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Public relations and the rise of hypermodern values: exploring the profession in Europe

Abstract

This article raises the question of whether European public relations (PR) and communications professionals perceive a cultural transformation in the direction of hypermodernity, and if so, attempts to assess how this influences their organizations and their work. Questions were asked in the European Communication Monitor 2017, an annual survey among communications professionals, and 3,387 respondents from 50 European countries filled in the questionnaire. The results indicate that European professionals recognize a cultural transformation in the direction of hyper consumption, hyper modernization and hyper narcissism that influences the communication between their organizations and their stakeholders. A cluster analysis shows that less than half of the respondents perceive a transformation of their organization in the direction of hypermodern characteristics and values. Organizations with post/hypermodern characteristics have superior communications departments compared to modern organizations. Post/hypermodern organizations and excellent communications departments also engage more often in societal debates than other types of organizations and departments.

Key words: hypermodernity, values, emancipation, modernization, European organizations, postmodernization

1. Introduction

Organizations and their PR activities are a major force in today's global society. Organizations are expected to continuously reflect on their behavior, the role they play for their stakeholders and society at large and their environment (Roberts & Armitage, 2006). Communications professionals are helping organizations to adapt to the changing circumstances that they constantly face (Tench, Verčič, Zerfass, Moreno & Verhoeven, 2017). Theoretically, the current global society can be labeled a hypermodern society. Hypermodernity is a concept introduced by the French social theorist Lipovetsky (2005), who differentiates it from modernity (based on rationality and division of labor as a key source of competitiveness) and postmodernity (characterized by innovativeness and knowledge competition). A hypermodern society is a society in overdrive, characterized by a culture of hyper consumption, hyper change, hyper narcissism and paradoxes (Charles, 2005; Lipovetsky, 2005). In hypermodern culture, an increasingly large part of life is characterized by consumption, and a majority of people have become turbo-consumers. Modernity is also in overdrive; continuous change and flexibility are key. Furthermore, postmodern individualization shifts to hyper narcissism. The public has become more critical, and all are expected to behave responsibly automatically, organizations included (Roberts & Armitage, 2006). However, hypermodern culture is not straightforward, since it is also full of paradoxes that make life difficult, especially for organizations and their communicators. For example, organizations are expected to be open and flexible while at the same time managing and controlling their internal and external environment in order to reach their goals. To succeed in this, they have to be both authentic and strategic at the same time. Moreover, organizations must simultaneously be ethical and make as much profit as possible. These paradoxes raise serious questions about how to run an organization today and how to communicate on its behalf. Value driven management, corporate social responsibility and ethical business practices are important organizational responses to the hypermodern challenges (Gupta, Briscoe & Hambrick, 2016; Rendtorff,

2014) along with the increased attention devoted to human rights by organizations (Stohl & Stohl, 2017).

The hypermodern paradoxes create communication problems: organizations are confronted with many different interests and opinions and need to react effectively and responsibly. How should organizations communicate in light of this double sidedness with stakeholders and the global audience? Virtually nothing is known about how organizations do this and how PR professionals respond to these hypermodern challenges. The purpose of this study is to determine whether PR professionals recognize a cultural transformation in the direction of hypermodernity, and if so, how their organizations address this hypermodern environment. This study is the first to empirically explore the perception of hypermodernity from the perspectives of PR professionals in Europe and to determine how this influences their organization(s) and their work. The following overarching research question (RQ) is therefore addressed: do European PR professionals recognize a cultural transformation in the direction of hypermodernity, and if so, how does it influence the organization they work for and its strategic communication?

2. Theoretical background

Organizations have to adapt to their environment continuously and vice versa. The identities of organizations are fluid and dynamic (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2002) and influenced by stakeholders (e.g., Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1994) or a more specified combination of stakeholders (constituencies like the management of the organization, employees and customers), stake watchers (pressure groups) and stake keepers (regulators) (Fassin, 2009). The interplay of organizations and stakeholders can lead to organizational adaptation (e.g., Dutton & Duckerich, 1991) to its environment. PR and communication

professionals play an important role in facilitating and managing this process of mutual adaptation. Much attention has been paid to this on the organization level or the meso level of analysis, not so much on the macro level of analysis: society.

The most important meso-level PR theory is of course Grunig's excellence theory (Grunig, 1992; Grunig, L., Grunig, J. & Dozier, 2002). The final contingency model of this theory accommodates both two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical communication as types of communication practices between organizations and the public. Negotiation and collaboration between organizations and the public make it possible to find "common ground in the win-win zone" (Grunig, L., Grunig, J. & Dozier, 2002, p. 357) that is acceptable for both parties. In theory, the organizations' environment is represented by the members of the public that have an interest in the organization. Under the influence of excellence theory, PR theory and research shifted focus to a two-way relational communication model, with an emphasis on dialogue and ethical practice (Kent & Taylor, 2002). At the same time, scholars continued to point out that persuasion and one-way monologs are also an important part of relationships and therefore of PR practice (see e.g., Brown, 2012; Theunissen & Noordin, 2012).

In PR theories of excellence, dialogs and relationship management on the meso level, the larger cultural context of the society that an organization is part of is only taken into account indirectly through the public and the internal culture of the organization. The broader macro societal level is taken into account more explicitly through the comparison of the intersubjective (or ethical, normative) paradigm of PR and the social systemic (or functional, cognitive) paradigm of PR (Holmström, 1997). In the intersubjective paradigm, PR is tasked with solving conflicts in society by reaching a consensus between different rationales in society. In the social systemic paradigm, PR becomes a question of reflecting on conflicts between different logics in society (Holmström, 1997), e.g., between the economic and the

political social system: "The objective is mutual self-regulation and adjustment in a society of continuous conflicts and disagreement." (Holmström, 1997, p.16) This reflective role for PR has been developed into the reflective paradigm for PR to achieve organizational legitimation (Holmström, 2005; 2009). The broader societal context and the idea of a public view on the organization was also taken into account in the Bled Manifesto on PR, where viewing the organization from the public's perspective (the public sphere) was suggested as an extra characteristic of PR, in addition to the relational and communicative approaches of PR, especially in Europe (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2002). The managerial consequences of this idea were further developed into a reflective model of communications management (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). Reflection on the organization from the outside perspective of the public sphere also fits the concept of issue arenas, where issues and discussions are at the center of communication and the organization itself is not. In this complex media landscape, traditional and social media organizations are no longer in control of communication and have to monitor issue arenas carefully (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010) to decide whether or not it is necessary and desirable to join a debate. By joining social debates, e.g., about the environment, organizations also bring in their own values rather than simply responding to the demands of the critical public, thereby influencing societal values as well. This has been labeled a post-reflective approach to corporate communication (Johansen & Valentini, 2013).

For both meso and macro PR theories, the societal context is important. Today, this context is a global context where the modernization and postmodernization of values is the underlying mechanism of development worldwide (Welzel, 2013).

2.1 Globalization, modernization and postmodernization

Our current society is a global society, characterized by internationalization, liberalization, universalization, Westernization and globality, and defined by trans-planetary relations between people that transcend territorial geography (Scholte, 2008). Organizations, including both commercial and all kinds of other organizations and institutions, drive this globalization. PR and communications management are an integral part of this driving force. PR as a management function can be considered a typical product of modern times, although there have been all kinds of PR activities before modernity (see, e.g., Brown, 2012). Modern times are characterized by modernization processes. Modernization theory defines modernization as the transition from a "traditional, rural, agrarian society to a secular, urban, industrial society. Modernization encompasses profound economic, social, political, and cultural changes, but the process of industrialization is at its core." (Inglehart, 2001; p. 9965) Industrialization goes hand in hand with urbanization, applying science and technology to all aspects of life, resulting in job specialization, bureaucratization of all types of organizations and a population that is better educated than before modern times. Economic development, cultural change and political change all go hand in hand, and evolve into a free democratic society where secularization, bureaucratization of all organizations and individuation are the norm. The religion-oriented worldview of premodern times with traditional values is transformed into a rational, legal worldview where secular and rational values prevail. Rationalization and a capitalist economy fit very well together. A secular-rational culture, with its rational organization of labor and calculation of profit and loss, has a positive influence on economic growth and the decline of poverty (Inglehart, 1997; 2001).

In the second half of the twentieth century, industrial societies developed into knowledge-based or information societies, also labeled as postindustrial. The cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s in many Western countries led to the development of postmodern values, which complemented the industrial modern values. Postmodern values

"give a higher priority to self-expression than to economic effectiveness and people are becoming less willing to accept the human costs of bureaucracy and of rigid social norms. Postmodern society is characterized by the decline of hierarchical institutions and rigid social norms, and by the expansion of the realm of individual choice and mass participation." (Inglehart, 2001, p. 9970) Societies where postmodern values prevail have a core of modernism and a strong belief in science and technology. At the same time, due to the rising educational levels, a critical and sometimes cynical public criticizes organizations on a variety of issues, e.g., ecological including environmental problems, climate change and human rights.

Modernization and postmodernization at the societal level has been followed closely using the World Values Surveys (see, e.g., Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, Welzel, 2013). Based on evidence from the World Values Surveys, Welzel (2013; 2014) developed the Evolutionary Emancipation Theory (EET). EET focuses on the development of human empowerment defined as the emancipation of people from domination. Central in this theory is the development of emancipative values through which people free themselves from traditional and survival values. Evolutionary development in the direction of emancipation is the underlying process of worldwide value development. Emancipative values are oriented towards individual autonomy, individual choice of reproduction and sexuality, equality of opportunities and gender and the voice of the people as a source of influence in their society. In societies that score high on the emancipative value index, independence and imagination are desired qualities, along with the total equality of women in all sectors of society, toleration of abortion, divorce and homosexuality, freedom of speech and having a voice at the local and national levels of society. Emancipative value orientations are found in every society in the world; they are universal and not a Western construction (Welzel, 2013; 2014). The highest scores on emancipative value index, as a combination of secular-rational values and self-

expression values, are found in Europe with Sweden leading as the most advanced society in the world, followed closely by other Scandinavian countries, The Netherlands and Switzerland (WVS6, 2015).

Other scholars label the transformation of modernity to postmodernity as the rise of a second or reflexive modernization (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994), or as one step further from postmodernity into hypermodernity (Lipovetsky, 2005).

2.2 Hypermodernization

According to Lipovetsky (2005), the postmodern society has developed into a hypermodern society. A hypermodern society is a society in overdrive. Central concepts are hyper consumption, hypermodernity and hyper narcissism. Consumption and production are the central features in this society and people consume frequently and with great pleasure; they are turbo-consumers (Rendtorff, 2014). Many people define themselves primarily as consumers and are constantly striving for pleasure and enjoyment, happiness, perfection and emotional experiences. This consumer mentality has also spread outside the realm of the economy, for example, into education and healthcare (Lipovetsky, 2005).

Hypermodernity is also modernity in overdrive. It is characterized by strong beliefs in science and technology as well as rational thinking, but science and technology, in addition to other institutions, corporations and organizations, are also constantly criticized. Change and flexibility are the normal state of being, not only for individuals but also for organizations. Organizations are influenced by this development towards hypermodernization (Charles, 2009; Roberts & Armitage, 2006). Hypermodern organizations, as opposed to postmodern and modern ones, are hyper flexible in that they exhibit a rapidly changing number of employees, are able to manage change as a key source of competition and rely on

decentralized information technology (like cloud software and mobile communication) to run the organization. Hypermodern organizations can be transient – they can exist briefly depending on their activities and context. Hypermodern organizations emphasize creativity at work and the ethics of responsibility. They want to do the right thing according to individual judgements in order to be perceived as responsible (Rendtorff, 2014; Roberts & Armitage, 2006).

Hyper narcissism, as the third main characteristic of hypermodern culture, is an evolution of modern individualization and postmodern self-expression. The shift towards hyper narcissism has raised the bar for individuals living in a hypermodern society. Members of society are expected to behave responsively out of themselves and to get the best out of themselves as well. High achievements in every aspect of life and reaching them in a responsible way is the norm for every individual in a hypermodern culture (Lipovetsky, 2005; Rendtorff, 2014).

Hypermodernization exhibits many paradoxes too, another key characteristic of hypermodern times (Lipovetsky, 2005; Rendtorff, 2014). For organizations, this means, for example, that they have to be open and flexible and at the same time, they also have to manage and control their environment to reach their organizational goals. They have to be authentic because the critical public calls for authenticity, but they also have to be strategic to be able to reach their goals. Similarly, organizations need to be ethical and transparent but are also expected to make as much profit as possible. Organizations have reacted to the rise of these paradoxes in their internal and external environment with policies for corporate social responsibility (CSR), business ethics and value-driven management (Rendtorff, 2014).

2.3 PR in the context of modernization theory

Modernization, postmodernization and hyper modernization theory provide an interesting macro theoretical framework to study PR and communications management because it is the cultural context for professionals in a global economy. In the PR literature, modern and postmodern perspectives are usually distinguished.

Excellence theory (Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002) and its spinoffs in relationship and dialog theories (Kent & Taylor, 2002) are usually seen as part of the modern paradigm, based on positivist social science and key concepts of control, reason and management. PR is studied within systems theory, complexity theory and symmetrical/excellence theory (Greenwood, 2010). Many see symmetrical/excellence theory as the dominant paradigm in PR (Greenwood, 2010; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2006) and is considered close to a metatheory (Botan & Hazleton, 2006; Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru & Jones, 2007).

Scholars working with postmodern theory challenged the dominant paradigm in public relations because it was perceived as an alliance of modernization and rationalization created for the purpose of maintaining the power of certain organizations and institutions (Greenwood, 2010). It became possible to talk about PR in a postmodern perspective (Radford, 2012), which made room for critical analyses of the profession and the study of PR (Mickey, 2003). PR professionals could also be considered organizational activists, freeing the profession of metanarratives, seeing it as a change function, and acknowledging the political and power aspects of PR in order to make room for dissensus instead of consensus only (Holtzhausen, 2000).

The theoretical lens of postmodernism as a phase of late modernity has developed in the direction of hypermodernity; a society in overdrive characterized by hyper consumption, hyper change and hyper narcissism (Charles, 2009; Lipovetsky, 2005; Rendtorff, 2014). The perspective of hypermodernity has not been used in PR literature yet, but it fits the different

versions of the reflective paradigm for organizational legitimation (Holmström, 1997; 2005; 2009; Van Ruler & Verčič, 2002; 2005), where PR is defined as a function that facilitates the legitimation of an organization amidst the different and continuously changing forms of societal coordination. This reflective paradigm of PR does not take a normative or critical stand on PR but acknowledges it as a necessary and neutral function to maintain an organization as a social system through communication with its environment (Holmström, 2009). This late modern neutral perspective on PR fits the hypermodern perspective that also takes a neutral position towards capitalism and its consumption patterns. It acknowledges the central position of a consumer mentality in the contemporary world, not only in the realm of the economy but also in other parts of society. In addition, it explains the continuous change that PR and communications professionals are confronted with inside organizations, which requires constantly enhancing the flexibility of the organizational structure through reorganizations, mergers and new ways of working. Furthermore, this perspective explains the overly critical public in some parts of the world and the dilemmas their criticisms create for organizations that operate globally. One of the most striking examples of this can be seen in the legitimacy crisis of Arla Foods in Denmark, which responded with an accommodating reaction to a crisis in the Middle East after it was accused of succumbing to forces that want to suppress modernist values like secularism and freedom of speech. Arla Foods became involved in a culture clash between the prevailing hypermodern values of the Danish public and the prevailing premodern values of the Arab public (Holmström, Falkheimer & Nielsen, 2010). This case shows the importance of monitoring social debates in issue arenas and the underlying value systems. It fits the issue arena perspective (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010) and the post-reflective use of the organization's values (Johansen & Valentini, 2013).

In most European societies, postmodern values prevail as modernization and postmodernization theory (Inglehart, 1997) and the Evolutionary Emancipation Theory

(Welzel, 2013; 2014) show. This development of European societies into advanced value systems could motivate European organizations to adopt hypermodern characteristics and values in their organizational structures and influence their interference in societal debates about issues that concern the hypermodern, emancipated and critical public.

Since there is no existing literature about PR and hypermodernity so far, the following three secondary research questions were developed to assess European PR professionals' awareness of hypermodernity and understand their perception of the influence of these values on their organizations and their practice of PR. Three main aspects of hypermodernity are highlighted: the observation of a consumer mentality, the possible need for organizational adaptation processes and a necessity for heightened engagement in public debates about societal issues.

RQ1: Do PR professionals in Europe perceive the rise of a consumer mentality and if so, does this observation differ between professionals in different organizational types, positions, regions and the level of perceived communication excellence of their department?

RQ2: Do PR professionals in Europe perceive more modern, postmodern or hypermodern characteristics and values in the organizations they work for, and does this differ between individuals in organizations that are considered to have excellent PR departments and those who work at organizations without PR departments that are considered excellent?

RQ3: Do PR professionals who perceive more hypermodern characteristics in their organizations demonstrate a higher level of engagement in public debates than professionals that perceive less hypermodern characteristics in their organizations, and does this differ between individuals who work for organizations with perceived excellent versus non-excellent PR departments?

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

Four questions about hypermodernity were part of the 2017 edition of the European Communication Monitor (ECM). The ECM is a survey that has been conducted annually since 2007, is organized by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) and the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD), and is supported by PRIME Research and Communication Director Magazine.

The survey used the English language and was pretested with 46 communications professionals in 20 European countries. Amendments were made where appropriate, and the final questionnaire was activated for five weeks in March and April 2017. More than 30,000 professionals throughout Europe were invited with personal e-mails based on a database provided by the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD). Additional invitations were sent via national research collaborators and professional associations.
In total, 9,895 respondents started the survey and 3,496 of them completed it. Answers from participants who could not clearly be identified as part of the population were deleted from the dataset. This strict selection of respondents is a distinct feature of the ECM and sets it apart from many studies which are based on snowball sampling, as well as those which include students, academics and people outside of the focused profession or region. The evaluation is based on 3,387 fully completed replies by communications professionals in Europe.

An examination of the demographics of the sample reveals that the main participants in the survey were senior professionals. Seven out of ten respondents were communications

managers: 37.0 percent held a position as head of communications or as CEO of a communications consultancy; 30.4 percent were unit leaders or in charge of a single communications discipline in an organization. Moreover, 63.6 percent of the professionals interviewed had more than ten years of experience in communications management, and 59.6 percent of the total sample consisted of female respondents, while the average age of respondents was 41.8 years. A vast majority (94.5 per cent) of survey participants had an academic degree, and more than two thirds of the sample held a graduate degree or even a doctorate. Three out of four respondents worked in communications departments in organizations (which consisted of joint stock companies, 22.4 percent; private companies, 22.6 percent; government-owned, public sector, political organizations, 15.8 percent; and non-profit organizations and associations, 13.2 per cent), while 26.1 percent were communications consultants working freelance or for agencies. The 2017 edition of the ECM achieved a wide spread of countries in Europe with participants from all 50 countries and geographic regions identified in the official list of European Countries by the European Union (2017) and the Columbia Encyclopedia (2017). Most respondents (31.5 per cent) were based in Western Europe (including countries like Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and France), followed by Northern Europe (28.8 percent; including countries like the United Kingdom, Finland, and Sweden), Southern Europe (23.8 percent; including countries like Italy, Spain, and Slovenia) and finally by Eastern Europe (15.9 percent; including countries like Romania, the Czech Republic, and Poland).

3.2 Concepts, variables and questions

The culture of hypermodernity was operationalized based on the literature about hypermodernity and ethics. Four concepts were constructed with the following labels:

hypermodern characteristics, hypermodern values, hypermodern stakeholders and hypermodern communication. These labels were defined based on the literature about hypermodernity and further operationalized into statements that were measured on a five-point Likert scale. Four closed questions were formulated about the following topics: the characteristics of hypermodernity and how they apply to the organization the respondent works for (1), the importance of hypermodern values in the organization (2), the level of recognition of hypermodern culture among consumers and other stakeholders of the organization (3) and the extent to which the organization actively communicates in current societal debates (4).

Based on the concept of the hypermodern organization from Robert and Armitage (2006), respondents were asked to assess the following statements regarding the hypermodern characteristics of their organization: the number of our employees is flexibly adjusted if necessary, the number of our employees changes rapidly to match external needs and opportunities, our key source of competitiveness is knowledge, our key source of competitiveness is the ability to manage change, we use mainly centralized information technology (server-based and local software) to run our organization, and we use mainly decentralized information technology (cloud software, mobile apps) to run our organization.

Based on Lipovetsky (2005) and Charles (2009), respondents were also asked to assess three hypermodern values: rationality at work, innovativeness at work and creativity at work. Furthermore, respondents were asked to assess three choices of ethical behavior, based on the literature about the ethics of duty, the ethics of virtue and the ethics of individual responsibility: whether it is appropriate to do the right thing according to organizational values even if one does not agree personally, to do the right thing according to one's own consistent values, norms and moral standards, or to do the right thing according to individual

judgements in order to be perceived as responsible (Bragues, 2013; Hartman, 2013; Heath, 2013; Hursthouse, 2013; Jensen, Scheuer & Rendtorff, 2013; Rendtorff, 2014; Sison, 2013).

Based on Charles (2009) and Rendtorff (2014), the concept of hypermodern stakeholders was operationalized into three statements: consumer mentality is clearly observable in the culture of my country, consumer mentality has already changed the communication between my organization and its stakeholders and consumer mentality will change the communication between my organization and its stakeholders within the next three years.

The concept of hypermodern communication was measured by the level of participation of the organization in social debates (Ledford, 2012). Five debates were included: the migration and refugee crisis, ecology and climate change, populism and anti-elitism, open borders for business and the future of Europe and the European Union.

3.3 Analysis

To assess the differences in the recognition of the cultural transformation towards hypermodernity and answer RQ1, a one-way ANOVA, post hoc LSD tests and a Student's T-Test were conducted. The same applies to the analysis of the level of participation in societal debates to answer RQ3. Gender, age, years of experience, education, type of organization, position, European region and communication excellence were used as test variables. For measuring excellence, the Comparative Excellence Framework for Communication Management was used. This framework is an empirical measurement of excellence based on four questions in the ECM which ask respondents to assess the advisory influence, executive influence, the competence and the success of their communications department on a seven-

point scale. Professionals that score 6 or 7 on all four questions are considered excellent (see Tench, Verčič, Zerfass, Moreno & Verhoeven, 2017; Verčič & Zerfass, 2016).

To identify different organizational characteristics and values and answer RQ2, a hierarchical cluster analysis was performed to identify clusters of organizations. The clusters were used to test the differences in hypermodern characteristics and values in different organizational types with chi-square analysis.

4. Results

To answer the primary research question of whether European PR professionals recognize a cultural transformation in the direction of hypermodernity and determine how this influences the organizations they work for, three secondary research questions were asked. The first question relates to the perception of cultural transformation, the second is about the organizational adaptation to cultural change and the third is concerned with organizations' level of engagement in social debates.

4.1 Hypermodern cultural transformation

The first secondary research question (RQ1) asks whether PR professionals in Europe perceive the rise of a consumer mentality, and if so, whether this observation differs between professionals in different organizational types, positions, and regions, as well as with the level of perceived communication excellence of their departments. The data show that European PR professionals do witness a cultural transformation in the direction of hypermodernity, marked by a growing consumer mentality in all areas of society. They think this is observable in the culture of their country (M = 3.86, SD = .87 on a five-point scale), that it has changed the communication between their organization and its stakeholders (M = 3.46, SD = .93) and

that it will change the communication between their organization and its stakeholders in the next three years (M = 3.88, SD = .90). This observation is broadly shared, since there are no significant differences between men and women, professionals of different ages, years of experience or education. A one-way ANOVA shows a very small but significant effect of the type of organization on the observation of the cultural change in the direction of hypermodernity, with F (4, 3382) = 2.53, $p < .039$, $\eta^2 = .003$ (equal variances between groups not assumed, Levene's F (4, 3382) = 2.942, $p <. 019$). An LSD post hoc test shows significant differences between professionals in non-profit organizations (M = 3.94, SD = .857) and joint stock companies (M = 3.81, SD = .859, $M_{difference}$ = .128, $p < .014$), between non-profit organizations (M = 3.94, SD = .857) and governmental organizations (M = 3.80, SD = .893, $M_{difference}$ = .144, $p < .010$) and between consultancies (M = 3.89, SD = .843) and governmental organizations (M = 3.80, SD = .893, $M_{difference}$ = .094, $p < .048$).

Additionally, a very small value was found for the effect of the position of the professional in the organization on the observation that the increasing consumer mentality has already changed the communication between the organization and its stakeholders, with F (2, 3178) = 4.52, $p < .011$, $\eta^2 = .003$. An LSD post hoc test reveals that team members (M = 3.38, SD =.969) think this effect is significantly smaller than team leaders (M = 3.50, SD = .914, $M_{difference}$ = -.117, $p < .006$) and heads of departments (M = 3.49, SD = .927, $M_{difference}$ = -.105, $p < .010$) do. The analysis also reveals a similarly small effect on the perception that the communication will change in the next three years, with F (2, 3178) = 4.77, $p <. 01$, η^2 = .003). Here, the post hoc LSD test shows that there is only a significant difference between team members (M = 3.82. SD = .900) and team leaders (M = 3.95, SD = .882, $M_{difference}$ = -.126, $p < .002$). Therefore, team members seem to agree with the development but believe that the change will happen more slowly. There is also a significant but very small geographical effect on the perception of hypermodernity by European communications professionals. A

one-way ANOVA shows that the observation of transformation is different, with F (3, 3383) = 5.546, p <.001, η^2 = .005, as is the perception of how this transformation has already changed the communication between the organization and its stakeholders, for which F (3, 3383) = 5.830, p <.001, η^2 = .005. The LSD post hoc test reveals that professionals in Northern Europe (M = 3.95, SD = .855) observe the transformation significantly more than in Western (M = 3.84, SD = .866, $M_{difference}$ = -.108, p < .005), Southern (M = 3.79, SD = .874, $M_{difference}$ = -.154, p < .000) and Eastern Europe (M = 3.81, SD = .904, $M_{difference}$ = -.135, p < .004). The consequences of this cultural change for communication are perceived differently, and most clearly in Southern Europe. The LSD post hoc test shows significant differences between Northern Europe (M = 3.48, SD = .979) and Western Europe (M = 3.38, SD = .956, $M_{difference}$ = -.100, p < .016), between Western Europe and Southern Europe (M = 3.55, SD = .844, $M_{difference}$ = -.174, p < .000), and between Southern Europe and Eastern Europe as well (M = 3.42, SD = .867, $M_{difference}$ = -.136, p < .009).

Professionals working in excellent communications departments observe the change in communication between the organization and its stakeholders significantly more (M = 3.65, SD = .89) already than those who work in non-excellent communications departments (M = 3.37, SD = .95), t (978.04) = 6.529; p = .000, 95%CI [.197, .366].

4.2 Organizational adaptation

The next secondary research question (RQ2) asks whether PR professionals in Europe perceive more modern, postmodern or hypermodern characteristics and values in the organizations they work in and whether this perception differs between those who work in organizations with excellent PR departments and those who do not. The answers of the respondents show that the transformation into hypermodern organizations is currently in

progress. Many PR professionals recognize changing characteristics in their organizations. A hierarchical cluster analysis shows three clusters of organizations with five characteristics each. Cluster A (n = 487) includes 14.4 percent of the organizations in the sample. Organizations in this cluster are characterized by the presence of typically modern communications professionals as well as the following five traits: a clear labor division, a stable work force, a rational structure, the secondary use of information technology and the ethics of duty. Cluster B (n = 1428) is comprised of 42.2 percent of the respondents' organizations, all of which are currently transforming from modern to postmodern, and are beginning to focus on knowledge, information technology, centralized information technology, the flexible adjustment of the workforce, innovation and the ethics of virtue. Cluster C consists of 43.5 percent (n = 1472) of the respondents. This cluster is composed of individuals who stated that their organizations are already changing from postmodern to hypermodern, exhibiting characteristics such as continuous change, decentralized IT, rapid adjustments of the workforce, creativity and the ethics of perceived responsibility. The cluster analysis therefore offers a mixed picture and hypermodern characteristics are not particularly distinguishable.

The perception of a transition from a postmodern to hypermodern culture differs significantly between different types of organizations, since the test results yield χ^2 (8) = 211.97, $p < .000$. PR professionals in consultancies and agencies (34.3 percent) recognized the most post/hypermodern characteristics in their organizations, followed by those in private companies (26.9 percent), joint stock companies (20.2 percent), nonprofit organizations (10.8 percent) and finally by those in governmental organizations (7.8 percent). The association between the perception of cultural transformation and the type of organization is weak but significant (Cramer's V = .177, $p < .000$). A Chi-square test furthermore shows that in cluster C, the majority of PR professionals perceived themselves as working in organizations with

excellent communications departments (52.8 percent), while in cluster B, comprised of individuals at organizations in the process of transformation from modern to postmodern, this perception was less prevalent (48 percent), a difference that yields χ^2 (2) = 64.987, $p < .000$. The association is weak but significant (Cramer's $V = .161$, $p < .000$).

4.3 Active participation in societal debates

One of the characteristics of a hypermodern culture is a very assertive public that expects organizations to actively participate in societal debates. Active participation in societal debates can be considered a necessity demanded by a hypermodern public. Therefore, the final secondary research question (RQ3) asks whether PR professionals who perceive more hypermodern characteristics in their organizations demonstrate a higher level of engagement in public debates than professionals who perceive their organizations to exhibit less hypermodern characteristics and determines whether this differs between professionals at organizations with perceived excellent and those at organizations with non-excellent PR departments. According to PR professionals, European organizations are the most active in societal debates about ecology and climate ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.36$ on a five-point scale), followed by debates about open borders for business ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.341$), the future of the European Union ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.342$), migration ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.283$) and populism and anti-elitism ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.158$). A one-way ANOVA test shows that the type of organization exhibits small to very small but significant effects on active participation in societal debates. This observation holds for four of the five debate topics (including open borders for business, F (2, 3384) = 22.912, $p <.000$, $\eta^2 = .013$; future of the European Union, F (2, 3384) = 4.137, $p <.016$, $\eta^2 = .002$; populism and anti-elitism, F (2, 3384) = 20.736, $p <.000$, $\eta^2 = .012$; migration, F (2, 3384) = 4.693, $p <.009$, $\eta^2 = .003$), but not for participation

in debates about ecology and climate. An LSD post hoc test reveals that professionals in cluster C, who work in postmodern and hypermodern organizations, observe their organizations participating in societal debates the most. They differ significantly from professionals at other types of organizations in the four debates. In open border debates, postmodern and hypermodern organizations (M = 2.98, SD = 1.358) participate significantly more than modern (M = 2.57, SD = 1.245, $M_{difference}$ = .403, p < .000) and modern/postmodern organizations (M = 2.71, SD = 1.334, $M_{difference}$ = .263, p < .000). The same applies to the other three debates. In case of the future of the European Union, postmodern and hypermodern organizations (M = 2.65, SD = 1.359) also participate significantly more than modern (M = 2.47, SD = 1.289, $M_{difference}$ = .179, p < .011) and modern/postmodern organizations (M = 2.54, SD = 1.339, $M_{difference}$ = .107, p < .032). For debates on populism and anti-elitism, postmodern and hypermodern organizations (M = 2.20, SD = 1.219) also participate significantly more than modern (M = 1.91, SD = 1.073, $M_{difference}$ = .286, p < .000) and modern/postmodern organizations (M = 1.95, SD = 1.105, $M_{difference}$ = .245, p < .000). For debates on migration, postmodern and hypermodern organizations (M = 2.26, SD = 1.292) also participate significantly more than modern (M = 2.11, SD = 1.265, $M_{difference}$ = .150, p < .025) and modern/postmodern organizations (M = 2.19, SD = 1.283, $M_{difference}$ = .130, p < .006).

According to PR professionals, organizations with perceived excellent communications departments are significantly more active in societal debates than organizations with lower quality communications departments, except for debates about migration. A Student's t-test yields the following results for debates about ecology and climate ($M_{excellent}$ = 3.27, SD = .1366; M_{other} = 3.10, SD = 1.384), t (2502) = 2.543; p = .011, 95%CI[.038.297], open borders, ($M_{excellent}$ = 3.03, SD = .1391; M_{other} = 2.74, SD = 1.337), t (2502) = 4.573; p = .000, 95%CI[.168, .428], the future of the European Union ($M_{excellent}$ =

2.68, *SD* = 1.378; M_{other} = 2.54, *SD* = 1.334), *t* (2502) = 2.159; *p* = .031, 95%CI[.013, .265] and populism and elitism ($M_{excellent}$ = 2.12, *SD* =1.200; M_{other} = 1.95, *SD* = 1.126), *t* (876.22) = 3.027; *p* = .003, 95%CI[.060.282], equal variances not assumed.

5. Conclusions and discussion

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that the cultural transformation towards a hypermodern culture in Europe, as proposed by Lipovetsky (2005), is recognized by the majority of the European PR and communications professionals. They are faced with hypermodern values of stakeholders in their organizations, and according to some, this has already changed the strategic communication of their organizations, and it will continue to do so in the future. Strikingly, observations of this transformation are more prevalent among professionals in nonprofit organizations. This suggests that consumer mentality is indeed spreading from the commercial sectors of society to other sectors of society where different attitudes previously prevailed. Consultants also recognize this transformation more than other professionals do, as do communications professionals who hold management positions. This recognition of the hypermodern transformation of culture in European societies fits and can be explained by the modernization and postmodernization theory from Inglehart (1997; 2001), as well as Evolutionary Emancipation Theory put forth by Welzel (2013; 2014), both of which show the highest scores of European societies on the postmodern secular-rational and self-expression values and the emancipation index. The European public, as one of the most emancipated and critical public constituencies in the world, can therefore be expected to possess a hypermodern perspective regarding organizations. This perspective will be primarily and especially visible for PR and communications professionals, since these individuals span the boundary between the

organization and its environment. The level of awareness differs across Europe and is the highest among professionals in Northern Europe. This observation is also in line with the postmodernization and emancipation theories, which consistently show Scandinavian countries as having the most advanced value patterns. It also underlines and explains the example of Arla Foods in Denmark in their conflict with a divided global public (Holmström, Falkheimer & Nielsen, 2010).

In a hypermodern world, organizations are expected to participate actively in public debates about issues the hypermodern public regards as important (Ledford, 2012; Rendtorff, 2014). As is clear from this research, organizations do satisfy this obligation, though they do not participate so frequently in all debates. Professionals in organizations with more postmodern and hypermodern characteristics perceive more active participation than do those in organizations with excellent communications departments. Organizations participate the most in debates about ecological and business issues, according to the PR professionals surveyed.

The hypermodern European environment not only influences the external behavior and communication of European organizations but also affects the characteristics and values of these organizations, according to PR and communication professionals, although the effect is mixed and unclear. While there are legitimate differences between postmodern characteristics and hypermodern ones in theory, they overlap largely in practice, particularly in the perception of PR and communications professionals. Three clusters of organizations can be observed based on respondents' perceptions of modern organizations, organizations that have both modern and postmodern characteristics, and those with both postmodern and hypermodern characteristics. Commercial organizations seem to be more postmodern and hypermodern than noncommercial organizations, which could be explained by the different environments that these types of organizations experience. This is in line with the need of

organizations to maintain fluid and dynamic identities (Hatch & Schultz, 2002) and to adapt to their stakeholders, as stakeholder theory prescribes with regard to, e.g., the level of mutual dependence of an organization and its stakeholders (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Fassin, 2009; Freeman, 1994) or the issues at hand (Dutton & Duckerich, 1991).

This research also shows that excellent communications departments can be distinguished from other communications departments in their recognition of the transformation of culture. Professionals in communications departments that perceive themselves as excellent are better at monitoring changes in communication patterns between the organization and its stakeholders and are more often found in postmodern and hypermodern organizations and in organizations that participate more frequently in societal debates. This shows that the Comparative Excellence Framework for Communication Management (Tench, Verčič, Zerfass, Moreno & Verhoeven, 2017; Verčič & Zerfass, 2016), which was developed based on longitudinal data from the European Communication Monitor, is a suitable framework that can distinguish between excellent and non-excellent communications departments. The results show that excellent communications departments in Europe seem to be better connected to the present time and better equipped to help organizations adapt to the changing postmodern and hypermodern environments than other departments are.

This research underlines the importance of a macro level, societal perspective on PR and organizations, as proposed in the different versions of the reflective paradigm for PR and communication management (Holmström, 1997; 2005; 2009; Van Ruler & Verčič, 2002; 2005). It shows that European PR and communications professionals perceive broad societal and cultural transformation and believe this transformation influences their work as strategic communications professionals as well.

5.1 Limitations and implications for future research and practice

This research was the first empirical exploration of the awareness, recognition and application of hypermodern characteristics in the PR profession in Europe. It therefore possesses some limitations. First, this study primarily relied upon perception and self-assessment research and therefore may have been affected by the limitations that come with this type of research. Furthermore, due to limited space in the survey, it was only possible to use four questions to ask respondents about the concept of hypermodernity. This restriction raises some concerns about the responses given to these questions, especially since the questions were about a complex concept. Were the respondents knowledgeable enough about the complexity of their organizations to answer the questions properly? Although this problem was minimized by introducing each question with definitions and explanations, it is not clear how respondents have answered these questions: as a communicator (which is how the questions were intended to be answered), an employee, a manager or a consumer? In future research, these different roles should be better defined and separated.

The same applies to the operationalization of the literature. Although existing literature is clear in its theories, concerns can be raised about whether the concepts from the literature were discernible in the minds of the respondents. For future research, the scales for measuring concepts like modern, postmodern and hypermodern characteristics in a PR context should be developed more thoroughly in order to improve the validation of the theoretical constructs.

For PR practitioners in Europe it is important to be aware of the hypermodernization of culture and its influence inside and outside the organization. To accommodate the cultural change, this awareness could ideally lead to new hypermodern strategies of organizations and to new hypermodern communication policies. The cultural change also shows practitioners

the importance of keeping a societal perspective on their organisation. The different versions of the reflective paradigm for organizational legitimation (Holmström, 1997; 2005; 2009; Van Ruler & Verčič, 2002; 2005) can help them with that, and so do the issue arena perspective (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010) and the post-reflective use of the organization's values (Johansen & Valentini, 2013)

Future scholarship could also take a broader societal perspective as a framework for investigating PR. One possibility would be to empirically explore the influence of PR on the development of hypermodern values and the role the profession plays in processes of modernization, postmodernization and hypermodernization around the world.

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