Navigating Crisis Communication Through Social Media: Generation Z's Insights

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Crisis communication focuses on how organizations and individuals communicate in emergency situations or crises, with the aim of managing and reducing the negative impact on both organizations and individuals. Generation Z, which has grown up in a digital environment, has a high level of digital literacy and quick access to information. Social media plays a central role in their lives as they use it for self-expression, information gathering and communication. This study examines Generation Z's trust in the security of social media and the accuracy of information in crisis situations. Primary research was conducted using a survey method. The research findings show that Generation Z spends a significant amount of time on social media to obtain and share information in crisis situations. Their main motivation for using social media in such times is to determine whether the crisis situation poses a threat to themselves and their families. In addition, Generation Z trusts crisis-related information they find on social media platforms and readily shares such content. Their trust in digital platforms contributes significantly to the spread of information in crisis situations. Ultimately, the study shows that Generation Z actively uses social media as a source of information and trusts these platforms, which makes them important participants in crisis communication.
	Index Terms— Crisis communication; Generation Z; Social media.

I. INTRODUCTION

T HEORETICAL assumptions suggest that crisis communication via social networks has become ubiquitous and extremely important in crisis situations. Crisis communication refers to the process of exchanging information, opinions and attitudes between social network users, resulting in dynamic interaction and active participation. Given the widespread use and influence of social networks, it is crucial to examine the role of social networks in crisis situations (Wang & Dong, 2017).

The use of social networks is one of the most popular online activities with a continuous increase in the number of users worldwide. The influence of social networks on the way generations receive and share information is increasing, as research shows (Dimitriou & Abou Elgheit, 2019; Dimock, 2019; Ghersetti & Westlund, 2016).

Data on the use of social networks around the world indicates a rise in the number of users and increasing daily engagement on these platforms. In 2021, more than 4.26 billion people used social networks, and this number is expected to grow to almost six billion by 2027 (Statista, 2023). The growth in social network usage is particularly driven by the increasing use of mobile devices, and the average internet user spends 144 minutes per day on social networks and messaging applications (Statista, 2023). Generation Z, born after 1991, is the first generation to grow up with widespread internet technology and has been exposed to an incredible amount of technology while growing up, with social media interaction being an important part of their social behavior. Generation Z builds "virtual connections" and uses social media to cope with emotional and psychological challenges. However, there are both positive and negative sides to Generation Z's use of technology (Prakash Yadav & Rai, 2017).

Research shows that Generation Z most often receives and shares information about crisis situations via WhatsApp and Instagram (Suwana, 2020), with television also being one of the most important media for information in crisis situations (Hashim et al., 2020). Some authors (Coombs, 2012) state that trust plays an important role in communication during a crisis. Chanley, Rudolph & Rahn (2000) claim that public trust in government is one of the most important factors influencing the public's perception of risk and emphasise the importance of public support during a crisis. Younger generations also use mass media and social networks to meet their needs for information and advice (Rochyadi-Reetz et al., 2020). In light of previous research, there is a need to understand the frequency of social network use compared to traditional media when viewing and sharing information about crisis situations.

The aim of this paper is to explore the significance and importance of social networks in the sourcing and sharing of information related to crisis communication by Generation Z. Social networks enable the sharing of information, connecting with others and shaping the public debate. In the context of crisis situations, the role of social networks in facilitating dialogue, supporting stakeholders and building relationships is important. They also have an impact on gathering and sharing information and shaping public opinion and responses (Plenković, 2015; Coombs, 2012). The aim of the research is to provide an insight into the use of social networks for obtaining and sharing information about crisis situations by Generation Z and to identify the most important motives of Generation Z for searching social networks in connection with crisis situations. It will also examine the extent to which Generation Z has confidence in the security of social networks and the accuracy of information about crisis situations, and how they assess the credibility of information from the government and relevant authorities. Given the speed at which information spreads on social media and the ability to interact with other users, it can be assumed that Generation Z prefers social media to traditional media when searching for and sharing information about crisis situations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Conceptual Background of Crisis Communication Through Social Media*

Unfavorable situations that occur suddenly are considered hazards and crises, and they can affect individuals, families, groups of people, the economy of the state, the whole society, political parties, local governments, as well as settlements, villages, cities and the international community in general (Plenković, 2015). The definition of a crisis is given by Jugo (2017), who considers a crisis to be an event that is unpredictable and as such has a potentially negative outcome. Osmanagić Bedenik (2003) considers a crisis as a critical, temporary and inherently difficult situation that affects the natural, social and intellectual process, while he considers a corporate crisis as a process that threatens the primary objectives, is unplanned and undesirable and has the characteristics of limited duration and the possibility of influence. Coombs (2012) divides the crisis into a crisis of perception, the characteristic of which is the threat to the public's trust in the organization and includes the influence of media reports and inappropriate responses of the organization to the crisis. Bulajić (2010) describes crisis communication as an interactive process in which information and opinions are exchanged before, during and after a crisis situation. The author starts from the concept of a crisis situation, which she sees as a specific, unexpected and unusual event that creates a high level of uncertainty and threat or the perception of a threat to the priorities of an individual organization. Crisis communication involves individuals, groups and institutions, and the messages of crisis communication are often multi-layered, with the aim of eliminating the effects of the crisis and minimizing the consequences of the crisis. Communication in crisis situations refers to the management of communication with the internal and external environment that takes place during all phases of the crisis. The most appropriate means of communication should be chosen to convey the necessary messages to the organizational environment (Kadarova et al., 2015).

Crisis communication is one of the areas that strongly influence the development of social media. Crisis management in social media is a particular challenge, as crises that arise online are unpredictable and can escalate quickly. Given the different characteristics of communication in social networks, the public, rather than organizations or media, is at the center of information production and dissemination (Coombs, 2015). Fritzsche (2012) states that social networks provide the opportunity to share thoughts that other people can respond to, which is their function and enables the emotional needs of those involved in such networks to be met. Since all people are able to post information, social networks are considered faster than broadcast news, which is why they are considered more credible than traditional media in some cases. The unique

characteristics of social media contribute to its positive image and its role in facilitating communication and information sharing in society (Civelek, Çemberci & Eralp, 2016). The role of social networks in crisis communication is very important for obtaining and sharing information in crisis situations. Plessis (2018) emphasizes the importance of dialogic content shared on social media to support stakeholders and build relationships during and after a crisis. Encouraging member participation through social media helps to maintain the credibility and legitimacy of content, demonstrate resilience and promote renewal. By applying the principles of dialogic communication, organizations can gain positive feedback, improve stakeholder support, and foster relationship building for post-crisis progress. Rochyadi-Reetz et al. (2020) also conclude in their research that the use of mass media, social media and news services has increased during a crisis situation. As far as the gratifications sought through media use during a crisis are concerned, the factor analysis shows that two gratifications are sought: Information and orientation and Entertainment and comparison, which differ in terms of gender, age and education level. Unexpectedly, the motivation to seek entertainment and comparison had a greater influence on the increase in media use during the crisis. In a crisis situation, users usually change the way they use the platform and focus on communicating vital information, such as immediate risks or their location, and search for the latest information from people. The entertainment function usually becomes secondary in emergency situations. Chenou et al. (2020) highlight three dimensions of information context in social media, which include a strong emotional, a strong normative and a weaker epistemic context. These contexts are analytically separate from each other, but at the same time promote a certain user behavior that can be described as irresponsible information sharing on social networks. A weak epistemic context reinforces strong normative claims that are associated with emotional responses, leading users to cling strongly to their claims and become indifferent to their reputation.

B. *The Influence of Social Media on Generation Z*

In order to observe the characteristics of specific generations in research, many authors (Brosdahl & Carpenter, 2011; Prakash Yadav & Rai, 2017; Dimock, 2019) classify generations by age, according to which: Generation X (1961-1980), Generation Y (1981-1990) and Generation Z (1991 and after). Generation Z is the first generation in which internet technology is so widespread and which has been exposed to an unprecedented amount of technology while growing up. Generation Z is considered to be very tech-savvy by nature, and social media interaction is an essential part of their social behavior. Generation Z's early, regular and influential use of technology has both positive and negative effects in terms of rational, emotional and social consequences (Prakash Yadav & Rai, 2017).

Dimock (2019) highlights the importance of historical events, political factors, economic conditions and technological advances in shaping the experiences and perspectives of each generation. For example, Millennials grew up with events such as the September 11, 2001 attacks and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan influencing their worldview and political engagement. Generation Z, on the other hand, is growing up in a technological environment where they are constantly confronted with smartphones, social media and constant connectivity that are part of their lives. Yet Generation Z has many of the skills and benefits that come with living in the modern technological age: they are able to multitask, and do so simultaneously and with highly effective results. They absorb and process information quickly, but at the same time need easy access to information. The lives of Generation Z members take place in the world of hyperproduction, networking and virtuality (Reić, 2015).

One of the biggest challenges for Generation Z when it comes to trusting information on social media in crisis situations is the spread of misinformation and fake news. Because it is so easy to share content online, false information spreads quickly, causing confusion and panic among users. Generation Z, known for its technological savvy, is aware of the presence of misinformation and has developed a healthy dose of scepticism. They know how important it is to check and verify information before taking it at face value. However, the sheer volume and speed of information on social networks makes it difficult to distinguish between truth and lies, which further increases their uncertainty (Hoffman et al., 2023). Information transparency goes hand in hand with trust in information; in times of crisis, trust is a key element that can hold society together. Once a government publishes unreliable information, it is difficult to regain the public's trust; therefore, trust depends on the visibility of transparency (Mei et al., 2020).

In crisis situations, trust in government information plays a key role in shaping the perception and response of the public, especially Generation Z. According to a survey by Pramiyanti et al. (2020) on trust in government information about the coronavirus, there are good government practices, including perceived sensitivity, transparency and accountability, that positively influence trust in government. Therefore, building and maintaining trust in government information in crisis situations is critical to promoting public cooperation and compliance, which ultimately contributes to effective crisis management.

C. *Hypotheses Development*

Numerous studies show that WhatsApp is the most used social network in the daily lives of Generation Z, while Instagram is the second most used network by Generation Z (Suwana et al., 2020). Indeed, there are changes in Generation Z's social network usage habits, such as a decline in the use of Facebook and Twitter and the use of Instagram as the primary social network (Suwana et al., 2020). On the other hand, some research (Hashim

et al., 2020) suggests that most students consider television programmes as the most reliable source of information. This result reflects students' trust in the information broadcast by local television stations. However, the results for other sources such as radio and newspapers do not indicate students' trust in these sources. Hobbs (2017) concludes in his research that Generation Z also occasionally uses Twitter, Line and online news and portals to search for and publish information. It is surprising that there are not many users who use TikTok on a daily basis to obtain and share information.

In terms of Generation Z's intention to share information on social networks, it is significant that they have a high level of intent. The desire to share information about a crisis situation indicates that the majority of Generation Z has a strong sense of curiosity to learn more about a crisis situation. It is also significant that they value the information they receive via social media, but verify the authenticity and accuracy of information about a crisis situation before sharing it with others, and avoid posting sensitive information that could cause people to panic (Hashim et al., 2020). Blandi et al. (2022) conclude in their study that Generation Z shows a certain level of trust when sharing information on social networks. The authors' study suggests that Generation Z people rely significantly on social networks to access and share information related to a crisis situation; trust in sharing information on social media reflects their belief in the authenticity and relevance of the content they come across.

A nationally representative survey in Sweden shows that although different generations use different types of media, all generations report an increase in daily media use, both traditional and digital, during social crises (Ghersetti & Westlund, 2016). Rochyadi-Reetz, Maryani & Agustina (2020) state that the increased use of mass media and social networks among younger people is aimed at satisfying their need for information and guidance. For Generation X, the increased consumption of mass media and social media serves to satisfy the need for entertainment and comparison. On the other hand, the motivation to obtain information and orientation is higher among people with a higher level of education than among people with a lower level of education, depending on the level of education. Since social networks are interactive platforms that allow users to actively participate in sharing content and expressing opinions, it is expected that Generation Z will use these opportunities in the context of obtaining and sharing information about crisis situations. The study attempts to find out which motives are important and which types of information Generation Z prefers to receive and share on social networks in connection with crisis situations:

H1: There is a statistically significant correlation between the motives and trust of Generation Z when searching on social networks.

Low levels of transparency and trust in the publication of government information during a crisis situation can reduce the chances of successfully managing the outbreak of a crisis. The research conducted by Pramiyanti et al. (2020) shows that the transparency, reliability, clarity and comprehensibility of government information in crisis situations do not show significant differences between generations. In fact, the generations have relatively similar views and believe that the information published by the government, even if it does not correspond to the facts, provides interesting information and increases caution regarding the crisis situation. On the other hand, there are significant differences between generations in terms of the transparency, reliability, clarity and comprehensibility of information published by the government; almost 50% of Generation Z have a low level of trust in government information. Mei et al. (2020), in their study on the interaction between trust in government, risk perception and public compliance in Singapore during the coronavirus pandemic, conclude that the majority of participants expressed a high level of trust in government and a very positive perception of the government's risk management and communication efforts during a crisis situation. Most respondents considered the risk of exposure to be very low as they considered the government to be transparent, the authorities to be highly competent and efficient and had a high level of trust in the healthcare system. Based on the above, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H2: There is a statistically significant relationship between the motives and satisfaction of Generation Z with the security of social networks and the accuracy of information about crisis situations.

Dimitriou & Abou Elgheit (2019) found that trust and reliability play an important role in Generation Z's use of social media. A study by the authors shows that the reliability and credibility of information sources strongly influences Generation Z's decision-making. They tend to prefer content from sources they consider trustworthy and authentic, such as influencers and community-generated content, as they seek genuine and relatable experiences shared by their peers. Kaperonis (2019) points out that trust and reliability are key factors in Generation Z's use of social media. The results of the author's study show that Generation Z values transparency and seeks reliable sources of information on social networks, preferring content from sources they consider reliable and credible, as this significantly influences their trust in shared information. With this in mind, the following hypotheses are made about Generation Z's security and trust in information provided via social networks:

H3: There is a statistically significant relationship between Generation Z's trust and satisfaction in sharing content about crisis situations on social networks.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted using an online questionnaire distributed via social networks: Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp. When examining socio-demographic characteristics, there was an option to select age, but the deliberate selection of respondents aimed to collect data only from people belonging to Generation Z. Of the total of 176 respondents, eight did not belong to the Generation Z age group and were excluded from the study. Ultimately, 168 correctly and fully completed surveys were collected. The structured questionnaire was divided into 2 parts. The first part of the questionnaire consists of 5 questions covering factors such as the use of social networks, the intention to use social networks, satisfaction with the use of social networks, trust in government information about social networks and motives for using social networks. The measurement instrument was developed based on previous research by Suwan et al. (2020), Rochyadi-Reetz et al. (2020), Pramiyanti, Alila et al. (2020) and Hassan et al. (2022). Respondents expressed their opinion using a Likert scale with ratings from 1-5, where 1 means that they disagree with the statement at all, while 5 means that they fully agree with the statement. The second part of the questionnaire deals with socio-demographic data.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

The study surveyed 168 Generation Z individuals, deliberately chosen. Males comprised 55.95%, females 42.86%, with 1.19% declining to respond. Education-wise, most had a Bachelor's degree (41.94%), followed by Higher education (32.34%). The 44.31% were employed, 37.73% students, and 10.18% unemployed. Analyzing data on the use of social media by Generation Z, it is noticed that the majority of respondents spend less than 1 hour on Facebook (44.05%), Instagram (25.60%), Twitter (38.69%), WhatsApp (17.86%), YouTube (40.48%), TikTok (25.00%), and LinkedIn (41.07%). Regarding traditional media for news consumption, online news, radio, and television stand out as preferred sources. Half of the respondents use online news for less than 1 hour, while 46.43% use television within the same time frame. Newspapers and magazines retain their importance, with almost 48.21% of users reading them, while around 41.67% read magazines for less thanan hour. The study indicates that Generation Z primarily uses Facebook (20.33%) and YouTube (21.75%) for receiving information about crisis situations on social media, while Twitter is the least utilized platform (7.53%) for this purpose. WhatsApp is most commonly used for sharing information about crises, followed by Instagram (22.64%). YouTube (1.89%) is the least prevalent among Generation Z for sharing information about crisis situations. Instagram is the most frequently used social media platform for sharing images (50.00%), while for resharing images, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and other networks are used equally (25.00%). TikTok is predominantly used for sharing videos (36.36%), whereas YouTube is the most common platform for resharing videos (28.57%). When it comes to expressing opinions about crisis situations, Generation Z mainly turns to YouTube (20.83%). For sharing personal experiences, significant platforms include WhatsApp (55.56%), Instagram (33.33%), and Facebook (11.11%).

Using Person's coefficient of correlation, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1: There is a statistically significant correlation between the motives and trust of Generation Z when searching on social networks.

Through correlation analysis, a weak but statistically significant positive correlation between "Motives" and "Trust" was identified ($r=0.27$; $p<0.01$). This correlation indicates a weak yet statistically significant positive association between the motives of Generation Z for using social media during crisis situations and their trust in the information they find on these platforms. Stronger motives, such as the need for information about crisis situations, lead to greater trust in social media information, as individuals with higher motivation to use social media for learning more about crisis situations are more inclined to believe in such information.

H2: There is a statistically significant relationship between the motives and satisfaction of Generation Z with the security of social networks and the accuracy of information about crisis situations.

The correlation between the constructs of "Motives" and "Satisfaction" is moderate and statistically significant ($r=0.41$; $p<0.01$). This correlation indicates a moderate and statistically significant positive association between the motives for using social media during crisis situations and the satisfaction that Generation Z feels when using these media. Essentially, respondents with stronger motives for using social media to learn more about crisis situations are more likely to feel satisfied with the use of these platforms. This suggests that social media successfully meet the needs of Generation Z regarding information about crisis situations.

H3: There is a statistically significant relationship between Generation Z's trust and satisfaction in sharing content about crisis situations on social networks.

A strong and statistically significant positive correlation between "Trust" and "Satisfaction" was established ($r=0.52$; $p<0.01$). This correlation indicates a strong and statistically significant positive association between trust in information from social media and the satisfaction that Generation Z feels when using these media. This suggests that there is a statistically significant relationship between the trust of Generation Z in the information they share on social media about crisis situations and their satisfaction with the process of sharing such information. Specifically, higher levels of trust in this information are associated with greater satisfaction when sharing such content on social media. This relationship is not a result of chance and may suggest that Generation Z values and enjoys sharing information about crisis situations on social media when they have

trust in that information.

The presented results suggest that the motives of Generation Z for using social media during crisis situations are associated with their trust in this information and their satisfaction when using social media. Additionally, trust in social media information is also associated with satisfaction, although this association is moderate. This provides a deeper understanding of how these constructs interact and can be useful for planning communication strategies and approaches during crisis situations.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research conducted provided important insights into the way Generation Z uses social media in crisis situations. These results allow a deeper understanding of their preferences, motives and behavior in relation to information about crisis situations and also to test the hypotheses put forward. The first hypothesis states that Generation Z uses social networks more frequently than traditional media to view and share information about crisis situations. These results are consistent with the research findings of Suwan et al. (2022), who found that Generation Z uses social networks more frequently to view and share information about crisis situations compared to traditional media. They also conclude that there is a significant difference between the intention to use social networks and traditional media to search for information about crisis situations. The research findings show that Generation Z spends the most time on Facebook and reading online news when seeking information about crisis situations. There are also significant differences in the amount of time spent on the different platforms. Some respondents use Facebook and Instagram the most, while others use different media sources. The most common motive for using social networks in crisis situations is to find out if the crisis situation is dangerous for the respondent or their family, while the least important motive is entertainment and stress relief. Satisfaction with the information provided by the government and relevant authorities about crisis situations indicates that Generation Z believes that crisis-related content on social networks can meet their needs. In terms of trust, it is significant that Generation Z trusts the information on social networks. The research concludes that there is a weak and statistically significant positive correlation between Generation Z's motives for using social media in crisis situations and their trust in the information they find on these platforms. This suggests that the motives, especially the need for information about crisis situations, are associated with greater trust in information on social media. There is also a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation between the motives for using social media in crisis situations and the satisfaction that Generation Z experiences when using these media. This suggests that study participants who have strong motives for using social media to learn more about crisis situations are more likely to be satisfied when using these platforms. There is also a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between trust in information from social media and Generation Z's satisfaction with using these media. This suggests that the level of trust in this information is associated with greater satisfaction when sharing such content on social networks. Rochyadi-Reetz et al. (2020) state in their research that there is a difference between Generation Z's motives when searching on social networks and their trust in the information they find on these platforms. Research by Dimitriou & Abou Elgheit (2019) also shows a correlation between trust and satisfaction among Generation Z when sharing content about crisis situations on social networks. The findings of this research also suggest that information providers and public authorities should actively use social networks as a communication channel with Generation Z in crisis situations, as these platforms have become a key element for their information and engagement. These findings can help to better understand the needs and preferences of Generation Z and adapt communication strategies in crisis situations.

Based on the research results obtained, some limitations are recognized and recommendations for future research are derived. The specific limitations of this research include the small number of respondents and the fact that only citizens of the Republic of Croatia were surveyed. Suggestions for improving future research can be derived from the results. Recommendations for further research include expanding the sample to a larger number of respondents to increase the accuracy and representativeness of the results, and exploring other methods for a deeper understanding of Generation Z's views. It is also recommended to further disseminate the survey through various social networks and to create the survey in English to include foreign citizens.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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