship cultivation strategy of positivity. When it comes to positivity, the Albanian citizens held a negative evaluation of the

government compared to the civil servants who considered there was high positivity in their interactions with citizens. In general, the Albanian citizens reported a very low level of positivity in their relationship with the government.

Regarding the frequency of interactions, the Albanian citizens and the civil servants indicated that their interactions happen daily. Citizen respondents reported meeting civil servants due to certain documents they need, to pay bills, taxes, fines and other personal requirements they have.

Albanian citizens complained that information is not regularly provided by the government. When information is provided, it has a propaganda character and is used to portray the current government in an uncritical light. These citizens regarded the information obtained as outdated, irregular and useless, adding that since the government provides superficial information, they must resort to word of mouth to be informed. Albanian citizens also complained that information is only available in the Macedonian language. The Albanian civil servants agreed with their fellow Albanian citizens in describing the information as irregular and mainly superficial, and they were also aware that Albanians prefer to rely on word of mouth to obtain information, which they believe is because in that way it is easier for them and they can avoid the official procedures needed to obtain information. Both the Albanian citizens and Albanian civil servants agreed that financial information is often hidden, and that it is a practice in many government institutions to make public procurement information available only to fulfil legal requirements, even though they already know in advance that the information will have to be made public. In contrast, Macedonian civil servants think that Albanian citizens regularly receive information like any other citizen in the country, and that the Albanian citizens have information available to them in the Albanian language. However, some Macedonian civil servants acknowledged that the presence of language barriers makes Albanian citizens less informed than their Macedonian counterparts.

The findings also show that Albanian citizens believe that civil servants are discourteous. Albanian citizens also reported the arrogant behaviour of civil servants and stated that civil servants do not even try to make their interactions enjoyable. Civil servants were described as lacking in acceptable basic behaviour and professional communication. Participants perceived a lack of professionalism and of training on how to deal with citizens, and employment based on one's political connections rather than meritocracy as reasons explaining civil servants fail to make interactions with the citizens enjoyable. Since meritocracy is not applied while recruiting civil servants, Albanian citizens considered it normal to always encounter stressed and nervous civil servants because they have accepted a job for which they are incapable. They also perceived that civil servants lack

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the training and formal education for the job they hold. Albanian citizens sympathised with civil servants in the belief that the civil servant–citizen interaction reflects the way civil servants are treated by the government. In their opinion, this makes civil servants arrogant and negligent while serving citizens. Civil servants of both ethnicities claimed they are courteous while dealing with Albanian citizens. Civil servants added that they tried to make the interaction enjoyable, yet often have to deal with aggressive citizens. Civil servants also believed that there might be instances when citizens are dissatisfied with the cooperativeness of civil servants, but here they pointed to their limited jurisdictions. Overall, civil servants believed they make their interactions with Albanian citizens enjoyable. Albanian civil servants, in particular, believed that Albanian citizens feel relieved once they are spoken to in Albanian. The civil servants also contended that an enjoyable interaction is equivalent to successfully resolving the problem of a citizen. Thus, civil servants think that if they manage to help citizens accomplish their task, citizens will perceive the interaction as enjoyable. Civil servants added that some degree of nervousness is always present among citizens while interacting with civil servants, making an enjoyable interaction only a reasonable response. Macedonian civil servants also believed that they treat all citizens equally, without differentiating between Albanians and Macedonians. However, one Macedonian civil servant admitted that she is only polite because her job requires her to be, noting she does not wish to be courteous with Albanian citizens. This shows that some signs of hatred are still present among the two ethnic groups living in the country.

With regard to cooperativeness, Albanian citizens find that civil servants are not at all cooperative. In their opinion, citizens should be persistent and pressure civil servants if they want to accomplish their task. However, Albanian citizens were aware that the cooperativeness of civil servants is influenced by their limited jurisdictions, lack of decision-making power and regular control of civil servants higher up the hierarchy. They also described how in civil servants' attempts to make the interaction enjoyable courtesy and cooperativeness change significantly if citizens make use of their personal connections or civil servants see some personal benefit or gain from serving a particular citizen. Albanian citizens also believed that civil servants in their interactions do not even feel they are 'servants of the people', but instead they feel quite powerful with respect to citizens, leading to their arrogant behaviour. As a result, civil servants always try to avoid citizens and do not cooperate in solving their problems. Civil servants also agreed with the citizens that civil servants are not cooperative. However, they blame their limited jurisdictions and a lack of decision-making power for hindering them in being cooperative with citizens. Civil servants admitted that in their work their only duty is to bring files of cases to civil servants higher up

the hierarchy. Civil servants reported that citizens are not always aware that civil servants hold limited powers, creating conflict because citizens have higher expectations. A few civil servants also confessed that they are only trying to do their job professionally; still, they do not care about the problems of citizens.

Finally, all of the Albanian respondents reported having experienced conflicts, particularly verbal conflicts and disagreements, with civil servants. They also believed that conflicts never work to the favour of citizens as they can be later avenged by civil servants. Citizens believe civil servants feel they are quite powerful towards citizens; they are stubborn and never cooperate, only to end up disagreements with citizens. Further, Albanian citizens believed that civil servants are never penalised for unprofessional behaviour, which gives them more power and leads to arrogance and a bossy attitude. Compared to the Macedonian civil servants who did not report any conflicts with citizens, the Albanian civil servants complained that conflicts, especially verbal ones, are part of their daily routine. Accordingly, the majority of Albanian civil servants claimed that verbal conflict is a normal part of their job, also explaining that they have to deal with aggressive citizens and that citizens are often unaware that civil servants do not make the decisions and, when they receive a negative/unexpected answer they vent their frustration by shouting at civil servants. In most of such cases, Albanian civil servants reported being accused by citizens for incompetence if they do not resolve their problems, even when this exceeds their jurisdiction/powers.

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Discussion

This study attempted to compare the opinions of both relational partners with regard to the level of positivity in government–community relationships and to explain the contributions made by positivity to the relational outcomes of trust and satisfaction in building positive government–community relationships. The findings show that positivity contributes to trust and satisfaction in building government–community relationships. Participants who evaluated the government as low on positivity also gave low evaluations for trust and satisfaction. The results also show that the way the government disseminates information, the services provided, and how civil servants interact with citizens affected the level of citizens' trust in and satisfaction with the government.

In addition, the results reveal word of mouth is the Albanian citizens' preferred method for obtaining and sharing information. This means that citizens perceived word of mouth as a convincing and credible source of information, disregarding all the information issued by the government as a truthful information source. In marketing research, Allsop et al. (2007)

argued that research clearly demonstrates that word of mouth is one of the most influential channels of communication in the marketplace. They considered that the power of word of mouth lies in the fact it is seen as more credible than marketer-initiated communications because it is perceived as having passed through the unbiased filter of 'people like me'. At a time of falling trust in institutions, the research showed that its influence was becoming stronger (Allsop et al., 2007). The marketing literature also suggests that word of mouth is generally employed to describe advice given by other experienced people (Argan and Argan, 2012). The study showed that the lack of information from the government coupled with the lack of trust in all government communications usually saw citizens resort to word of mouth as a credible and effective information source.

Moreover, the findings show that positivity appealed more to the citizens' emotions. Citizens reported often having been ignored and overlooked. They also reported having experienced a lack of courteous vocabulary, impoliteness, arrogance, a bossy attitude, and the desire of government civil servants to get rid of them as quickly as possible. Citizens also felt that civil servants do not care much about them, despite their duty being to serve people. As Cooper (1984) argued, "public administrators are 'professional citizens', or 'citizen- administrators'; they are fiduciaries who are employed by the citizenry to work on their behalf". In this study, citizens reported civil servants wielding considerable power over citizens, not acting as servants and representatives of their interests. Citizens also noted that the way civil servants interact with them makes them feel they are a burden on civil servants.

The study shows courtesy and an enjoyable interaction are important factors influencing trust and satisfaction. Citizens complained that it is very rare to see civil servants smile, while they also lack acceptable basic behaviour and are often arrogant. Politeness is extensively studied in interpersonal communication where scholars claim that the affect individuals feel towards each other also influences their relationship (Brown and Fraser, 1979; Brown and Gilman, 1989; Coupland et al., 1988). Brown (2000: 83) defined politeness as "[...] a special way of treating people, saying and doing things in such a way as to take into account the other person's feelings". According to Lakoff (1989), politeness revolves around the avoidance of offence and the reduction of any possible conflict resulting from social interaction. Relinque et al. (2012: 7) consider that the "ultimate goal of politeness is to achieve a certain degree of social harmony by reducing aggressiveness or avoiding conflict between interlocutors".

Returning now to customer service research, the focus has been on the unique contribution made by contact employee–customer interpersonal relationships to positive relationship outcomes for retail service firms

(e.g. Bloemer et al., 2003; Gremler and Gwinner, 2000; Price and Arnould, 1999). The main interest has been the factors that help create a strong bond between the customer and the service-provider employee (Beatty et al., 1996; Bendapudi and Berry, 1997). For example, Gremler and Gwinner (2000: 83) studied rapport as a component of the customer–employee relationship, where they considered rapport "(a) to be the customer's perception of having an enjoyable interaction with a service provider employee, and (b) to be characterized by a personal connection between the interactants". In their study, they examined the impact of perceptions of an enjoyable interaction and a personal connection on satisfaction with the service, customer loyalty intentions, and word-of-mouth communication. They concluded that that these two dimensions of rapport – enjoyable interaction and personal connection – appear to be particularly salient in services contexts. They contended that rapport is associated with three outcomes of interest to marketers: satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of mouth communication. Previously, Price and Arnould (1999: 51) also found commercial friendships were strongly correlated with three key "marketing objectives: satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth communication". In this study, citizens claimed that civil servants' lack of professionalism and formal education had influenced their interaction with civil servants, in turn influencing their satisfaction with government and the services obtained. They added that civil servants lacked in acceptable basic behaviour and a degree of arrogance is always present. Citizens also claimed that interactions with civil servants are not meant to be enjoyed. Some civil servants mainly considered that an enjoyable interaction is equivalent to successfully resolving a problem or addressing the concern of a citizen. This shows they underestimate the importance of polite and courteous communication which on the other side was quite important to the citizens. Still, some civil servants acknowledged the importance of politeness and asserted that citizens have lots of problems, putting them in need for positive and enjoyable communication. One civil servants acknowledged that at times one feels that, despite all the problems citizens have, all they need is a smile and a little dose of humour. This also shows how positive and enjoyable communication can help increase satisfaction in government–public relationships.

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Cooperativeness was another important aspect of government–community relationships. Citizens believed that civil servants were not at all cooperative and that they feel they exert power over citizens, which led to arrogant behaviour. In research studies, the precise relationship between trust and cooperation has remained elusive; namely, whether trust leads to cooperation or the other way around (Yamagishi et al., 2005). Leading theorists disagree on the causal direction (Hardin, 2002; Macy, 2002). However, Bostrom (1995: 152) considered cooperation is a "fundamental part for

the customers' experience of the perceived quality of the service and may therefore not be overlooked". Von Matern (1989), cited in Bostrom (1995), conducted a survey among customers of professional service firms with the results showing that the providers' ability to cooperate was the key customer attribute. Heide and Miner (1992) proposed that four behaviours represent cooperation – information exchange, flexibility, joint problem-solving, and restraint in the use of power. In addition, with regard to cooperative behaviour, studies have among other aspects found that organisational culture, individual and organisational values influence cooperative behaviour (Bercovitz et al., 2006; Koza and Dant, 2007). As one civil servants in this study mentioned, "it depends very much on how courteous and cooperative we are to the person in front of us." The study findings revealed that the service and treatment civil servants give to citizens depends very much on the civil servant's personality, the institution they are working for, and the citizen requesting the service.

Conflict or disagreement, particularly verbal conflict, was an inevitable outcome in the daily interactions of the citizens and civil servants. Conflict and the way civil servants confront conflict with citizens appears to play a crucial role in the government–citizens relationship. Citizens reported that civil servants did not even cooperate to resolve conflicts, while they also felt that staying quiet is the best strategy if involved in a conflict or disagreement with civil servants because serious repercussions might follow if they respond aggressively in their disagreement with civil servants. Some studies on conflict management suggest that managing conflict for mutually benefit greatly contributes to trust and high-quality relationships (Chen and Tjosvold, 2012; Hempel et al., 2009; Segal and Smith, 2014; Tjosvold and Chen, 2010). Tjosvold and Chen (2010: 2) propose that "conflict, typically believed to be an impediment to trust, can enhance trust, when it is constructively managed, even between people of different status, companies, and countries". They further argued that when conflicts are managed constructively, they strengthen trust; when managed ineffectively, they weaken trust. Tjosvold and Chen also consider that trusting those who believe they have cooperative goals is likely to induce trust and mutually beneficial interaction. Segal and Smith (2019: 1) see conflicts as an opportunity for growth and contend that trust-building happens with constructive conflict resolution which enhances the relationship; "When you are able to resolve conflicts in a relationship, it builds trust". However, in this study, citizens reported civil servants feeling quite powerful in any conflict they had with them, with their stubbornness meaning they never cooperate to resolve problems, ending up in disagreements with citizens.

Implications

First, the study shows positivity is important for beneficial government–public relationships in general, and trust and satisfaction in particular. The study reveals that government should ensure that its communication efforts reach all ethnic groups in society and to achieve this the government should communicate in the various languages spoken by the different ethnic groups in the country. The study proves language is an obstacle in the communication between civil servants and citizens. Besides, the government should inform citizens on a regular basis about government operations and programmes. The more knowledgeable citizens are, the more they actively engage in society and government activities. In addition, the government should improve employee engagement and satisfaction. Engaged and satisfied employees provide better services to citizens, leading to citizen satisfaction. The findings also show that the empowerment of civil servants is crucial for excellent citizen services. Many civil servants complained of having limited jurisdiction/powers in serving citizens. The lack of professionalism and the politicisation of the public administration seem to be the biggest causes of the poor citizen services. The government should apply meritocracy while employing civil servants. Giving jobs to militants who hold no suitable formal education should be avoided. The government should regularly train civil servants to ensure that the public administration provides good citizen services.

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Limitations and Future Research

Methodology is the first major study limitation. The study was only conducted using the methodology of qualitative interviews. Although the qualitative data show strong evidence about the contribution made by positivity to trust and satisfaction, applying well-established quantitative measures of cultivation strategies and relationship outcomes would provide even stronger correlational evidence between positivity and the relational outcomes of trust and satisfaction.

Moreover, the results may be affected since it is known that interviews yield self-report data that are usually subject to various biases and limitations, such as social desirability bias, lack of honesty, exaggeration, embarrassment to reveal private details etc. In this study, although a good rapport was established with the participants, the sensitive topic of inter-ethnic relations could still have affected the participants' answers. It is possible that some participants, in particular the Macedonian civil servants, avoided negative answers or talking about any negative experiences they may have had with Albanian citizens because the researcher is Albanian in origin. Further, in order to portray themselves or the government and their institutions in

a complementary way, the civil servants might have provided only positive answers. For example, when asked to evaluate themselves on how courteous and cooperative they are, and the extent to which they make their interactions with citizens enjoyable, all of the civil servants positively evaluated themselves, even though Albanian citizens described them as being discourteous and uncooperative, and their interactions with civil servants as not being at all enjoyable. Future studies should apply different methodologies in studying government–community relationships in inter-ethnic societies. In this case, focus groups would be a useful method for bringing both relational partners together to explore how they each think and feel about a topic and why they hold certain opinions. Well-established quantitative measures of cultivation strategies and relationship outcomes could also be applied in future studies in order to statistically prove the correlation between positivity and the relational outcomes of trust and satisfaction.

Conclusion

This study also extended the relationship cultivation strategy of positivity to the context of government–community relationships. Evidence was presented on the importance and contribution of the relationship cultivation strategy of positivity to government–public relationships generally and to the relational outcomes of trust and satisfaction in particular. The study shows that detrimental behaviours on both sides (civil servants and Albanian citizens) affect why the Albanian citizens held a negative evaluation of trust and satisfaction in their relationships with the government. Participants who evaluated the government low on positivity also had low evaluations of trust and satisfaction. Further, the findings reveal that positivity appeals more to the citizens' emotions, where courtesy and an enjoyable interaction were identified as important factors influencing trust and satisfaction. The findings support the initial assumption that the relationship cultivation strategy of positivity is a vital factor in predicting the government–citizen relationship quality, starting from the way the government disseminates information, the services provided, and how civil servants' interactions with citizens affect the degree to which citizens trust and are satisfied with the government. The study also provides a multiple-publics evaluation of the cultivation strategy of positivity and the relational outcomes of trust and satisfaction. A comparison of both relational partners' opinions with respect to the level of positivity in government–community relationships showed disagreement between the relational partners on the government's enactment of the relationship cultivation strategy of positivity. Regarding positivity, citizens held negative evaluations while the civil servants considered their interactions with the citizens were high in positivity.

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