

(De)Legitimation in Policy Transfer and Branding: A Dialogical View of the Romanian Covid-19 Vaccination Policy

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Abstract

With the growth of marketing’s influence extending from the commercial domain into governance strategy, public health branding and promotional communication relating to the Covid-19 vaccine were essential for national authorities trying to transfer the WHO communication strategy and vaccine policies to their domestic contexts while maintaining public trust. This study explores the role of (de)legitimation in the Covid-19 vaccine communication (#ROVaccinare/ROVaccination) policy transfer and branding conducted by the Romanian government on Facebook. Adopting a top-down and bottom-up approach to the meaning-making process of the message strategy promotion, we employed a mixed-methods approach. We drew on categorizations of message tailoring related to health communication and operationalizations of discursive (de)legitimation. The main findings showed a preference for rationalization legitimation through the usage of fact-based posts and a clear integration of authorization and narrativization into the message strategy promotion of the ROVaccination page. However, despite the prevalence of fact-based posts, legitimation through personal and medical stories was a positive predictor of engagement, unlike legitimation through facts. The bottom-up approach revealed polarized attitudes towards healthcare professionals as sources of the campaign, the Romanian medical system, and past and present vaccination. The dominance of polarization in online users’ comments emphasizes their role as agents of conversion, contesting either the message sources employed in the campaign or other commenters as personal authorities.

Keywords

Facebook; health messages; legitimation; message tailoring; narratives; policy; vaccination

1. Introduction

The public health domain is considered one of the fields closely related to branded policies (Ogden et al., 2003; Raev & Minkman, 2020). Policy branding allows policymakers to “enhance visibility as well as the legitimacy of new or reformed policies” in order to gain stakeholders’ support for public policy campaigns that are “infused with brand attributes” (Raev & Minkman, 2020, p. 3). This need for policy branding was also visible when Covid-19 vaccination was promoted as a solution to the pandemic. Hence, promotional communication was an essential part of the marketing mix for Covid-19 vaccine communication (Hong, 2023). Domestic authorities tried to adapt the “grand strategy” (Botan, 2021) of the WHO developed in the *Covid-19 Vaccines: Safety Surveillance Manual* to their national socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts. These contextual aspects were closely related to trust in policymakers and health experts (Dubé et al., 2013; Larson et al., 2018).

The transnational communication policy transfer also took place in Romania, with the government adopting a vaccination strategy against Covid-19 on December 3, 2020, implemented under the form of an online campaign entitled #ROVaccinare/ROVaccination. The aim of this study is to explore the role of (de)legitimation in the transfer and branding of Covid-19 vaccine communication (#ROVaccinare/ROVaccination policy) deployed by the Romanian government on Facebook (the most used social media platform in the country; Manafu, 2021).

The legitimation capacity of governments comprising trust in the political and socio-economic spheres is essential for policy effectiveness (Woo et al., 2015). Socio-political drivers played a significant role in increasing East European citizens’ distrust of health specialists (Wellcome, 2020). Bohle and Eihmanis (2022) consider that many governments from this region put financial interests ahead of health interests during the Covid-19 pandemic. The East Europeans’ distrust of national authorities and experts could also be linked to the legacy of their communist past (Mishler & Rose, 1997), the rise of populism (Mihelj et al., 2022), or the growth of corruption (Haerpfer et al., 2022) in this area. The results of Flash Eurobarometer 505 (European Commission, 2022) showed that Romanians were not satisfied with the national government’s handling of the vaccination strategy: a 20% drop in trust was reported between May 2021 and February 2022. One explanation for this distrust in authorities could be linked to the constant political instability in Romania (Gherghina & Soare, 2016), with seven ministers running the Ministry of Health within one year (December 2020–December 2021).

This macro-contextual level may have played a crucial part in Romania’s low Covid-19 vaccination uptake. Only 30% of the population had been immunized by September 2021, the lowest rate in the EU by the end of 2022 (OECD & European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2023, p. 17). However, it is important to acknowledge that vaccination rates in Romania were “below both European averages and WHO recommended targets of 95%” even before the Covid-19 pandemic (OECD & European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2019, p. 14).

At the same time, contextual factors are of paramount importance in a micro-oriented analysis of “legitimacy constructions in social media” (Holmgreen, 2021, p. 3). The hybrid media ecology (Ihlen et al., 2021, p. 6) has facilitated the development of the postmodern medical paradigm, elevating “subjective experience” and raising “skepticism towards objective bases for knowledge” (Bricker & Justice, 2019, p. 6), and questioning authority and science (Kata, 2012). It is essential to acknowledge that legitimacy in the online environment

should go beyond a top-down perspective; it should be coproduced between (health) organizations and stakeholders (online users). The emphasis on multiple voices and potential counter-discourses (Vestergaard & Uldam, 2022) brings forth a dialogical view (Glozer et al., 2019) on the (organizational) authority which is related to “perceived legitimacy” (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 263).

In this study, we adopted a top-down and bottom-up approach to the meaning-making process of the message strategy promotion in order to (a) identify how the Romanian authority legitimized its message strategy promotion, (b) determine how (de)legitimation was coproduced in comments, and (c) explore how the Romanian authority managed (de)legitimation as a policy branding mechanism.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Policy Branding and Health Communication

The branding of public policy is a somewhat late arrival to political marketing in general and to government marketing in particular. In their heuristic identification of four different areas in which branding and politics intersect, Marsh and Fawcett (2011) point to, among others, branded products and services used by governments and public policies, particularly in the area of public health. WHO is highlighted as an international agency that is often engaged in branding practices and interacting with governments and government agencies, particularly in relation to policy transfers. In this context, policy branding can create contestation and debate, but at the same time, it can also raise the issue’s public profile (Ogden et al., 2003), engaging new target groups. In health communication, policy branding is used to convince citizens of the quality of the “product” being produced while also legitimizing policy decisions taken in expert networks (Marsh & Fawcett, 2011, p. 525). Therefore, irrespective of whether branding the policy legitimizes or delegitimizes it in the eyes of a very polarized public sphere, it fulfills two core communication requirements for any campaign run in an increasingly digitalized environment: visibility through message strategy promotion and engagement of stakeholders.

Embedding brand attributes into public health policies enables citizens to see them as “products” and interact with the communication campaigns developed by government agencies in order to promote the policies and the behaviors associated with them. According to Basu and Wang (2009), in adopting a branding approach to public health policy and communication campaign development, governmental agencies and departments can anchor the process in core concepts such as brand definition, brand communication, and brand management (Karens et al., 2016). A branded public health campaign can achieve a high degree of brand resonance (Keller, 2007) by enabling the adoption of a certain behavior, transforming the target group into “agents of conversion,” converting non-practitioners of the health behavior (Basu & Wang, 2009, p. 82), and by planning the communication campaign as a coproduction endeavor.

Defined as setting out policies, treaties, and goals, grand strategies pertain to high government bodies or to high management of organizations, and they act as directives for other subordinate (inter)national bodies (Botan, 2021). The tangible part of grand strategies takes the form of a campaign that implies planning and strategic implementation (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2021). In health communication campaigns, sources and messages are two strategic elements of paramount importance since they can trigger behavioral changes. Yaqub et al. (2014) consider that legitimacy and trust play a significant role in understanding the

recontextualized information on vaccination supplied by various sources. Gilpin et al. (2010) add the authority component. However, within the context of the postmodern paradigm where online users are empowered, authority is no longer associated only with experts: Ordinary individuals have become reliable sources for others, with direct consequences on health message tailoring.

A great challenge for (inter)national bodies setting out the message strategy promotion in a vaccination policy is linked to the type of content to be embedded in these messages. Research suggests that narrative communication fosters identification with the characters and immersion into the story, which reduces message resistance, whereas factual information focuses on motivation to learn or cognitive appeals to logic and reason (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Nan et al., 2015). However, when it comes to strategic communication planning, researchers make a plea for a hybrid usage of narrative and statistical evidence in health messages (Betsch et al., 2011; Dahlstrom, 2014; Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2021) in order to increase the chances of attitudinal and behavioral change.

Similarly, in its *Covid-19 Vaccines: Safety Surveillance Manual*, the WHO (2021) advised a blended approach to tailor Covid-19 vaccination message strategy promotion in order to raise the effectiveness and acceptability of these messages. Whereas an evidence-based approach is considered to be suited for the communication of potential risks, personal stories about vaccination—messages that elicit emotions—are preferred to address vaccine safety (Loft et al., 2020), and they “can be part of an authentic, personal approach to communicating via social media” (WHO, 2021, p. 180).

In Romania, the initial vaccination strategy against Covid-19 in December 2020 (Official Gazette, 2020), developed by a liberal government, only referred to the usage of correct and factual information without making any clear reference to the employment of narratives as a content strategy. Later on, in April 2021, the government headed by USR-PLUS (Progressive, Liberal, and Centrist Political Alliance) implemented a communication strategy that also embedded narratives. This new communication campaign entitled #povestidelavaccinare (#storiesfromvaccination) was awarded the first prize for “the best use of user-generated content” at Webstock, a national social media competition.

Therefore, in our analysis of legitimation discursive categories, we will consider both narratives and facts as the main parts of the promotion of the Covid-19 message strategy. Besides the usage of a personal and authentic approach to communication about the Covid-19 vaccine, WHO (2021) stipulates that user involvement and interaction should be part of building a strong social media presence for national bodies. In the methodology section, the coding scheme is developed, taking into account these three content strategies: stories, facts, and user involvement.

2.2. Towards Socially Mediated (De)Legitimation and the Study of Policies

Defined as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574), legitimation has been a key focus in organizational studies. Related to politics and political economy, the concept of promissory legitimacy has been developed. Avigur-Eshel (2023) considers this type of legitimacy appropriate to the analysis of policies related to Covid-19 since national bodies have transferred and adapted these international policies at the country level.

The social media ecology has brought a new perspective on legitimation. It is not only organizational legitimacy as a social construct deriving from “managerial efforts to achieve societal support for the organization’s existence” (Holmgreen, 2021, p. 2) that matters, but also the constituents’ perception of organizational actions. Therefore, since the legitimacy of authority “must be socially agreed on among those communicating” (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 262), it is also essential to talk about delegitimation. Associated with “destructive legitimation” (Vestergaard & Uldam, 2022, p. 233), delegitimation implies legitimizing a social group’s discourse by undermining the opposing group’s social practices (van Dijk, 2000). The new mediascape, where a multitude of voices are engaged in “instant and real-time communication” (Holmgreen, 2021, p. 2), urged scholars to study both legitimacy-as-process and legitimacy-as-perception (Suddaby et al., 2017) or to provide “a dialogical view of discursive legitimation in organization-led social media settings” (Glozer et al., 2019, p. 626).

Various operationalizations of legitimation categories are present in research studies. One of the most well-known typologies of legitimation categories belongs to van Leeuwen (2008): authorization (reference to authority), rationalization (reference to goals and uses of organizational social action), moral evaluation (reference to values), and mythopoesis (reference to narratives). Closely related to these legitimation functions, Vaara et al. (2006) underlined the importance of normalization as a discursive strategy since it makes reference to exemplarity. Examining organizational discourse in dialogic interaction, Glozer et al. (2019, pp. 638–641) developed three interrelated functions of discursive legitimation: discursive authorization (reference to personal and mythic authorization); discursive validation (reference to normative, moral, and rational evidence); and discursive finalization (reference to instances of antagonism and/or co-option). Vestergaard and Uldam (2022) propose the following analytical categories: constructive legitimation (systemic rationalization and agentic rationalization) and destructive legitimation (deauthorization and demoralization).

The present study will expand on some of the legitimation categories presented above and will propose new ones, associating them with elements of health message strategy promotion in the social media environment. The following types of discursive legitimation will be employed in this study: legitimation through (a) stories, (b) facts, (c) events, and (d) user involvement.

Legitimation through stories (a) embeds two types of discursive strategies: mythopoesis (van Leeuwen, 2008) or narrativization (Vaara et al., 2006) with authorization (Vaara et al., 2006; van Leeuwen, 2008). The type of authority telling the stories is of paramount importance. Research has found that legitimization through elites’ quotations was one of the top three discursive strategies employed in official media discourse on vaccination in China (Wang, 2020). However, both experts and laypersons are considered relevant sources to be used in effective vaccination communication messages (Motta et al., 2021). Glozer et al. (2019) identify mythic authorization as a form of organizational commitment to a certain social practice.

Legitimation through facts (b) coincides with van Leeuwen’s (2008) theoretical rationalization with its three forms (definitions, explanations, and predictions). The enactment of this legitimation is closely related to the evidence-based approach to health messages (Loft et al., 2020).

Legitimation through events (c) coincides with what Wang (2020) identified as a discursive strategy emphasizing the government’s positive actions, and the findings of her research revealed that such a strategy set the tone for an authoritarian official discourse.

Legitimation through user involvement (d): The social media environment implies a shift in how organizations relate with stakeholders, from offline to online involvement. Therefore, “the need for engagement in authentic online communication” is important in socially mediated interaction (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 266).

3. Methodology

Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What legitimation categories were present in the message strategy of the Romanian authority in the Covid-19 vaccination communication policy transfer?

RQ2: What type of legitimation strategy triggered the highest engagement?

RQ3: What relationships are present between legitimation strategies and Facebook behavior?

RQ4: What (de)legitimizing topics were visible in the comments to the top three most salient message strategies?

We used CrowdTangle, an online tool developed by Meta, to collect all Facebook posts from the ROVaccinare/ROVaccination Facebook page from December 20, 2020, to March 8, 2022. This timeframe encompasses the period from the beginning of the vaccination campaign in European countries up to the date when all the Covid-19 restrictions were lifted in Romania. The corpus consisted of 2,106 Facebook posts, and after curating the data, the final data included 2,060 posts.

The first stage of the research (RQ1) focused on establishing the codebook in order to analyze the Facebook posts. Following various categorizations on legitimation strategies and efficient health message strategies presented above, the following categories were included in the codebook. Legitimation through stories will include (a) legitimation through personal stories (stories about vaccination or topics related to vaccination, told by laypersons or role models); (b) legitimation through medical stories (stories told by health professionals about their work experience related to the Covid-19 virus and vaccination); (c) legitimation through organizational stories (stories about organizations or other groups showing their support of Covid-19 vaccination).

Legitimation through facts makes reference to factual (scientific) information about Covid-19 vaccination, vaccination in general, fake news debunking (arguments to show the opposite), reports from national organizations (National Institute of Statistics, etc.) and international organizations (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or WHO).

Legitimation through events refers to information about events organized by the Romanian authority (National Coordinating Committee for Covid-19 Vaccination Activities), for example, caravans and media events.

Legitimation through user involvement refers to mobilizing posts inviting online users to participate in online and/or offline activities related to Covid-19 vaccination. For example, the National Coordinating Committee for Covid-19 Vaccination Activities tried to mobilize online users to employ the #storiesfromvaccination

hashtag, urging them to post their experiences in the PROVaccination Facebook group. Some of these stories were then posted on the ROVaccinare/ROVaccination Facebook page.

The second stage of the analysis (RQ2) focused on assessing the relationship between engagement and post-type by employing simple and multiple linear regressions. The engagement rate was calculated using Bonsón and Ratkai's formula (2013). CrowdTangle provided insights into the interactions of each post (likes, reactions, comments, shares) and the number of likes and followers at the time of posting. Based on the engagement rate, we selected the top five posts with the highest engagement rate from each of the legitimation strategies.

We set the regression model with post type as an independent variable and various categories of engagements collected from the ROVaccination Facebook page as dependent variables. As the post-type variable was measured categorically, we used the dummy coding system, turning it into a series of dichotomous variables. The software used was PASW Statistics 18, the applied regression type was linear, and the variable selection method was entered. The estimation method used was ordinary least squares. The model's goodness-of-fit was assessed through adjusted R2.

In the third stage of the analysis (RQ3), we started with Muntinga et al.'s findings (2011) that contributing (commenting) alongside consuming (liking) and creating (sharing) are indicative of active participation in online conversations. Therefore, we wanted to assess the comments on the 15 posts based on the three types of legitimation strategies with the highest engagement rate. The comments (both primary and replies) were extracted using ExportComments.com. The dataset included 58,512 comments. We imported them into WordStat 7.1.19, and topic modeling was performed. Using two statistical methods (factor analysis and non-negative matrix factorization), topic modeling obtained via WordStat extracts topics from co-occurrence matrices (Péladeau, 2021) based on word similarities. The conditions set were as follows: segmentation was performed by document, including comments and replies. The number of topics extracted was 30, and the loading was 0.30. Since WordStat allows researchers to change the generated topic names, we adapted these topics, taking into account the (de)legitimizing strategies, and we presented the first five topics for the legitimation strategies with the highest engagement rate.

4. Results

4.1. Message Strategy Promotion: Types of Legitimation, Engagement Rate, and Facebook Behavior

The post distribution based on legitimation strategies employed in messages on Covid-19 vaccination (Table 1) points to (a) a preference for rationalization legitimation through the usage of fact-based posts, and (b) a clear integration of authorization and narrativization into the message strategy promotion of the ROVaccination page. Personal, medical, and organizational stories represent 31.11%, second to facts (47.38%), underlining a storytelling approach to content production. A dialogic communication approach to content creation appears to be a missed opportunity, as content primarily focuses on online/offline user involvement and registers a relatively low post count.

Table 1. Types of legitimization strategies in message promotion: ROVaccination/ROVaccinare Facebook page.

Type of legitimization strategy	Post distribution (N = 2,060)	Post distribution %	Engagement rate (ER) average of top 5 posts
Legitimation through personal stories	430	20.87%	10.18%
Legitimation through medical stories	143	6.94%	16.36%
Legitimation through organizational stories	68	3.30%	3.06%
Legitimation through facts	976	47.38%	6.12%
Legitimation through events	262	12.72%	4.02%
Legitimation through online user involvement	85	4.13%	2.47%
Legitimation through offline user involvement	72	3.50%	3.43%
No connection to vaccination	24	1.17%	1.73%

Although evidence-based messages were mostly employed by the Romanian authority, they were outperformed in terms of engagement rate by messages including legitimization through personal and healthcare expert authority (Table 1). When looking at the engagement rate averages of the top five posts in each category, we observe a reversal of the quantity pyramid, pointing to source authority as a salient factor in engagement generation. Medical story posts had a 16.36% engagement rate (ER) average, even though they registered a much lower count ($n = 143$) than factual posts ($n = 976$), with a 6.12% ER average.

Table 2 shows the five posts with the highest engagement rate. As observed, posts embedding stories were the best-performing five posts on the ROVaccination Facebook page. In the first four stories, four Romanian experts were present. They expressed their authority by providing arguments for the benefits of (Covid-19) vaccination (posts 1 and 2) and by talking about their experiences with Covid-19 patients in hospitals (posts 3 and 4). Employing an analogy between the approval of the Covid-19 vaccine and paracetamol, a Romanian doctor (post 1) instructed online users how to discuss with vaccine skeptics using common-knowledge medical information in order to debunk the opinions about the experimental serum associated with the Covid-19 vaccine (“Covid-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer/BioNTech has FDA’s full authorization. Therefore, in terms of approval, there is no difference between this vaccine and paracetamol,” August 26, 2021). A comparison between previous outbreaks (scarlet fever or polio) and the Covid-19 pandemic was used by an elderly Romanian doctor (post 2) who emphasized the benefits of vaccination. Posts 3 and 4 focused on intensive care unit and emergency room doctors, and both stories embedded the healthcare experts during their latest day on-call: “My latest night shift at the COVID unit, 23 patients: 20 unvaccinated patients and three vaccinated persons” (September 20, 2021); “On September 10, I finished my on-call day. There were 12 patients at the intensive care unit and only one person got the Johnson shot...and he had other diseases as well” (September 16, 2021). Janssen and Jansen (2018, p. 65) consider that “numeral markers...play a role in systemic central processing” by influencing “the extent to which readers are inclined to elaborate on the text.” The usage of numerals as lexical choices in the two posts highlights two important aspects. On the one hand, a fear appeal was closely linked to the presence of unvaccinated persons in intensive care units even after nine months since Covid-19 vaccination started. On the other hand, the low numbers (23 patients and 12 patients) may implicitly show the benefits of vaccination. A personal story was among the five Facebook posts with the highest ER and focused on an elderly woman’s vaccination experience: “My niece, a doctor, convinced me that the vaccine is the only way out of the pandemic.” (March 28, 2021). This choice of personal experiences told by laypersons legitimizing

vaccination aligns with previous research (Motta et al., 2021) that emphasized the importance of having laypersons alongside healthcare experts as sources when tailoring health messages.

Table 2. Type of legitimation strategy, content of the Facebook posts with the highest ER (ROVaccination/ROVaccinare Facebook page).

Post	Type of legitimation strategy	Content of the Facebook post	Engagement rate (ER)
1	Legitimation through medical stories	A Romanian doctor tries to debunk misinformation about the experimental Covid-19 vaccine	23.70%
2	Legitimation through medical stories	A video with an elderly Romanian doctor talking about his experiences throughout various epidemics	18.67%
3	Legitimation through medical stories	A Romanian doctor working in an intensive care unit talking about his experience during his latest on-call day	14.12%
4	Legitimation through medical stories	A Romanian doctor working in a County Emergency Hospital talking about his experience with unvaccinated patients	13.85%
5	Legitimation through personal stories	Picture of an elderly woman getting the second Covid-19 shot	12.15%

RQ3 addressed the relationship between legitimation strategies and Facebook behavior (Table 3). The frequency analysis showed that liking was the most frequent Facebook behavior associated with all types of legitimation strategies. Commenting was the second Facebook behavior for five legitimation strategies, whereas sharing was the second most employed behavior for legitimation through organizational stories and online user involvement.

The regression analysis showed that whereas legitimation through personal stories ($\beta = 0.094$, $p < 0.01$) and medical stories ($\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.01$) positively predicted engagement rate, legitimation through facts ($\beta = -0.181$, $p < 0.01$) was negatively related to engagement rate. As observed in Table 3, while posts embedding legitimation through facts had a negative correlation with almost all Facebook behavior, legitimation through medical expert authority positively correlated with all types of Facebook behavior, with medical stories being the best message type to explain variation. This suggests that posts embedding medical stories are more likely to trigger online users to have all types of reactions on Facebook.

Three legitimation strategies were significantly related to post liking: while personal stories ($\beta = 0.173$, $p < 0.01$) and medical stories ($\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.01$) displayed a positive correlation, facts ($\beta = -0.227$, $p < 0.01$) had a medium negative correlation with liking. Messages embedding legitimation through medical stories were more likely to encourage online users to comment and share posts. In contrast, evidence-based messages and posts, including events, were negatively related to these two types of Facebook behavior.

In terms of reactions, the frequency analysis showed that love was the most frequent type of reaction for legitimation through personal stories (6.02%), events (4.23%), and organizational stories (4.01%). Sadness was the most used reaction for the posts embedding legitimation through medical stories (4.97%) and facts (4.50%). The regression analysis highlighted that medical stories were positively correlated with both

Table 3. Frequency and regression analysis of Facebook engagement behavior.

	Legitimation strategy						
	Legitimation through personal stories <i>n</i> = 969.443 (100%)	Legitimation through medical stories <i>n</i> = 707.051 (100%)	Legitimation through facts <i>n</i> = 1,012.204 (100%)	Legitimation through events <i>n</i> = 333.847 (100%)	Legitimation through organizational stories <i>n</i> = 112.820 (100%)	Legitimation through online user involvement <i>n</i> = 104.476 (100%)	Legitimation through offline user involvement <i>n</i> = 122.109 (100%)
ER	0.094**	0.228**	-0.181**	-0.022	0.023	-0.011	0.001
Likes	65.44% (0.173**)	47.48% (0.254**)	60.60% (-0.227**)	64.81% (-0.040)	67.37% (0.017)	57.89% (-0.038)	54.23% (-0.008)
Comments	14.20% (0.039)	20.60% (0.269**)	15.14% (-0.129**)	12.66% (-0.050*)	11.15% (-0.018)	23.05% (0.006)	17.94% (0.011)
Shares	7.52% (-0.026)	20.15% (0.226**)	14.10% (-0.071**)	13.51% (-0.018)	12.66% (-0.001)	9.61% (-0.022)	13.69% (0.003)
Love	6.02% (0.271**)	2.32% (0.106**)	1.91% (-0.243**)	4.23% (-0.010)	4.01% (0.011)	1.66% (-0.052*)	2.70% (-0.015)
Wow	0.20% (-0.019)	0.29% (0.143**)	0.53% (0.015)	0.19% (-0.060**)	0.18% (-0.023)	0.17% (-0.037)	0.26% (-0.009)
Haha	2.07% (0.027)	2.36% (0.140**)	1.98% (-0.112**)	1.35% (-0.053*)	3.09% (0.015)	6.46% (0.055*)	6.05% (0.080**)
Sad	2.49% (0.000)	4.97% (0.239**)	4.50% (-0.041)	1.78% (-0.059**)	0.11% (-0.046*)	0.34% (-0.050*)	3.05% (-0.004)
Angry	0.69% (0.025)	0.95% (0.176**)	0.73% (-0.096**)	0.81% (-0.018)	1.03% (0.015)	0.53% (-0.025)	1.12% (0.022)
Care	1.39% (0.139**)	0.86% (0.123**)	0.52% (-0.132**)	0.66% (-0.035)	0.40% (-0.022)	0.28% (-0.035)	0.95% (0.006)

Notes: Standardized, list-wise; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

positive and negative reactions. While personal stories were positively correlated with the number of loves and cares, facts triggered a negative correlation with both positive and negative reactions. As a reaction, Haha showed statistical relevance with five types of legitimation strategies present in the Facebook posts: legitimation through medical stories, online user involvement, and offline user involvement (medium and weak positive correlations); legitimation through facts and events (medium and weak negative correlations). As observed in Table 3, although the percentages associated with Haha reactions were not high, they were more frequently associated with posts embedding legitimation through online user involvement (6.46%) and offline user involvement (6.05%). A humorous tone was present in two posts focusing on user involvement with the highest number of Haha reactions. One post had the following message: “D4C4 P0T1 24 C1T32T1 45TA 1N2E4MN4 C4 T3 P0T1 V4CC1N4” (“If you can read this, it means that you can get the job,” September 12, 2021). The Romanian authority employed numbers instead of letters (4 for A, 0 for O, 1 for I) to flatter the online users for their cognitive capacity to read the message, and it implicitly urged them to get vaccinated at various vaccination centers mentioned in the Facebook post. “I have the feeling that night does not exist. It is just part of the conspiracy of those who want to sell us light bulbs!” (January 8, 2022) was the humorous message in another post where online users were invited to get informed from trusted online sources. Besides laughter, the Haha reaction was also associated with ridicule. For example, when showing behavior towards Facebook posts focusing on medical stories, some online users displayed contempt for a doctor telling her story from a Clinical Hospital of Infectious and Tropical Diseases in Romania.

4.2. (De)Legitimizing Topics Present in Comments

Although topic modeling showed an overlap of topics, some of these topics had a higher Eigenvalue in the comments to the posts focusing on personal stories (Table 4), medical stories (Table 5), and facts (Table 6). When commenting on personal story posts, Romanian users focused on freedom of choice, Covid-19 vaccination risks and benefits, and personal experience. A polarization between Romanian online users could be observed. On the one hand, those who delegitimized vaccination seemed to dominate the debate by emphasizing their lack of freedom. On the other hand, other commenters employed personal authority as a way of legitimizing Covid-19 vaccination, but at the same time, they discussed the potential risks and benefits of vaccination. In the case of medical story posts, polarization was also present, but this time, it was related to legitimizing past vaccination and delegitimizing Covid-19 vaccination. Words such as “years; many years; after years” versus “in a year” indicate a temporal argument employed as an instance of explanation associated with theoretical rationalization. Comments to posts on facts also embedded this topic, but negative-laden moral evaluation (“experimental serum”) was used to delegitimize Covid-19 vaccination.

Deauthorization was found both in the comments to posts focusing on medical and personal stories. It was mainly combined with depreciative adjectives (“idiot,” “stupid”), sarcasm (“so-called,” “expert,” “doctor”), and illiteracy (“not know Romanian”), thus emphasizing a negative-other presentation. Although personal experience as authority was present only in the comments to posts embedding personal stories and facts, the presence of the Predictions topic in comments to medical stories also suggests Romanian users’ tendency to assume a role of authority, but this time associated with an expert-like voice. This emphasizes what Breeze (2021, p. 5) labels as a “first-hand experience” of “a potential source of trustworthy information.” Advice Giving dominated the topics found in the comments on posts focusing on facts. Considered a normal thing to be followed (Glozer et al., 2019), Advice Giving (“should” or imperative forms of verbs) acts as an instance of “prospective exemplarity” (Vaara et al., 2006, p. 798), emphasizing a future normality.

A polarization of attitudes towards the medical system was observed in the comments to posts focusing on personal and medical stories. The online users accused the Romanian medical system of corruption and ROVaccination of vaccination campaign mismanagement (“money,” “post,” “sell for,” “campaign”). When commenting on the posts of healthcare experts, a dichotomy can be observed between positive moral evaluation associated with doctors (“trust,” “good doctor,” “respect”) and deauthorization of doctors as corrupted sources (“money,” “received,” “how much money,” “politics”). The commenters’ appeal to corruption related to Romanian healthcare experts was also present in other studies on the analysis of comments on the Covid-19 vaccination campaign in Romania (Cmeciu, 2023; Obreja, 2022).

Table 4. Topics in comments to Facebook posts embedding legitimization through personal stories (topic modeling—WordStat 7.1.19).

Topic	Keywords	Eigenvalue
Freedom of choice	each; everyone; his/her life; want; do; make; whatever; free; freedom; allow; us; if (you) want; do not want; vaccinate yourself	11.52
Covid-19 vaccination efficacy	vaccinated; unvaccinated; may; virus; can transmit; as long; got infected; virus; form; mild; severe; those vaccinated; those unvaccinated	10.37
Personal experience	days; first dose; side-effects; fever; booster dose; absolutely nothing; days; two; disease; my opinion; gone through the disease	9.46
Medical system delegitimation—mismanagement	diseases; people; die; died; who died; other diseases; ROVaccination; money; post; sell for; campaign	9.28
Commenter deauthorization	you (nominative, accusative cases); believe; so-called; your; yours; are; yourself; expert; idiot; shame; shame on you	5.22

Table 5. Topics in comments to Facebook posts embedding legitimization through medical stories (topic modeling—WordStat 7.1.19).

Topic	Keywords	Eigenvalue
Past versus present vaccination	adverse; reactions; effects; severe reactions; long term; years; many years; after years; years ago; in a year; thousands of people; immune; immune system; RNA messenger; RNA	9.76
Commenter deauthorization	you; are; stupid; mind your business; you rock; you are a doctor; your head; not know Romanian; Romanian language	5.49
Predictions	develop; form; severe; severe form; mild; mild cases; if; you; disease; catch; virus; dose; vaccinated	3.71
(De)legitimation of medical experts as sources	Doctor; experts; trust; academician; good doctor; respect; thank you; bad doctor; liars; money; received; how much money; politics	3.29
Freedom of choice	do; make; whatever you want; get vaccinated; my own life; should be	1.60

Table 6. Topics in comments to Facebook posts embedding legitimization through facts (topic modeling—WordStat 7.1.19).

Topic	Keywords	Eigenvalue
Advice giving	do not get the vaccine; please; get the shot; get informed; official sources; Gates; Bill; should; might; green certificate; should + verbs.	14.28
Past vs. present vaccination	severe; reactions; effects; experimental; serum; experimental serum; vaccine; were; tested; serums; vaccines were; were tested; RNA; messenger; lives; saves; own responsibility.	13.48
Personal experience	I; me; mine; as a child; 7 months old; certificate; mild form; get the shot; form; mild; severe	6.6
Collective authority (de)legitimation	we; vaccines; are; a lot; many; have (+ past participle of verbs); we got the shot; we should + verbs	2.14
(De)legitimation of AstraZeneca	astra; zeneca; astrazeneca; vaccine; Europa; EMA; COVID; Facebook groups.	3.92

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature on vaccination policy transfer in the context of a postmodern medical paradigm where a coproduction mechanism on (de)legitimation prevails as a brand resonance trigger. As mentioned, policy branding enhances visibility and legitimacy (Raev & Minkman, 2020). Thus, the first part of our analysis focused on a top-down perspective of the meaning-making process of the message strategy promotion related to Covid-19 vaccination. We acknowledged the important role of the WHO as a policy branding element in setting out the global brand communication for national governments, in our case, Romania. However, at the same time, we emphasized the role of stakeholders as “agents of conversion” (Basu & Wang, 2009) in a branded public health campaign, as was the case of the #ROVaccinare/ROVaccination campaign in Romania. Thus, we acknowledged that meaning-making should also be tackled from a bottom-up perspective since the empowerment of online users is a feature characteristic of the postmodern medical paradigm.

The discussion will focus on these two important aspects of policy branding in public health campaigns: visibility through message strategy promotion and engagement of Romanian online users. The top-down perspective on the message strategy promotion showed a hybrid usage of stories and facts as legitimation strategies in the ROVaccination Facebook posts, thus reinforcing WHO’s content policy embedding a blended approach to Covid-19 vaccination message tailoring. This result aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of leveraging narratives and statistical evidence in health messages to increase message efficiency and acceptance (Dahlstrom, 2014; Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2021). The frequency analysis showed that the Romanian authority scarcely employed a dialogic communication approach to content creation. The engagement rate analysis revealed that the ROVaccination posts embedding legitimation through user involvement did not trigger a high engagement. Thus, the Romanian authority did not make full use of the WHO’s recommendations (2021) on building a strong social media presence through user involvement as a means of promotion.

Related to engagement, the second requirement of any campaign, the analysis of the relationship between Facebook behaviors and legitimation strategies, showed that legitimation through personal and medical stories was a positive predictor of engagement, unlike legitimation through facts. One significant finding showed that messages embedding legitimation through medical stories were more likely to increase sharing and commenting. Therefore, we may conclude that Romanian online users accept medical stories on their Facebook walls as a means of “self-presentation” since sharing implies “more cognitive effort” than commenting (Kim & Yang, 2017, p. 442).

The bottom-up approach to the Romanian authority’s message strategy promotion revealed polarized attitudes towards healthcare professionals as sources of the campaign, towards the Romanian medical system, and towards past and present vaccination. The dominance of polarization in online users’ comments emphasizes their role as agents of conversion, contesting either the message sources employed in the campaign or other commenters as personal authorities. Delegitimation through deauthorization of medical experts shows that the macro-contextual element of corruption plays a significant role in (de)legitimizing the message sources. As mentioned above, Romanian online users will likely share medical stories on Facebook. However, the analysis of the comments showed that these experts are considered legitimate sources if they are not corrupt and not involved in politics. Previous research (Mihelj et al., 2022; Walkowiak et al., 2021)

revealed that medical expertise politicization in Eastern Europe could not function as an efficient content strategy to increase vaccination rates. Commenter deauthorization by leveraging sarcasm and depreciative evaluation is consistent with previous research (Breeze, 2021), showing that these rhetorical devices are present in the echo chambers of both vaccine supporters and opponents.

This study proposed a twofold approach to health policy transfer and branding. Although the analysis focused only on one country, we consider that the methodological and analytical approach developed in this study could serve as a starting point for future research on the implementation of health message strategy promotion in other countries. The study also has some practical implications: Communication professionals should consider that legitimation through story-based posts is more engaging than legitimation through fact-based posts. Second, although medical stories are more likely to encourage online users to comment and share posts, the message sources of these posts should not be related to politics in East European countries (Cmeci, 2023; Mihelj et al., 2022). Lastly, communication specialists should address the online users' polarized concerns expressed in the comments since commenters act as agents of conversion (Basu & Wang, 2009) in the postmodern medical paradigm where their voices are more powerful.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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