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Conquering the liminal space: Strategic social media influencer communication in the Finnish public sector during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Public sector organisations have traditionally used mass media and their own communication channels to communicate urgent matters to citizens. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced these organisations to look for new communication approaches. In Finland, several public sector organisations collaborated with social media influencers (SMIs) to maximise their efforts in communicating about the measures needed to constrain the spread of the virus. Using a multiple-case study design, this chapter scrutinises four public-sector organisations and their collaboration with SMIs during the pandemic in 2020. We found that public organisations turned to SMIs through influencer marketing and influencer public relations to approach citizens in a personalised and emotional way to create a sense of community. This finding suggests expanding the previous categorisations of public communication campaigns and examining not only the purposes of the campaigns (behaviour change—policy change) but also their main appeal to citizens (information-centric—emotion-centric). While the campaigns appeared as efforts towards controlling the risks of the prevailing pandemic, their strategies also appeared to entail possible risks to the legitimacy of the organisations.

Keywords: social media influencers, public sector communication, public communication campaigns, risk communication, COVID-19

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has strained public sector organisations worldwide. Governments and public officials have taken drastic actions in an attempt to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, such as shutting down public facilities, businesses, schools and national borders, as well as mandating face masks, assembly restrictions and even curfews. These mitigation measures also create pressure to reach all citizens and share accurate information about the prevailing health risks, which has led to calls for more frequent, open, transparent and effective communication (Kim and Kreps, 2020; OECD, 2020).

Public sector organisations have often been accused of failing to build meaningful and trustworthy relationships with citizens due to bureaucracy, slowness, inefficiency, ignorance of citizen expectations and a lack of strategic communication planning (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). These problems have been evident in both current and previous pandemics. Yang (2020), for example, showed that during the 2015 Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) epidemic in South Korea, the government lacked dialogic competency and thus failed to provide credible risk-related information, which created distrust and dissatisfaction among citizens. Efforts to remedy these failures are vital, as effective communication increases the likelihood of successful management of and recovery from the situation (Kim and Kreps, 2020).

While public sector organisations struggle with communication challenges, the information void is being filled by new actors. Social media influencers (SMIs) (e.g. bloggers, YouTubers, Instagram celebrities) are able to create intimate, affective connections with their followers and gather large audiences online (Berryman and Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017; Raun, 2018). Many private

organisations, especially those with consumer brands, have found that integrating SMIs into their strategic communications can effectively influence consumer attitudes and behaviours (Lee and Watkins, 2016; Munnukka *et al.*, 2019). Public sector organisations have been slower to adopt SMIs within their communication strategies. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic swept through Finland in March 2020, the Finnish Prime Minister's office swiftly launched an initiative to support SMIs in sharing information about the coronavirus (Henley, 2020), with other Finnish public organisations later following suit. It appears that this was one of the first cases globally in which SMIs were officially deployed to help with public sector communication during a health crisis.

This chapter explores how four Finnish public sector organisations—the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of the Interior, the National Institute for Health and Welfare THL and the City of Helsinki—campaigned with the help of SMIs to reach citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. By exploring these cases through the framework of strategic SMI communication (Enke and Borchers, 2019), we aim to contribute to the understanding of public communication campaigns (Werder, 2020) that include SMIs, particularly during a rapidly escalating public health crisis.

The research data for this multiple case study consist of interviews with key people in the four case organisations, as well as various documents, such as press releases, campaign presentations, campaign websites and news articles. We investigate how the four public organisations in question argued for the use of SMIs in their strategic communication during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and what kind of strategies and aims they had for the campaigns. Despite their

effectiveness in reaching certain groups and individuals (Enke and Borchers, 2019), collaboration with SMIs can also carry risks for organisations. For example, indiscretions that SMIs engage in can reflect badly on the organisations with which they collaborate (Reinikainen *et al.*, 2021; Sng, Au, and Pang, 2019). Risk anticipation has been deemed a key function for public sector organisations (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2016a); therefore, we also investigate the role of risk perception and management within the cases studied.

Literature Review

Public sector communication

Public sector organisations are politically mandated, regulated and tax-funded organisations. These include ministries, government agencies and local bodies that provide various services for citizens and realise political decisions (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2018). They depend heavily on legitimacy, or ‘a license to operate,’ which is provided by citizens (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). Public-sector communication is defined as ‘goal-oriented communication’ that ‘enables public sector functions, within their specific cultural/political settings’, with the ‘purpose of building and maintaining the public good and trust between citizen[s] and authorities’ (Luoma-aho and Canel, 2020, p. 10). This definition suggests that public sector communication can be considered strategic (Werder, 2020). Furthermore, regional and local aspects matter when studying public sector organisations and their communication (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2016b).

Public communication campaigns are a typical way for public sector organisations to reach citizens and fulfil their communication-related goals (Werder, 2020). Such campaigns are often executed with a clear purpose to either inform, persuade or change the behaviour of specific

groups of citizens, with no commercial purposes, but with the aim of benefitting either individual citizens or society at large (Rice and Atkin, 2009). Public communication campaigns differ from regular ongoing communication implementations in that they typically focus on a specific topic or goal and occur during a defined timeframe, often on multiple platforms (Werder, 2020).

Werder (2020) classifies public communication campaigns with the help of a continuum, with campaigns aimed at individual behaviour on one end and those aimed at policy change on the other; these are not mutually exclusive ends, and both are influenced by public attitudes, awareness, social norms and public will. Notably, this sort of classification does not consider how these desired effects are generated. Traditionally, campaigns by public organisations have been informational in nature (Luoma-aho and Canel, 2020; Werder, 2020) and have relied on one-way communication through websites and press releases (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). However, in the new digital environment, more emotional approaches might prove to be superior (Papacharissi, 2015) because citizens now expect more personal and dialogic communication, even from public organisations (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). This suggests that the public sector also needs to consider the role of emotional appeal and affect in their communication, which private sector persuasion tactics have utilised for decades (e.g. Turner, 2010).

Finally, an important defining feature of public sector organisations and their communication is that they commonly anticipate risks (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2016a). This anticipation is important, as looming risks can turn into full-blown crises in case risks are not effectively recognised, managed and/or communicated (Heath and O'Hair, 2009). While failing in these efforts might endanger citizens' safety during disasters, less severe crises, such as administrative

scandals, can also affect public sector organisations and their legitimacy through negative press (Frandsen and Johansen, 2020). Therefore, risk perception and risk management, which can be vital for public organisations and their activities, are considered in this study.

Strategic social media influencer communication

During the past decade, SMIs have become noteworthy, with interest in them growing tremendously, both in practice and in research. SMIs, who operate on social media platforms, can influence and persuade their audiences through self-presentation, personal branding, interaction and relationship building (Enke and Borchers, 2019; Freberg *et al.*, 2011). Notably, many SMIs are able to reach and influence certain hard-to-reach groups, such as teenagers and young adults (Enke and Brochers, 2019).

The appeal of SMIs is largely based on their ability to connect with their audiences in intimate (Berryman and Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017) and authentic (Pöyry *et al.*, 2019) ways, such as producing touching, personal content with which their followers can identify (Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020) and using relevant language (Ge and Gretzel, 2018; Kim and Kim, 2020). Therefore, SMIs can be seen as occupying ‘a liminal space’ between the logics of old and new media (Chadwick 2017, p. 199), where they combine extensive reach and engaged audiences with emotional and personal appeal.

Organisations across sectors have become keen on including SMIs in their strategic communication efforts. Strategic SMI communication entails mandating, compensating or requesting SMIs to carry out strategic activities (e.g. content production and distribution) that are

of significance to the organisation (Enke and Borchers, 2019). This can include value exchange, such as paying SMIs to create specific content. However, strategic SMI communication can also include efforts without value exchange, where SMIs are offered information with no requirement to produce relevant content. Here, the decision to publish the information is left to the SMIs. While activities that include value exchange are generally understood as influencer marketing, the latter approach is known as influencer public relations (Enke and Borchers, 2019).

Many studies have explored how SMIs can, for example, enhance purchase intentions *vis-a-vis* commercial brands (e.g. Munnukka *et al.*, 2019; Pöyry *et al.*, 2019), but the perspective of public sector organisations utilising SMIs in their strategic communication has received far less attention.

Methods, data and analysis

This study followed the logic of an exploratory multiple case study (Stake, 1995; 2006; 2008) to explore how four Finnish public organisations campaigned, with the help of SMIs, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The timeframe for the study was the first year of the pandemic (2020) before the vaccination rollout; thus, it was characterised by great uncertainty and strict restrictions. The case organisations comprise the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of the Interior, the Institute for Health and Welfare THL, and the City of Helsinki. The campaigns that they organised are described in Table 11.1.

The use of a multiple-case design study allowed us to explore the phenomenon and enhance our understanding of it in a way that supports theorising in terms of an even larger collection of cases

(Stake, 2008). However, the real significance of case studies is particularisation instead of generalisation and making the cases understandable (Stake, 1995).

The study was based on several data sources. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with people responsible for implementing SMI communication within the case organisations. This resulted in 3.5 hours of interview material. Other data types included three campaign websites (Virtual May Day, May Day Remotely and Five Tips to Tackle COVID-19), five reference stories from the agencies that helped the case organisations implement the campaigns, six press releases published by the case organisations, three webinar presentations given by the case organisations and eight online articles with quotes and comments from the case organisations.

The study adopted an interpretive sensemaking approach, where the intention was to find meanings and understand and describe the studied cases (Welch *et al.*, 2011; Stake, 1995). The analysis started during data gathering, and notes were written while organising the case materials. All the material was carefully analysed, and passages related to the rationale behind the campaigns, their deemed purposes and possible risks were gathered in the case reports (see Stake, 2006), which yielded 15 pages of written text. A timeline of the major events was also compiled to create a clearer understanding of the sequence of events as they unfolded in 2020 (see Figure 11.1).

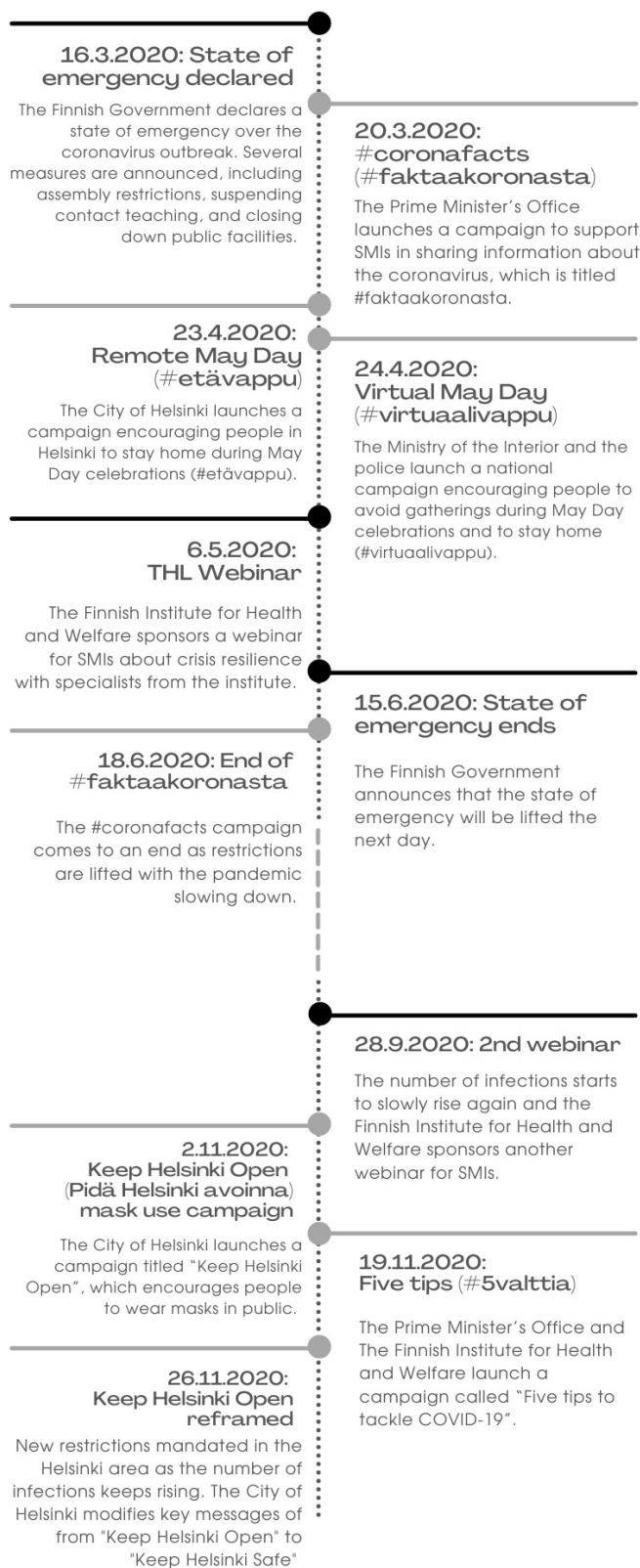


FIGURE 11.1. Timeline of the events.

A typical feature of interpretive case studies is the search for patterns within the data (Stake, 1995). In this study, patterns were sought between the selected cases, and the themes were drawn from the research task (strategies and aims to collaborate with SMIs, along with risk perception and management).

Results

The rationale for and design of the campaigns

According to the interviewees, the COVID-19 pandemic severely affected the communication environment for public sector organisations and thus called for new strategic communication measures. They described the situation as *continuous crisis* and *totally exceptional* compared to anything experienced before. Across the observed data, the pressure to reach all citizens with COVID-19 communications and influence their behaviour to prevent spreading the virus was evident. The adopted approach departs from the usual, mediated practices of these organisations. For example, while the Ministry of the Interior does not usually communicate directly to citizens, it was deemed appropriate and important in this case.

SMIs were perceived as an important way of executing modern communication, especially when seeking to reach teenagers and young adults, and were utilised to reach citizens broadly and quickly regarding critical COVID-19 information:

We can reach a large portion of the public in Finland through official communications and traditional media channels, but it is clear that the messages of the authorities do not always reach all population groups. The aim of this cooperation is to provide better access to information for those who

are difficult to reach through traditional media and communications (Excerpt from a press release by the Prime Minister's Office, 22nd March, 2020)

Based on their evaluation of the prevailing situation, all the studied organisations used SMIs as part of their COVID-19-related communication. A summary of the campaigns that the four case organisations executed with the help of SMIs is featured in Table 11.1.

TABLE 11.1: Summary of the campaigns

	Prime Minister's Office	Ministry of the Interior	Institute for Health and Welfare THL	City of Helsinki
Campaign	1) Coronafacts 2) Five Tips to Tackle COVID-19	Virtual May Day	1) Coronafacts 2) Five Tips to Tackle COVID-19	1) Remote May Day 2) Keep Helsinki Open (mask use campaign)
Influencer integration	1) Sixteen newsletters and three webinars for SMIs about the current situation regarding the pandemic. SMIs were also able to ask government representatives questions. 2) Featured popular celebrities, artists, athletes and SMIs in the campaign ads and invited other SMIs to share the campaign's key messages related to hygiene practices, social distancing, mask-wearing and getting tested if symptomatic.	Virtual May Day pre-party exclusively for SMIs, hosted by the Minister of the Interior to inspire SMIs to encourage people nationally to stay home. Hired 15 SMIs to create content, such as Instagram live streams and tips on how to celebrate May Day while staying home.	1) One newsletter and two webinars for SMIs about the current situation regarding the pandemic. 2) Same approach as the Prime Minister's Office.	1) Hired four SMIs to support the online and offline campaign through content creation that encouraged the citizens of Helsinki to stay home on May Day. 2) Hired 10 SMIs to create content that encouraged the wearing of face masks, the continuation of social distancing and proper hygiene.
Mode of strategic SMI communication	No value exchange. SMIs were offered information, but there was no requirement to publish it.	Value exchange: SMIs chosen for the campaign and their content were pre-screened.	No value exchange: SMIs were offered information, but there was no requirement to publish it.	Value exchange: SMIs chosen for the campaign and their content were pre-screened.

All four organisations had an outside agency help them plan and execute the campaigns and contact SMIs. In the case of Coronafacts (Prime Minister's Office, Institute for Health and Welfare THL) and Virtual May Day (Ministry of the Interior), the agency was the same.

When considering collaboration strategies, both influencer public relations (Coronafacts, Five Tips to Tackle COVID-19) and influencer marketing (Virtual May Day, Remote May Day, mask use campaign) were utilised (see Enke and Borchers, 2019). Typically, marketing communication is connected with the sale of products and perceived to belong in the commercial sphere (Enke and Borchers, 2019). However, in the studied cases, two of the public organisations took advantage of influencer marketing tactics to reach their goals in a way similar to that of commercial brands.

Appealing to citizens through emotions

The studied campaigns mainly sought behaviour change, with the aim of influencing attitudes, awareness and social norms (see Werder, 2020) when seeking to normalise the proposed actions, such as mask wearing and social distancing. Extending Werder's (2020) idea of the purposes of public communication campaigns, the interview data and the campaign materials showed that an important aim in both the Virtual May Day and Remote May Day campaigns was to create a sense of community, when meeting people in person was not advised, by offering alternative, fun online content for citizens. A key message of the Virtual May Day campaign was, 'It's okay to celebrate May Day, and we can come together in new ways'. Both May Day campaigns collaborated with SMIs to offer virtual experiences (e.g. Instagram lives) that aimed to create a feeling of togetherness. This can be seen as an emotional style of persuasion, and it was also

used in the mask use campaign, which operated on a personal level to encourage mask wearing, often considered a personal choice.

While the campaigns with no value exchange (Coronafacts and Five Tips to Tackle COVID-19) had a more general aim of spreading information about COVID-19 as widely as possible through SMIs, the influencer marketing campaigns (Virtual May Day, Remote May Day and mask use campaign) had more precise plans for the influencers: the included SMIs were chosen based on their distinct profiles and follower segments, with the idea of targeting messages “with precision” at different strategically defined groups, such as young people or people with immigrant backgrounds. The SMIs’ ideas and plans for campaign content were also screened before they were published to ensure appropriateness and fit for the campaigns, which can also be perceived as part of risk management.

Risk perception/management

Several instances of risk perception/management were detected. The interviews revealed that all four case organisations had considered the possible risks of the collaborations, even though the campaigns were planned and executed rather quickly.

For example, the organisations reported being quite satisfied with the results of the campaigns, and they even suspected that without SMIs, they would not have been able to reach their target groups to affect citizens’ behaviours as intended. The interview data also revealed that it was considered that without SMIs, there would have been less reach and visibility, but also

insufficient information available, which might have put citizens at risk. Thus, the campaigns offered a way to mitigate COVID-19 risks, as perceived by the studied organisations.

Additionally, the organisations recognised risks associated with the campaigns' execution. These ranged from journalists possibly questioning campaign costs and inappropriate content being published by the SMIs to campaign hashtags being hijacked and followers taking a negative stance towards the campaigns.

The case organisations also implemented risk management strategies, including preparing to speak openly about the costs and the key messages of the campaigns to journalists, preparing materials to help influencers answer potentially difficult questions, and monitoring conversations on social media. The influencer marketing campaigns also included pre-screening SMIs' posting ideas to ensure that unsuitable content was not present, such as the use of alcohol.

The recognised risks, the possible targets of these risks and the corresponding management strategies are summarised in Table 11.2.

TABLE 11.2. Risk recognition and management within the case organisations

Risks	Target of the risk	Management strategies
Lack of information about the pandemic Misinformation	Citizens	The campaigns
Negative press about the collaboration	Organisations	Transparency and openness
Hashtag hijacking Influencers not committed/interested Inappropriate content	Campaigns	Controlling posts beforehand (in paid collaborations) Social media monitoring
Negative comments from followers	Influencers	Preparing Q&A sheets

Discussion

This study explored how four Finnish public organisations turned to SMIs during the COVID-19 pandemic, whilst acknowledging that their traditional methods of communication might not suffice in reaching all citizens to influence their behaviour, attitudes, and awareness during a prevailing health crisis. The two main arguments for using SMIs in their COVID-19 communications were to increase message reach and to add a more emotional and personalised tone to the messaging. Furthermore, SMI collaboration was considered a ‘modern’ form of strategic communication.

It seems that, from the perspective of the studied organisations, there is a grey area located between the reaches of traditional legacy media and the organisations’ own communication efforts, which leaves certain groups of citizens uninformed regarding public sector communication. This ‘liminal space’ is potentially occupied by SMIs (Chadwick, 2017, p. 199), but it has, to date, rarely been explored by public sector organisations. None of the studied organisations had collaborated widely with SMIs before, and examples of such practices are also

scarce globally. Hence, the respective campaigns can be regarded as attempts to conquer this unknown space and—with the help of SMIs—to reach out to those citizens who are neither responsive to public organisations' own communication nor necessarily influenced by traditional media outlets or advertisements.

In addition, as SMIs can create intimate and emotional connections with their followers (Berryman and Kavka, 2017; Raun, 2018), campaigning with the help of SMIs offers public sector organisations an opportunity to approach citizens in more personalised, affective ways and to participate in creating a sense of community. We argue that, in addition to participating in information sharing, SMIs help public organisations make emotional appeals, which are typically difficult in public sector communication.

We suggest that these findings expand the premises of public communication campaigns introduced by Werder (2020) because with the help of SMIs, public organisations also have a channel for creating a sense of community. This introduces another dimension to the continuum of public campaigns (behaviour change vs. policy change) (Werder, 2020), namely the campaign's approach to the audience (information-centric vs. emotion-centric). This essentially turns the continuum into a four-quadrant model (see Figure 11.2). We argue that using SMIs also makes the lower quadrants of the model accessible to public organisations.

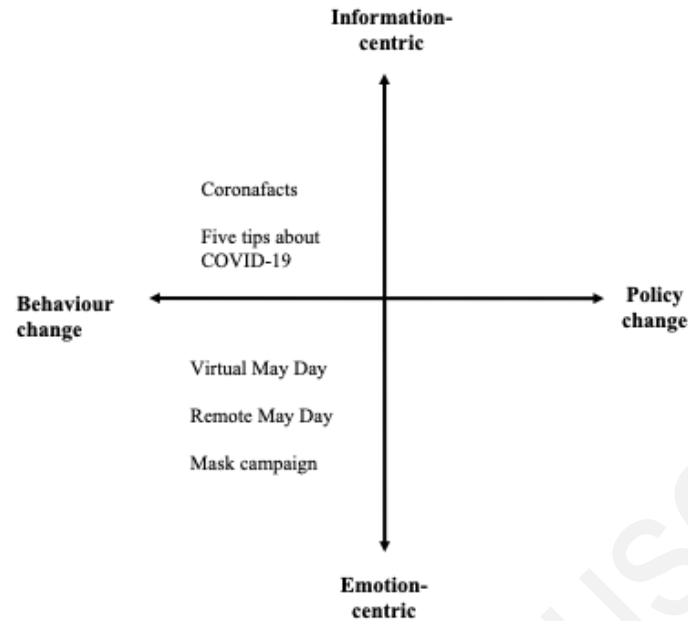


FIGURE 11.2. Public communication campaigns according to their aims (X axis), approaches to appeal (Y axis) and placement of the studied campaigns. (Adapted from Werder, 2020, p. 249)

The campaigns were conducted to reduce the risks of COVID-19 to citizens and society at large. This suggests that communicating with the help of SMIs was a risk management strategy in itself; it is possible that excluding SMIs from the strategic communication process could have resulted in the organisations overlooking certain groups of citizens and possibly endangering their health and the health of others in the process. However, engaging in SMI collaborations can also be risky for organisations (Reinikainen *et al.*, 2021; Sng *et al.*, 2019); inappropriate SMI content or negative press about the campaigns might have threatened the legitimacy of the organisations. Therefore, risk perception/management was also necessary at the execution level, and these efforts should not be overlooked when initiating collaborations with SMIs.

Anticipating prevailing risks helps avoid a full-blown crisis (Heath and O’Hair, 2009) and can save lives during a pandemic.

Public sector organisations' use of SMIs in their strategic communication reflects that these organisations are adopting the same agile approaches in communication and marketing as the business sector. Therefore, in the same way that commercial brands collaborate with SMIs when seeking to influence consumers' purchase intentions and brand attitudes (Munnukka *et al.*, 2019; Pöyry *et al.*, 2019), public sector organisations can turn to SMIs when seeking to change the behaviour of citizens and strengthen their own legitimacy. These actions are particularly important during health crises because without legitimacy, public officials can lose their authority and fail to convince citizens to comply with ordinances and restrictions (Yang, 2020). However, there has also been criticism of this kind of development, with some questioning whether tax-funded organisations should engage in practices that resemble corporate public relations (e.g., Hiltunen, 2021) and whether such new, indirect influence is considered ethically sound.

Public sector organisations can target certain groups of citizens in much the same way as commercial brands target consumers on social media through native advertising and content marketing. While public sector organisations' targeting of citizens with the help of SMIs who are compensated for their efforts is interesting, there is growing pressure for public organisations to offer personalised content and to serve the individual needs of citizens (Luoma-aho and Canel, 2020). Targeting and personalisation provide an opportunity that campaigns involving SMIs can offer, but SMIs operate on their own channels and on their own terms, making it impossible to entirely control their content (Enke and Borchers, 2019). Therefore, it is worth considering how much authority and control over their messaging public sector organisations should give to third parties, such as SMIs, especially during a health crisis.

Finally, in the Nordic countries, public sector organisations have responsibility engrained into their operations, and campaigning with SMIs raises questions about new forms of ‘collaboration responsibility’ (see Reinikainen *et al.*, 2021), such as how to ensure that society and all involved parties are better off as a result of the collaboration. Additionally, if public sector organisations aim for the common good, how can this be ensured in the case of collaboration with SMIs?

Limitations

While this study offers new insights into public sector communication and strategic SMI communication, it also has its limitations. For example, the context is specific—the COVID-19 pandemic. In many countries, including Finland, the pandemic created a truly unique, rapidly erupting crisis, which makes historical comparisons with previous communication campaigns difficult. Nevertheless, we believe that this study makes a new contribution to public sector communication studies by analysing the collaboration between public organisations and SMIs at an urgent and pressing time and in the modern, fragmented and hybrid media environment.

We also acknowledge that Finland is an exceptional country in which to study public sector organisations. Finnish people have greater trust in public officials and authorities than other EU citizens (Standard Eurobarometri 94, 2021), which creates fertile ground for implementing public communication campaigns. This also means that SMIs are probably prone to joining public communication campaigns, and the opportunity to support such campaigns might even be a ‘patriotic mission’ for them. Therefore, a similar study conducted in a country with varying or less trust in public officials would probably produce different results.

In the discussion, we suggested that leaving SMIs out of their strategy could have been risky, as this could have meant that the organisations might have missed certain groups of citizens. This view is, however, based on the perceptions of the studied organisations. It is possible that the organisations are inclined to present the campaigns in a favourable light to avoid criticism. To gain a better understanding of the effects and outcomes, future research would benefit from different methods and approaches.

Finally, the interpretive case study leaves room for consideration. The aim of this study was not to make generalisations or causal claims but rather to seek the particular and increase our understanding of the studied phenomenon (Welch *et al.*, 2011). This emphasises subjectivity and the uniqueness of the cases. Generalisability could be reached through analysing data over different kinds of cases and contexts or with a more comparative approach, for example.

Key lessons for future research

- Future studies could extend this line of research by analysing other types of communication campaigns that public sector organisations and SMIs engage in and noting how their collaboration premises differ.
- The campaigns studied here could also be viewed from the perspectives of the SMIs or the audience to explore other questions, such as how SMIs perceive these types of public communication campaigns, what their reasons are for participating in them, how the use of SMIs in public communication campaigns affects the attitudes and behaviour of audiences and how audiences perceive these campaigns.

- The role of emotions and personalisation in public-sector communication could be further explored, while also considering the general expectations for impartial and objective communication from public sector organisations.

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