

DOCTORAL THESIS

Image management and online promotion of theater institutions in Romania

- Abstract -

To carry out a research on cultural institutions in a country where the consumption of culture is very low (Croitoru et al., 2024) can be considered a paradoxical approach. The data provided by Eurostat at the level of the European Union show that in 2015 Romania recorded the lowest percentage regarding cultural participation, and in 2022 it was followed only by Bulgaria, when less than a quarter of Romanian adults (22.2%) declared that they had participated at least once in the last 12 months in the following cultural activities: going to the cinema, watching shows (theatre, ballet, concert) or places of culture (historical monuments, museums, art galleries, archaeological sites). In addition, the 2023 Cultural Consumption Barometer, conducted on a nationally representative sample, shows that the level of participation in theatre performances remains low and 13% of all respondents have been to theatre performances in the last 6 months. The study also points out the constant decrease in people who have never been to a theatre performance in the last 12 months as follows: “from 63% in 2014 to 65% in 2015, to 67% in 2018, to 73% in 2019, and in 2023 the percentage reaches 75%.” (Croitoru et al., 2024).

However, these unfavorable results justify the need for an in-depth analysis of the Romanian cultural landscape, especially regarding the role of communication in increasing theatre consumption. In an increasingly digitalized society, communication plays an important role for institutions and organizations, and theatre institutions are no exception. Also, communication through online social networks has become a natural part of people's lives for the purpose of communication, entertainment and information (Shahzad et al., 2024). Considering these aspects, one of the challenges of cultural institutions in Romania is to develop digital interactions with the public (Croitoru, 2022). With the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions that were imposed nationally since March 2020, cultural institutions were forced to move their activity to the online environment, which seemed especially incredible for the theatre institution. This situation surprised many theatres with poor online communication and forced them to adapt both by expanding the services offered online and through new communication and promotion, which would be closer to the theatre audience. As stated by Brill et al. (2023), the activity that took place in the digital environment evolved from a niche practice to a general one in terms of cultural consumption at that time.

Online social networks and theatre are about the here and now. Theatre is an essential cultural phenomenon, which is why “public institutions should activate artistic education programs” (Croitoru, 2019, p. 12). Thus, both institutions and theatre should adapt to the times and technological transformations so that the cultural phenomenon continues in relation to current times.

Taking into account these important and current aspects, this doctoral research is relevant to identify, analyze and bring solutions to the communication and promotion of theatre institutions in Romania in the online environment, especially since there are no in-depth studies on this subject. Thus, the following triad was found: cultural institutions (theatre institutions) - the online environment (the place where communication and promotion are carried out) - the theatre audience (vital stakeholder in the functioning of the institution).

The following objectives were formulated to deepen this triad and provide a relevant analytical framework in the field of communication. First, the research aims to identify and analyze the image of Romanian theatres in the online environment from the point of view of the theatre audience. This essential stakeholder for theatre institutions is also found in the next objective, which consists of knowing the role of the digital environment in the relationship with the theatre audience (the cultural consumer). Following these objectives, the third objective follows regarding the establishment of an efficient online communication model for theatre institutions in Romania. And last but not least, I propose to reduce the gap existing in the relationship between the field of communication sciences and theatre studies.

Following these research objectives, I designed a mixed research, consisting of both a qualitative and a quantitative component in order to obtain results that are more in line with reality and more in-depth. For the first stage, qualitative research, I decided to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the social networks, objectives, communication strategies and tactics for online promotion of Romanian theatre institutions?

Research Question 2: How do Romanian theatre institutions communicate and promote themselves through online social networks?

Research Question 3: What are the elements of two-way communication between theatre institutions and the public in the online environment?

Research Question 4: What are the changes adopted by theatre institutions in terms of their online communication and promotion starting with 2022 (after the COVID-19 pandemic)?

Research Question 5: What are the resources invested by public and independent theaters in Romania in communicating with their audience?

Research Question 6: What is the future of online theatre in Romania from the point of view of theatre institutions?

Research Question 7: What are the problems faced by Romanian theatre institutions in terms of online communication and promotion?

Given that the second part of the research is quantitative, questionnaire-based, and exploratory, both hypotheses and research questions were established:

Hypothesis 1: The higher the educational level of people, the more they participate in cultural-artistic events.

Hypothesis 2: The more dependent people are on online social networks, the more interested they are in information about theatre performances promoted on online social networks.

Hypothesis 3: The more dependent people are on online social networks, the higher their expectations are to receive quick responses from theatre institutions to online requests.

Research question 1: What information about theatre performances should be communicated online by theatre institutions?

Research question 2: What are the online channels that theatre institutions should use to promote their theatre performances?

Research Question 3: To what extent are viewers interested in watching theatrical performances filmed and broadcast online?

Research Question 4: To what extent do viewers follow the activity of actors and directors on their online social networks?

Research Question 5: Are there differences in opinion regarding the frequency and quality of online activity between state and independent theatre institutions on their online social networks?

In order to answer the research questions and test the proposed hypotheses, an appropriate methodology is required. For this reason, the instruments of the mixed research are: semi-structured interview and anonymous questionnaire administered online. Qualitative research based on semi-structured interview allows for a deep understanding of the categories of respondents to be interviewed: communication managers from theatre institutions, actors and theatre directors, theatre spectators. The interview is increasingly used as a research method in the social sciences and it has been found that the methodological literature on how to conduct interview-based research is on the rise (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). In addition, the interview represents a unique and unrepeatable access to the context of each respondent who expresses their opinions and experiences (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). Thus, the interview is a special way of conversation, guided by the interviewer and used for a specific purpose (Knott et al., 2022).

To answer other research questions and to test the formulated hypotheses, quantitative research is based on a questionnaire. The usefulness of this questionnaire is given by access to a large number of relevant information that can ascertain the existence of similarities, differences, transformations in the researched subject. For such results, a small number of information does not represent a solid foundation in a quantitative research. The questionnaire is also one of the best-known methods of data collection (Mazikana, 2023). In addition, the audience, probably the most demanding "theatre critic", is no longer only in the theatre, but also in the online environment, where the "scene 2.0" has developed, the space in which there is continuous two-way communication, as I have

previously emphasized. It will be administered online, ensuring the participants of the confidentiality of the answers and the anonymity.

In order to facilitate the understanding of the completed doctoral study, the structure of the thesis is presented below, which has four chapters, along with the introduction and conclusions. The first chapter presents institutions and organizations, followed by cultural institutions and highlights their adaptation to communication in the digital age. The first objective of this chapter is to determine the definitions, historical perspective of organizations, types of organizations and institutions, the characteristics of those in the cultural sector, as well as their presence in the online environment. Thus, differences and similarities between the two concepts are identified, in order to know the subsequent correct reporting to the appropriate notion. There is a high interest in the study of organizations and a relationship of dependence between the two concepts, but also a gap in the in-depth studies of cultural institutions, especially theatrical institutions both globally and especially in Romania in the online environment. For a deeper understanding of cultural institutions, a classification was also made, a classification that also includes the type of content generated by them and how it is received by the cultural consumer (synchronous / asynchronous content, passive / active audience). Then, an important difference is also noted between communication and public relations and marketing – the latter being often encountered in the study of cultural institutions and in the promotion of cultural activities. With the internet and digital transformation, both fields have also undergone major changes due to the need to adapt. The e-PR component is observed as an essential part of a public relations strategy (Cismaru, 2015), and marketing is highlighted through stages initiated by the "father" of modern marketing, Philip Kotler: from marketing 1.0 to marketing 6.0. At the same time, some authors consider that only marketing is responsible for bringing the audience to the theatre and contributes to the relationship between artistic good and the audience (Ionescu, 2020), so a presentation of these two fields is required. The chapter continues with the theoretical nuance of the concepts of image, identity, reputation, branding, in order to identify and avoid confusion between them, including in the empirical part of the thesis. General definitions of these concepts are presented and specialized studies are identified regarding their relationship to cultural institutions in the online environment, both internationally and nationally.

Chapter 2 explores the theoretical framework of organizational communication and technological changes, considering the evolution of organizational communication from a historical and theoretical point of view, the definitions and types of organizational communication. The beginnings of organizational communication are noted at the same time as the Industrial Revolution that began in Great Britain, but the in-depth interest in organizational communication is identified in the 1980s. Understanding the evolution of organizational communication is important because at a macro level it applies to all institutions. Today, an institution intended for a specific audience would

no longer have a complex image without an adapted presence in the online environment. It is also important to understand that a small organization has a different communication compared to a large organization, at a national level. As Baker (2002) specifies, initially small organizations had an informal communication, but with the growth in size of organizations, this communication became formal. This can also be related to theaters in towns with a small number of inhabitants versus theaters in large cities and capitals. The second part of this chapter presents the stakeholders of cultural institutions, the cultural consumer, the theatre audience and their relationship with the theatre institution. This part is relevant for clarifying the stakeholders, so that there are no confusions and assumptions, that only theatre spectators represent the important audience of a theatre institution. Bonet and Schargorodsky (2017) identify even nine types of interest groups of theatre institutions. Given the arrangement of so many interest groups, establishing those necessary for the present doctoral study becomes easier and more efficient, in which case the stakeholder theory also contributes significantly.

Chapter 3 completes the theoretical foundation so far by presenting the communication of organizations in the online environment with a "more technical" approach, as it describes the evolution of the online environment, the promotion of organizations in this space, digital communication media (website, newsletter, blog, online social networks and other online platforms), attempting to relate to cultural institutions through existing studies in the field. This chapter points out the evolution of the web in parallel with industry, concepts that over the years have received updates such as web 1, web 2, web 3 and from industry 1 to industry 5. These concepts contribute to the understanding of technological development regarding the internet in society, the effects it has on institutions and any assumptions regarding the activity of theatrical institutions in relation to digital media. Also, these notions contribute to the understanding of the behavior of the internet user, who in this paper is exactly the theatre spectator. The chapter also studies in depth the distribution channels, to observe how they are used in other states and in Romania, if applicable, and how they can be used to promote Romanian theatre institutions so that they have a positive image. For this reason, reference reports in the field were consulted, such as DataReportal, which provides specific data for online social networks both globally and locally.

The last chapter is the central component of the thesis and marks the transition from the theoretical to the practical part, being dedicated to qualitative and quantitative research on the triad of theatre institutions, theatre audience and online environment. The objectives of the doctoral thesis are set out, intended to be achieved through research, and they aim to identify the image of theaters in Romania in the online environment from the audience's point of view; to find out the role of the digital environment in the relationship with the theater audience; to identify an online communication model useful to theatre institutions in Romania, starting from the fulfillment of the previous

objectives, aiming to obtain new theater audiences and increase the frequency of theatre attendance of the existing one and, last but not least, to reduce the existing gap in the relationship between the fields of communication sciences and theatre studies. Next, the chapter includes the research questions and hypotheses, the applied research instruments, the description of the participants in the semi-structured interview and the questionnaire sample. In order to respond to the objectives as authentically as possible, the research is mixed, so the first part is qualitative based on a semi-structured interview, in order to know in depth the opinions of the respondents, to observe similarities and differences between the categories interviewed and to have a reliable starting point in initiating the quantitative component of the research. Thus, the information obtained serves to carry out the anonymous questionnaire administered online. The entire approach contributes to the validation of the scientific activity. After presenting the methodological elements, chapter 4 presents the research results starting from hypotheses and research questions and thus put in correspondence, the two components of the mixed research contribute to the final results and interpretations expressed.

The conclusions summarize the doctoral study, highlight significant research results, provide solutions for the identified dysfunctions, reveal conceptual and methodological limits, and propose future research directions in the field of cultural communication.

Therefore, the mixed research was chosen to have both a macro and a micro perspective, as clear as possible on the researched context. This research does not come only from a desire for theoretical deepening, thus noting a significant gap in studies in the field of communication regarding theatre institutions, but is also based on a professional and personal motivation. From a professional point of view, as a professional in an important national integrated communication agency, I had the opportunity to accumulate a complex experience in communication and social media and to understand how theory in the field of communication combines with practice, but also to know what from practice needs to be completed in theory. From a personal point of view, the relationship with theatre starts from childhood, at least from the preschool stage and continues dynamically to the present, through participation in theatre festivals, through traveling to theaters in the province and through constant viewing of theatre performances in Bucharest. Also, the collaboration with the Sibiu International Theatre Festival – considered the third largest festival after the Avignon Festival and the Edinburgh International Festival at a European level (Ilieva, 2017) – and with other theatre events contributes to the practical experience in the cultural field. Last but not least, I had the opportunity to get to know theater institutions better and, in some cases, people who work in them. The doctoral study offers me the opportunity to combine the academic with the professional and personal sides. I believe that the theoretical dimension of the work, the complex research and the recommendations for improving communication between theatres in Romania and the public give the doctoral thesis both a theoretical and a practical value.