

THE ROLE OF MUNICIPAL COMMUNICATION AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN THE  
REINFORCEMENT OF TRUST IN LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN  
LEBANON

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Media Studies - Advertising

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by

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## **Abstract**

Municipalities are in direct contact with their communities, delivering basic services and ensuring safety and security within their jurisdiction, and they are at the forefront of the response to crises. While it is imperative to understand the potential of municipal communication in bridging the trust gap between the state and citizens to improve functionality and social stability, there is a dearth of such studies in Lebanon. This study becomes even more pertinent considering that it comes at a time when Lebanon is facing multiple crises including an unprecedented economic and financial collapse.

Through the lens of the Theory of Citizen Participation and the commitment-trust relationship theory, this qualitative research, therefore, explores the impact of municipal communication approaches on the relationship and trust between citizens and their local governments before and after the uprising of October 17, 2019 in Lebanon.

Following a descriptive analysis of the official municipal Facebook pages of four major cities in Lebanon, namely Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, and Nabatieh, between August 1, 2019, and February 29, 2020, this study observed a 48% decrease in the rate of posting after the uprising and a significant increase in negative public reactions to the posts. No two-way communication messages were posted and hardly any posts reflected transparent governance.

The research, which also included semi-structured interviews with locals from the same municipalities, observed that there was a lack of trust in local authorities among the majority of interviewees, and the desire for transparent and consultative two-way communication messages was expressed as a means to reinforce that trust.

Keywords: trust, citizen participation, engagement, communication, and municipality and local authority

## **The Role of Municipal Communication and Citizen Engagement in the Reinforcement of Trust in Local Authorities in Lebanon**

### **1. Introduction**

Lebanon has been reeling under multiple crises since 2019, the year that marked the public uprising against the ruling elite on October 17, and the civil unrest that followed. People suffering from the repercussions of a stagnant economy on their livelihoods demanded reform and accountability as they took to the streets in decentralized protests across Lebanon following a government decision to introduce new taxes to curb the massive budget deficit. A trust gap between citizens and the state widened as the country began its freefall into an unprecedented economic and financial collapse, further impacted by COVID-19 and the Beirut blast of August 4, 2020 (Reuters, 2020).

According to the Central Administration of Statistics, Lebanon has 1108 municipalities and around 1,550 villages within eight Governorates. These municipalities are in direct contact with their communities, providing local basic services such as street cleaning, road tarmacking, public lighting, street signs, wastewater treatment, and water drainage (European Committee of the Regions, 2002), as well as ensuring safety and security within their jurisdiction. They are also at the forefront of the response to crises at the local level as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic (AUB, 2020).

Each work of public character or interest, in the municipal area, falls within the scope of the Municipal Council's competence. The Municipal Council, directly elected by the local community, is the authority with decision-making power at the municipal level. Furthermore, the Council is in charge of the municipality's annual budget, setting the

rates of local taxes, and managing and building all public areas such as parks, schools, and shops.

With such a direct impact that a municipality has on people's lives, it is imperative to bridge the trust gap between local communities and their municipalities through informed and engaged citizens, and endorsed local institutions that together create some form of social stability especially during the protracted crises in Lebanon. The entry point to citizen participation in matters of public interest is through municipal communication, hence this thesis will delve into the potential of communication to build and maintain trust in local authorities.

Citizen participation in local governance is defined as the interaction with governmental institutions, providing input on given tasks. It is dependent on the citizen's willingness to be involved (Bekkers, Tummers, and Voorberg, 2013). Democratic decision-making, in contrast to bureaucratic or technocratic decision-making, is based on the assumption that all who are affected by a given decision have the right to participate in the making of that decision. Kweit and Kweit (as cited in Ffolliott, 2000) point out that the criteria for evaluating policies in a democratic process are the accessibility of the process and/or the responsiveness of the policy to those who are affected by it, rather than the efficiency or rationality of the decision.

The benefits of citizen participation in the planning process revolve around the notion of gaining public support, increased trust, and avoidance of protracted conflicts among others (Cogan & Sharpe, 1986, p. 284).

Numerous scholars (Ares & Hernández 2017; Solé-Ollé & Sorribas-Navarro 2018; Zhang & Kim 2018) researched the topic of trust-building through communications and

public participation in municipal governance in modern democracies, but there is a lack of similar studies in Lebanon, making the topic of this research pertinent, especially, since Lebanon seems to be at the peak of public distrust in the state following the severe economic and financial collapse caused by decades of government malpractice and corruption (OHCHR, n.d.).

In this context, many municipalities in Lebanon established official Facebook pages to reach and connect with their residents using different types of messages. Yet, it is unclear to what extent this platform is utilized as a medium to enhance the quality of the relationship between the municipality and its constituents and as a means to engage the public in the decision-making process at the local level.

Therefore, using the lenses of citizen participation and commitment-trust theories, this thesis investigates the role of communication and public engagement in reinforcing trust in local governance in the largest Lebanese cities with administrative and commercial centers in their governorates, namely Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, and Nabatieh. To do so, the thesis will analyze the content of the official Facebook municipal pages of the previously mentioned four municipalities and will cross-examine the findings with interview results around citizens' trust in local authorities in the light of municipal communication practices.

The descriptive analysis of the official municipal Facebook pages of the selected municipalities will cover timelines pre- and post-October 17, 2019 uprising (August 2019 till the end of February 2020) to detect new trends and changes in communication messages if any were applied in response to the public demand for transparency and accountability.

Facebook was selected for this study since by February 2022, it ranked as the leading social media platform in Lebanon, with market shares of 78.15% of users in Lebanon and at a distant second place is YouTube with 11.59% (Statcounter GlobalStats, 2022). Facebook, like most social media platforms, enables engaging users in two-way communications, making it a useful tool for local authorities to receive instant feedback and be able to identify their constituents' concerns, not just to send out one-way informative messages.

## **2. Literature Review**

Numerous studies such as those conducted by Edelman Intelligence (2011, 2017) and the World Bank (2016) have demonstrated the relationship between public engagement through communication and citizen participation in governance and the reinforcement of public trust in the state. Public participation in governance has been widely institutionalized in modern democracies (OECD, 2020), yet it is generally not practiced in Lebanon leaving the concept widely unexplored with little research conducted on the topic locally.

### ***2.1 The Lebanese Context***

With 18 officially recognized religious groups including four Muslim sects, 12 Christian sects, the Druze sect, and Judaism, Lebanon has always been a fertile ground for conflicts; the country has been afflicted with several wars since its independence in 1943, such as the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, the spillover of Palestinian refugees, the protracted Civil War (1975 till 1990), the Israeli and Syrian invasions (1976, 1978, 1982, 1990) and occupation of the country, and more recently the war against Islamic extremist groups in 2017. Lebanon has suffered from the repercussions of these local and regional

conflicts throughout its modern history, and the Lebanese people have always paid the hefty price of their country's strategic location at the heart of the Middle East (BBC, 2018).

The numerous wars and constant security threats played a key role in polarizing the population into sectarian groups living in fear of "the others" and created a fertile ground for corruption as warlords emerged as sectarian political leaders (The New York Times, 2021). The same political parties and leaders that engaged in a Civil War for 25 years, took hold of the political scene in the country for decades, leading the country to sink into a sovereign debt of over 95 billion US Dollars by 2020, ranking it as the 9th highest debt per GDP in the world at 150.43% (International Monetary Fund, 2020).

On August 4, 2020, the third most powerful non-nuclear explosion in the world ripped through the capital Beirut, taking the lives of over 200 people, injuring thousands, and causing destruction that spanned across a radius of 10 kilometers from the heart of Beirut Port. Whether the Beirut port explosion was a result of negligence, conspiracy, terrorism, or act of war, remains unknown. Almost two years into the investigation, and there are still no official indicators as to who was behind the explosion of tons of ammonium nitrate, improperly stored inside one of port hangars of the most densely populated cities of Lebanon (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

The explosion occurred eight months after the start of civil unrest triggered by the government's attempt to increase taxes to cover the growing budget deficit. Lebanon had been spiraling into a severe and prolonged economic depression, labelled as The Deliberate Depression by the World Bank Lebanon Economic Monitor (LEM – Fall, 2020). People took to the streets in October 2019 to revolt against the government and the

failing traditional political system that had thrived on corruption and clientelism while the economy was collapsing and people falling deeper into multidimensional poverty.

The people's trust in the state took another serious turn following the above-mentioned Beirut explosion of August 4, 2020, which according to the World Bank, caused an estimated \$3.8-4.6 billion in material damage (HRW, 2021). According to the LEM report (2020) released on June 1, 2021, the economic and financial crisis is likely to rank in the top 10, possibly top three, most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century. The Lebanese currency continues to devalue, having lost more than 90% of its value between late 2019 and September 2021, and with it, the purchasing power of the Lebanese people and local authorities alike, making the provision of adequate basic services a serious challenge for most municipalities across the country (Reuters, 2022).

Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2019) published an article on the non-compliance of the Lebanese authorities with the Right to Access to Information Law in September 2019, just a few weeks before the eruption of the October 17, 2019 demonstrations, marking the tipping point of public distrust in the state and the political class as a whole. Authorities continued to challenge the public call for transparency and accountability and no measures of reform were put into effect to try and bridge the trust gap (HRW, 2019).

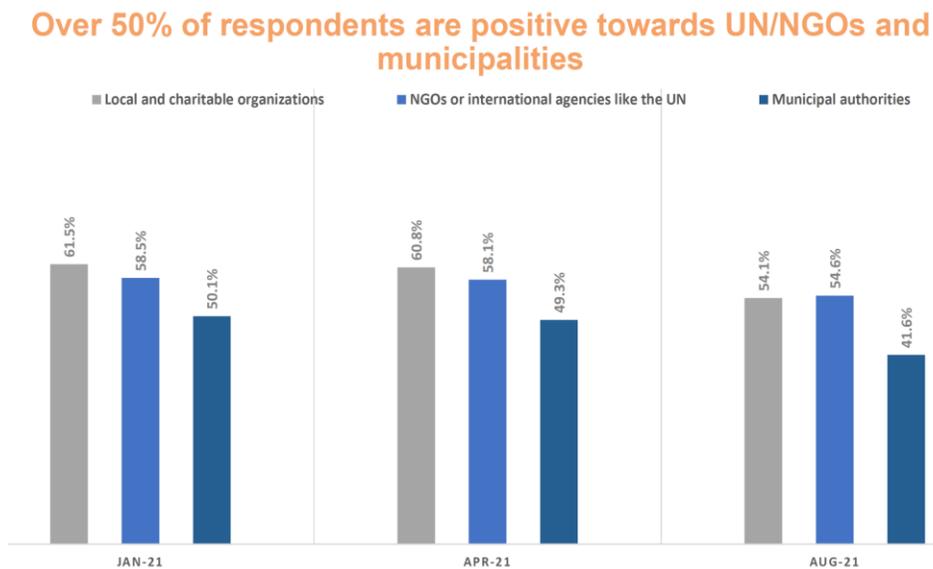
On the local level, public trust in municipal authorities remained relatively acceptable over the past few years according to UNDP Lebanon's Tension Monitoring interviews conducted between 2018 and 2021. Municipalities had been struggling to meet the growing needs of communities even prior to the 2019 financial crisis due to a number

of internal and external factors such as tensions rooted in political bickering and the Syrian refugee crisis.

The influx of over 1.5 million Syrians fleeing the Syrian Civil War in 2011, settling initially in marginalized border towns and villages exasperated the situation in these areas that had already been suffering from poor infrastructure and limited resources (European Parliament, 2017). This placed additional pressure on municipalities to meet the needs of the growing population and to maintain stability where tension and competition over basic services and livelihood opportunities prevailed.

While the trust gap grew significantly between citizens and the state, local authorities were still perceived as trustworthy to a certain degree by constituents as indicated by the UNDP Tensions Monitoring survey conducted across all of Lebanon. Although the level of trust decreased since January 2021, according to the September 2021 edition of the report, 41% of respondents (N 5,028) still found municipalities to be trusted for the services they provided (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Tensions Monitoring Report – September 2021



These findings emphasize the significance of the relationship between citizens and local authorities as an entry point toward social stability and inclusive sustainable development, making the subject matter of this study of importance.

## ***2.2 Salience of Citizen Engagement and Participation in Public Matters***

The relationship dynamics between a government and its citizens vary from one representative democracy to another, and when public engagement in a representative democracy is restricted to the basic commitment, it occurs only during elections. Unlike direct democracies where people vote to pass laws and rules, representative democracies are built around the notion of trust that is placed by the people in elected representatives to pass laws and rule on their behalf over a period of time. Within that context, in democracies, the social contract must be solidified through a trust-based relationship between the people and the state, represented by the central and local governments.

Voting is a key structural element of modern democracy. According to Wilson (1999), voters are becoming more apathetic towards it. 'Representative democracy needs to be supplemented by participatory democracy' (Wilson, 1999, p. 246). Evidence suggests there is a rising demand in the community for increased involvement in decision-making and accountability by governments (Barbaro, 2006, Herriman, 2011). Therefore, in addition to conducting elections, many current forms of democratic governments invite their citizens to be involved in the decision-making process, aiming to reinforce trust through transparent consultative practices. At the general level, public participation is "the practice of consulting and involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy-forming activities of organizations or institutions responsible for policy development" (Rowe and Frewer, 2004: 512).

Public participation has become a measure of the practice of democratic governance as Urbinati (2008) noted; "The government of the moderns is not defined by election per se, but by the relationship between participation and representation (society and the state) instituted by elections" (Urbinati, N. 2008, p.8). The entry point to public participation is communication, and it is the responsibility of the government to engage the public through the establishment of open communication channels.

According to Flynn, Gregory and Valin (2008), public relations is about "the strategic management of relationships among organizations and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals, and serve the public interest." In government communications, "public relations is the means by which an administrator interacts with the citizenry and is held accountable" (Lee, 2000: 452).

Ideologically, local governments provide more accessible means to become an active member of the government (Raadschelders, 2003). At the municipal level, decisions are directly relevant to the public which makes public participation in local governance an institutional priority in modern representative democracies.

Governments providing opportunities for community involvement in decision-making became more prominent during the 1960s in London with the release of the Skeffington Report (Wilson, 1999). This report examined the involvement of the public in town planning (Town Planning Institute, 1968). It emphasized the need for planners, employed by local governments, to encourage participation in the process of decision-making. Public consultation was detailed throughout the report and stimulated discussion within local government and the community about community participation (Damer and

Hague, 1971). The report describes the positive outcomes of the “establishment of community development projects and the increased mobilization of tenants groups” (Town Planning Institute, 1968).

As a result, local governments introduced new techniques to involve community members in decision-making including “market research, consumer feedback and consultation” (Wilson, 1999, p. 247). Accordingly, the role of government has continued to shift from governing to that of governance, whereby the government works with the community to deliver decisions (Newman et al., 2004; Lane, 2005).

Viteritti (1997) stated that “meaningful communication between government and the people is not merely a managerial practicality. It is a political, albeit moral, obligation that originates from the basic covenant that exists between the government and the people” (p.82). This covenant is built on the trust that is earned through ethical practices “that government communication and ethics are intertwined” (Garnett, 1992, p. 229).

Ethical communications have been founded on truthful communications. “Truth in communicating involves accuracy in communicating, avoiding falsehood or misrepresentation whether by including false information, deliberately excluding vital information, or allowing people to misinterpret a message” (Garnett, 1992, p.229). Garnett (1992) argues that “to have the most value, however, truth in communicating needs to include usefulness, openness, and fairness as well as accuracy”.

### ***2.3 Media and Public Opinion***

Local authorities should engage in truthful communications to maintain trust and safeguard the public against forming misguided judgements based on false information. With the rise of the internet and citizen journalism, and with the advancement of

technology, people have become exposed to both credible and unreliable news sources. This has increased the risk of swaying public opinion based on misleading information. Lee (1999) notes that policymakers should develop media skills and that “public managers need to learn how to deal with the emergence of public journalism because it has the potential of being an ally, rather than an opponent, of public administration” (p. 457).

Media also “pervades the informational environment, and this, in turn, influences public opinion” (Rainey, 2003, p. 106-107). When considering the role media play in democracy, Raboy and Taras (2004) state that “the mass media is a vital measure of the democratic health of a society. Mass media are, to a large degree, the public squares, the meeting places of modern life” (p.60). The authors also note that the media serve as “a reflecting mirror that allows citizens to see and communicate with each other” (Raboy and Taras, 2004, p. 60). The “tension between speed and accuracy in the ratings-driven news environment” (Stayner, 2004, p. 420) impacts government media coverage.

There is substantial literature (Liu and Horsley, 2007; Raboy and Taras, 2004; Rainey, 2003) supporting the influence of the media on public opinion, and this emphasizes the need for local authorities to safeguard public trust through strategic public relations activities which include the engagement of constituents in two-way communications. Research has shown that governmental organizations are more likely to “practice a public information model of public relations and less likely to engage in two-way communication” (Grunig and Jaatinen, 1999, p. 219). The “government’s traditional use of one-way models of communication, rather than two-way models, often limits dialogue, thereby diminishing the role of public feedback” (Liu and Horsley, 2007).

Research suggests (Ares and Hernández et al., 2017) that consulting with constituents increases trust in government authorities and that during crises, well informed and engaged communities tend to trust their elected officials to do the right thing (Babu and Qamar-ud-Din, 2020). It is imperative to perceive trust within a crisis context given the nature of the ongoing situation in Lebanon.

Organizational communications scholars have identified “multiple stages in the life cycle of an issue: nonexistent, potential, dormant, imminent, current, and critical” (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 2006: 326). They go on to define crises as “issues confronting the organization that has reached the critical stage” (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 2006: 326). Garnett (1992) advocates that “communication during a crisis should be contingent upon the situation” (p.204) and proceeds to establish a framework for government communication during a crisis – crisis identification, when the public administrator should appear on the scene, establishing and mobilizing the crisis team, implementing a crisis plan, communicating the outcome, acknowledging individual efforts, and evaluating the crisis response (Garnett, 1992, p. 204-216).

Garnett (1992) notes that “winding down a crisis properly is almost as difficult as mobilizing for one... failure to announce resolution can lead to confusion, which prolongs the chronic phases of crisis or complicates recovery” (p.215).

Grunig (2001) states that excellent public relations “builds long-term relationships of trust and understanding with strategic publics of the organization—those that affect or are affected by the organization as it identifies and pursues its mission” (p. 21). Grunig (1992) goes on to state, “excellent public relations is an integral part of an excellent organization” (p. 248).

Without active public participation, a growing gap between government perception of what is a priority and the real needs of communities emerges. Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000) recognized that “government touches every aspect of society and virtually every facet of government is closely tied to and reliant upon public relations” (p. 488). Without an informed and active citizenry – which happens through trained communications professionals – elected and appointed officials may lose touch with the true needs and interests of their constituents (Cutlip et al., 2000).

The role of expert communicators is key to engaging the public, yet retaining qualified staff in public environments has proven to be challenging. Liu and Horsley (2007) highlighted “...the lack of importance often placed on communication by management” which is one of the primary environmental constraints facing public sector communications and often results in skilled communicators leaving the public sector.

Another constraint that tends to devalue government communications is public perception. According to Liu and Horsley (2007), “the negative connotations of the term propaganda and the derogatory use of spin often make the public cynical about the intentions of government communications” (p. 380).

To sum it up, numerous studies posit that public participation has become a measure of the practice of democratic governance. Interactive communication between the government and the people is considered a moral obligation that originates from the basic existing covenant that is built on trust. Research also points to the importance of public participation to reduce the gap between government perception of what is a priority and the real needs of the communities.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This research explores the relationship between municipal communication messages and the level of public trust in local authorities within the context of the crises affecting Lebanon. It is conducted under the framework of the theory of citizen participation, which identifies the levels of participation, points to the benefits of engaging the community in matters of public affairs, and acts as a baseline definition of what constitutes passive and active participation. Public participation is also viewed in light of the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing - trust being the root principle around which representative democracies are built.

#### ***3.1 Theory of Citizen Participation***

In democracies, citizens are presumed to be important stakeholders in that they can participate either directly or indirectly through elected representatives in the formation, adoption, and implementation of the laws and policies that affect them. Public participation, thus, is a fundamental part of the public–government relationship within democracies (Roberts 2004; Jacobs, Fay, and Michael 2009; Bryson, Quick, Slotterback, and Crosby 2013). Citizen participation is a process that provides private individuals with an opportunity to influence public decisions and has long been a component of the democratic decision-making process.

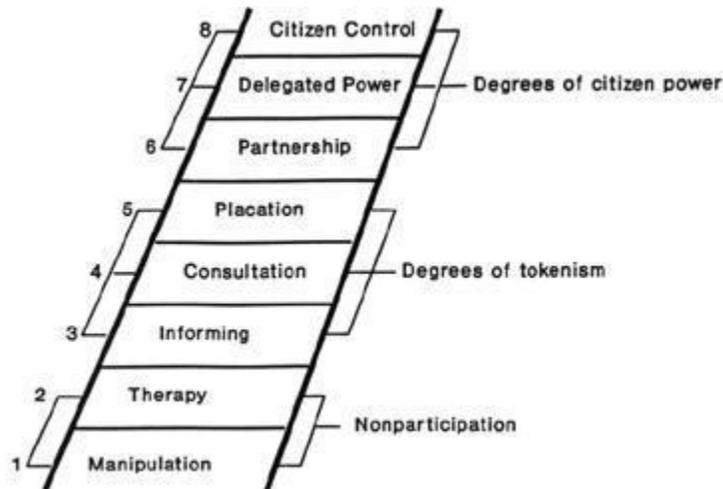
While participation may be limited to discrete acts (e.g., a town hall meeting or citizen survey) or described by a set of practices (e.g., convening public hearings or other types of consultation processes), participation more generally is the process of engagement in governance.

The perception of stakeholders and planners is an important consideration in the development and implementation of any public participation program. Public participation may be a requirement for planners, however, it is always optional for citizens. Citizens choose to participate because they expect a satisfying experience and hope to influence the planning process. Cogan and Sharpe (1986) provide a concise overview of citizen participation in the planning process. Cogan and Sharpe (1986) indicate that participation can offer a variety of rewards to citizens. These may be intrinsic to the involvement, deriving from the very act of participation, or instrumental, resulting from the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of public policy. Planners should attempt to incorporate both in the program. Ignoring the intrinsic could lead to burnout; ignoring the instrumental can result in tokenism. The planner's expectations are also important in that an effective public participation program can lead to a better planning process and product as well as personal satisfaction.

In successful citizen involvement programs, the disparity between the planner's and the participant's expectations is minimal. If expectations are different, conflict is probable. This conflict is damaging to the planning process and the relationship between the participants and the planner. Often, it is avoidable because its source is in conflicting expectations rather than conflicting demands, (Cogan and Sharpe, 1986, p. 287).

Well-planned citizen involvement programs relate to the expectations of both the citizens and the planner. Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of citizen participation" can assist the planner in determining his or her perceptions of a program's purpose and compares this with the anticipated perceptions of citizen participants (Figure 2):

Figure 2. The Ladder of Citizen Participation



Source: Arnstein, 1969

The three stages of the well-known ladder transition from the somewhat deceptive non-participation level to reach the fully empowered citizen control level. Divided into eight distinctive steps, at the very bottom, *manipulation* occurs when public institutions, officials, or administrators mislead citizens into believing they are being given power in a process that has been intentionally manufactured to deny them power. Participation as *therapy* occurs when public officials and administrators “assume that powerlessness is synonymous with mental illness,” and they create pseudo-participatory programs that attempt to convince citizens that they are the problem when in fact the established institutions and policies are creating problems for citizens.

While Arnstein (1969) acknowledges that informing “citizens of their rights, responsibilities, and options can be the most important first step toward legitimate citizen participation,” she also notes that “too frequently the emphasis is placed on a one-way flow of information—from officials to citizens—with no channel provided for feedback and no power for negotiation. Similarly, Arnstein notes that “inviting citizens’ opinions, like informing them, can be a legitimate step toward their full participation.”

Still, the consultation level of participation offers no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account. At the placation step, citizens are granted a limited degree of influence in a process, but their participation is largely or entirely tokenistic: citizens are merely involved only to demonstrate that they were involved.

Participation as partnership occurs when public institutions, officials, or administrators allow citizens to negotiate better deals, veto decisions, share funding, or put forward requests that are at least partially fulfilled. Delegated power occurs when public institutions, officials, or administrators give up at least some degree of control, management, decision-making authority, or funding to citizens. Participation as citizen control occurs, in Arnstein's words, when "participants or residents can govern a program or an institution, be in full charge of policy and managerial aspects, and be able to negotiate the conditions under which 'outsiders' may change them."

Citizen participation programs can increase costs and the amount of time a project takes. However, Cogan and Sharpe (1986) suggest that citizen participation programs can make the planning process and planners more effective by:

- Reducing isolation of the planner from the public
- Generating a spirit of cooperation and trust
- Providing opportunities to disseminate information
- Identifying additional dimensions of inquiry and research
- Assisting in identifying alternative solutions
- Providing legitimacy to the planning effort and political credibility of the agency
- Increasing public support

Cogan and Sharpe (1986) state "with few exceptions, a successful public involvement program incorporates several techniques" (p. 292). These techniques can be graphically presented as a continuum that ranges from passive involvement to active involvement (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Public Participation Continuum

PUBLICITY	PUBLIC EDUCATION	PUBLIC INPUT	PUBLIC INTERACTION	PUBLIC PARTNERSHIP
Building public support	Disseminating information	Collecting information	Two-way communication	Securing advice and consent
<----- PASSIVE <span style="float: right;">ACTIVE-----&gt;</span>				

Cogan and Sharpe (1986) provide the following description of each of the forms of public involvement (p. 292-294):

- **Publicity** — Publicity techniques are designed to persuade and facilitate public support, relating to citizens as passive consumers.
- **Public Education** — Public education programs present relatively complete and balanced information so that citizens may draw their own conclusions.
- **Public Input** — Public input techniques solicit ideas and opinions from citizens. They are most effective when combined with feedback mechanisms that inform participants of the extent to which their input has influenced ultimate decisions.
- **Public Interaction** — Public interaction techniques facilitate the exchange of information and ideas among citizens, planners, and decision-makers. When these

techniques are effectively utilized, each participant has the opportunity to express his or her views, respond to the ideas of others, and work toward consensus.

- Public Partnership — Public partnerships offer citizens a formalized role in shaping the ultimate decisions.

Public hearings are the most ubiquitous form of public participation and serve the important purpose of transparency and accountability in governance. Yet, they are also very commonly considered illegitimate “window dressing” because decisions have been already effectively made (Innes and Booher, 2004).

Within the Lebanese context, the lack of citizens' trust in their elected officials and public institutions has become endemic to the extent that even positive news such as ongoing efficient municipal works is often received with skepticism or cynicism, especially after the uprising of October 17, 2019. This phenomenon was observed in the descriptive analysis of the municipal Facebook posts that was undertaken for the sake of this research, and that is why it is important to understand what is being done on the level of municipal communications to try and restore the lost trust.

Another significant observation was made during the interviews conducted. When asked whether the mayor or members of the municipal council were politically affiliated to any party, and if so, whether that affiliation was influencing municipal work in any way, the interviewees' common answer was that of course there was political affiliation “just like everywhere else in this country”, and the majority confirmed that this impacted the decision-making process at the municipal level. Through a follow-up question, only four out of the 13 interviewees knew the mayor and members of the council on a personal

level to be able to confirm their statements, whereas the remaining replies were based on a generalization without concrete knowledge.

Here lies the importance of municipal communication in general and the understanding of how much their approaches in Lebanon are passive or active according to the Public Participation Continuum, and try to identify through communication messages on Facebook, how empowered citizens are according to the ladder of citizen participation, given the impact that engaging citizens has on their level of trust in local authorities.

### ***3.2 Commitment-Trust Relationship***

Trust is a malleable and elusive term (Feldheim and Wang, 2003; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012), and numerous scholars have identified it from various aspects depending on the context through which they were defining it. One definition that is descriptive of a relationship between citizens and the state is: Trust in government is an evaluation of whether or not political authorities and institutions are performing in accordance with normative expectations held by the public (Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006). Another definition that is also directly linked to the essence of this research is that of Newton (2008), who states: Political trust is the belief that those in authority and with power will not deliberately or willingly do us harm, if they can avoid it, and will look after our interests, if this is possible.

The literature on trust suggests that confidence on the part of the trusting party results from the firm belief that the trustworthy party is reliable and has high integrity, which is associated with such qualities as consistent, competent, honest, fair, responsible, helpful, and benevolent (Altman & Taylor, 1983). Genuine confidence that a partner can

rely on another indeed will imply the behavioral intention to rely. Thus, just as behavioral intention is best viewed as an outcome of attitude and not as part of its definition (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), "willingness to rely" should be viewed as an outcome (or, alternatively, a potential indicator) of trust and not as a part of how one defines it.

The objective of this research is to identify how municipal communication practices affect community trust through behavioral indicators such as the willingness to rely on the municipality or engage with its activities, or through other forms of actions that would reflect different manifestations of a trusting relationship.

Trust is also defined in terms of an assumed positive linear relationship with control; it represents a perception of heightened control, whereas the lack of trust represents a reduction in perceived control (Boone and Holmes, 1991). Control in such definitions often is discussed in terms of a trustor's level of confidence in others' intentions and actions in a given situation (McAllister, 1995; Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998).

Kee and Knox (1970) refer to the lack of trust as suspicion, in which even a suspicious attitude is functional because by virtue of having the attitude, one feels better prepared to potentially manage the outcomes and protect the interests (i.e., sense of control). Therefore, defining trust in terms of a trustor's level of confidence in influence assumes a positive trust-control relationship, which inappropriately limits the functional nature of trust to cases in which there is only high trust. However, the functional nature of trust is such that even a lack of trust provides a sense of control over the outcomes of ambiguous situations.

Definitions that infer a negative relationship between trust and control also limit the functional nature of trust. Such definitions suggest that trust refers to a voluntary reduction of perceived control, and the lack of trust is an effort to increase one's sense of control in ambiguous situations (Das & Teng, 1998). Because both the positive and negative views of the trust-control relationship fail to consider trust from the trustor's perspective, it is inappropriate to define trust in terms of a linear relationship to control. That is, trust does not necessarily refer to the amount of control the trustor perceives in a given situation. Rather, research indicates that both trust and the lack of trust are associated with an increased sense of personal control over the outcomes of a given situation (Sorrentino et al., 1995).

Trust is problematic in any process involving people with diverse interests and levels of power (Huxham & Vangen 2005). However, when diverse voices are included and power is managed so that potentially marginalized groups do influence outcomes, there are strong payoffs for the legitimacy of the process, the quality of decisions, and effective decision implementation. Stakeholders are more likely to accept a decision that they believe was produced in a procedurally just manner, even when it is not their individually preferred outcome (Tyler & DeGoey, 1996).

A major precursor of trust is communication, which can be defined broadly as the formal as well as informal sharing of meaningful and timely information between firms" (Anderson & Narus, 1990). Communication, especially timely communication (Moorman et al, 1993), fosters trust by assisting in resolving disputes and aligning perceptions and expectations (Etgar, 1979).

### ***3.3 Crisis and Community Participation***

Trust and control are interconnected and their manifestations are dependent on the influence of the environment and the parties involved. This study is conducted to cross-reference the community relationship dynamics with their local governments and how these dynamics are affected by the type of communication messages and the crisis context. During crises, communities are most vulnerable, and the need for a trusting relationship is high.

Crisis preparedness and response will not be effective without the participation of the vulnerable communities (UNESCO, 2018). When involved in the mitigation process, the communities' confidence, capacities, and coping mechanisms develop in an upward spiral (Newport & Jawahar, 2003). According to Newport and Jawahar (2003), community participation should be viewed as a social process, in which the vulnerable groups organize themselves for their common needs and problems. However, in order to make it a practical reality, crisis and disaster mitigation require not only the participation of the individual within the vulnerable community but also the involvement of related institutions, NGOs, and the general public (Chen, Liu, & Chan 2006:219) as a supportive institutional construct (Yodmani 2001:5; Paton & Johnston 2001:274).

Thus, building resilient communities involves ensuring that communities and community members have the resources, capacities, and capabilities necessary to bounce back and recover in a manner that minimizes disruption and facilitates growth (Paton & Johnston, 2001).

According to UN ESCWA (September 2021), the multidimensional poverty rate in Lebanon doubled from 42% in 2019 to 82% of the total population in 2021, with nearly 4 million people living in multidimensional poverty.

As the country sinks deeper into an unprecedented economic depression, the devaluation of the local currency, and the loss of purchasing power, the majority of the population, now classified as vulnerable, is left to fend for themselves in the absence of social safety nets, rescue plans, or any measures to safeguard the people's access to basic services. During such times, empowering local communities with the needed resources and an organized framework led by local authorities and civil society organizations helps those communities achieve higher levels of resilience on the path to recovery.

Thus, to achieve efficient community engagement and mobilization in the face of crises, trust in local authorities is a prerequisite whereby municipal communication plays a significant influencing role. This research focuses on how communities' level of trust is affected by local municipal communication trends, and what possible changes may be made to improve that trust before a crisis and during one.

The research investigates whether two-way communication messages for consultation or active public participation were applied at any given time and whether they would be appreciated by citizens during crises as factors that would increase their level of trust as well as the efficiency and effectiveness of the crisis response.

### ***3.4 Research Scope and Importance***

Even if selectively practiced, the Right to Access to Information law is already in effect in Lebanon, whereas ensuring citizens' engagement and participation in decision-making is not legally binding for local authorities (HRW, 2019). With that notion in

mind, the nature of the relationship between citizens and municipal authorities is governed by the latter's decision and conviction in the benefits of reinforcing legitimacy through engaging constituents and increasing the level of public trust. Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of citizen participation" provides a clear overview of the different approaches to engaging communities and their expected perception outcomes, and with the lack of public trust during the period under study. Municipalities' communication and engagement models ought to have a significant impact on the quality of the relationship with their constituents.

The subject of this research is highly relevant given the risk of tension and social instability that an irreversible public distrust in the state may trigger. The impact of two-way municipal communication messages on the relationship between citizens and the state remains vastly unexplored in Lebanon, and given the salience of the topic, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

*Research Questions:*

RQ1: How did the uprising of October 17, 2019 in Lebanon impact municipal communication messages on Facebook?

RQ2.1: To what extent are citizens in Lebanon interested in engagement with matters of local governance?

RQ2.2: How is the level of citizens' interest in engagement with matters of local governance affected by crises?

RQ3: To what extent are municipalities in Lebanon that share consultative two-way messages with their communities more likely to earn public trust than municipalities that share close-ended one-way messages?

## **4. Methodology**

### ***4.1 Research Method***

This qualitative research investigates the municipal communication strategies of four major cities in Lebanon through their messages on Facebook before and after the uprising of October 17, 2019, and identifies how communication impacted the level of constituents' trust in local authorities through the lens of the theory of citizen participation. Following a two-step approach to data collection and analysis, an initial descriptive analysis of the municipalities' Facebook pages was combined with semi-structured interviews with 13 residents representing each municipality. The ladder of citizen participation is applied to the findings of the data analyzed and findings compared to current municipal communication practices to answer the research questions.

The two stages of data are superimposed to form an understanding of how municipal communication messages affect the relationship between local authorities and constituents. The interviews conducted aimed at depicting the nature of this relationship based on public interest and need; interest and engagement with matters of local governance and the basic needs of citizens that are managed and secured by local authorities. They also aimed at drawing an understanding of the general public perception around the role of municipal communications vis-à-vis public expectation, as well as the level of engagement with municipal communication channels and citizens' interest in participation in governance. The interviews also helped form an indicator of the level of public trust in local authorities derived from municipal communication messages, namely the messages that reflect transparency and call for public engagement in the decision-making process.

The interview results were incorporated with the outcomes of the descriptive analysis of the Facebook messages on the official pages. These messages were classified into two main clusters: pre and post-October 17, 2019 uprising, and the descriptive analysis looked for the changes in the frequency of posting and the type of messages (one-way vs. two-way).

Based on the ladder of citizen participation, moving into "Active" rather than "Passive" messaging helps secure communities' buy-in and increases public trust (Kim & Lee, 2012). Trust is also established in a transparent environment of operations, and thus under each of the two main pillars, the level of transparency is indicated through the nature of the information disclosed on the Facebook pages, such as financial statements, expenditure reports, or calls to tender.

The interview feedback and the Facebook pages' analysis together represent the public perception and expectations from the communication perspective in comparison to the actual municipal practices on the popular social media platform. Understanding the constituents' viewpoints enables a strategic reading of the messages disseminated by the local authority, whereby trends are formed around the levels of public engagement.

### *Interviews*

The interviews consisted of 25 questions and were conducted online and audio-recorded during the first week of May 2022. The interviewees were assured of the confidentiality of the interviews, and accordingly, all but one interviewee from Nabatieh accepted that the researcher records the interview. The duration of the interviews varied between 15 and 30 minutes, depending on the interviewees' interest in elaboration on the topics discussed.

Once completed, the interviews were transcribed, and the main pertinent responses were inserted into a comprehensive table and color-coded for the researcher to try and depict patterns and insights.

### *Descriptive analysis*

The data that was logged from the posts published on the four municipal pages included the post date, text content, number of likes, negative reactions, shares, and comments, as well as the number of municipal replies to comments. Screenshots of the posts and some of the comments were taken for reference and to revert to during the analysis stage if needed. The data extracted was placed on an excel table, and numerous filters were applied during the course of the analysis to observe trends and depict insights.

## **4.2 Research Sample**

In this study, the interviews were conducted online with subjects who were selected using the convenient sampling technique (Straton, 2021). Convenience sampling is cheaper, faster, and easier than other types of sampling, and if other sampling methods are not feasible, you can use convenient sampling to create hypotheses and goals for use in more rigorous research (Straton, 2021).

### *Interviewees' profiles*

<b>Pseudonym initials</b>	<b>1 Sex</b>	<b>2 Age</b>	<b>3 Marital Status</b>	<b>4 Children</b>	<b>5 Education</b>	<b>6-A Employment Status</b>	<b>6-B Sector/title</b>	<b>7 City</b>
A.B.	Female	25	Married	1	Bachelor	Employed	Shipping company	Beirut
B.B.	Male	65	Married	0	Bachelor	Employed	Registrar-Private school	Beirut
C.B.	Female	54	Married	0	Diploma - Cambridge	Business owner	Beauty services	Beirut

D.T.	Male	57	Married	0	Bachelor	Business owner/Freelancer	Communication	Tripoli
E.T.	Male	41	Married	1	Master	Employed	Local NGO - Executive director	Tripoli
F.T.	Female	44	Single	0	Master	Independent consultant	Working with international organizations	Tripoli
G.T.	Male	47	Married	2	MBA, currently PhD candidate	Business owner	Business consultancy, developing projects and coaching SMEs	Tripoli
H.S.	Female	23	Single	0	University student	Employed	Telecommunication products	Saida
I.S.	Female	32	Single	0	University student	Employed	Dental laboratory	Saida
J.S.	Female	50	Separated	2	Some university (3 years)	Not working	N/A	Saida
K.N.	Female	20	Single	0	University student	Employed	Teacher and dentist assistant	Nabatieh
L.N.	Female	46	Married	4	University student	Not working	N/A	Nabatieh
M.N.	Male	26	Single	0	Master	Not working	N/A	Nabatieh

The local perceptions in the targeted towns also provide area-specific insights that validate the correlation between municipal communication messages on Facebook and the level of engagement and trust in local authorities within these communities.

The choice of municipalities was based on the purposive sampling relying on the non-probability sampling technique, whereby only the relevant samples are selected by the researcher (Lavrakas, 2008). The municipalities of Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, and Nabatieh were chosen since they are within the five most populated Lebanese cities<sup>1</sup>. They represent the administrative and commercial centers within their governorates.

Six hundred ten Facebook posts were analyzed from four official municipal pages (Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, and Nabatieh) selected using the purposive sampling technique (pre and post-October 19 2019 uprising to discover whether the crises outcomes affected

the messaging frequency (measured by percentage) and type. It should be noted that the timeline of the selected posts disregarded the COVID-19 phase that began toward the end of February 2020 to avoid any contamination of the data with news related to the new overshadowing crisis. The posts mapped dated back around two months before the uprising and four months post the uprising. The size of the sample extended to double the time after the uprising than before it to provide ample time for municipal communication teams to adapt their strategies to the new developing situation.

#### *Municipality profiles*

<b>Municipality</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Estimated Population<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Population count ranking in Lebanon<sup>1</sup></b>
Beirut	19.8 km <sup>2</sup>	1,916,100	1st
Tripoli	27.3 km <sup>2</sup>	229,398	2nd
Saida	7.8 km <sup>2</sup>	163,554	3rd
Nabatieh	8 km <sup>2</sup>	120,000	5th

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<sup>1</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/cities/lebanon>



Beirut, the ancient city and capital of Lebanon, is one of the most religiously, culturally, and economically diverse cities in the Middle East. Beirut has a unique administrative status: it is the only municipality in Lebanon that is also a governorate. Beirut is a city of neighborhoods, most with a relatively homogeneous politico-religious and socio-economic character. Relatively few areas are genuinely mixed in terms of religious and confessional backgrounds, at least not on the residential level. This is to a large extent a result of the civil war (1975-1990), during which the city was violently

divided into East Beirut (almost exclusively Christian) and West Beirut (predominantly Muslim), as well as into a number of further subdivisions.

Beirut is a central hub for commercial activity and businesses, and over the years, massive numbers of Lebanese from underdeveloped rural regions of the country migrated to its outskirts seeking livelihood opportunities or fleeing wars and recurring invasions<sup>2</sup>.

The Northern city of Tripoli is located 85 kilometers north of Lebanon's capital, Beirut. Tripoli is the second largest city in the country and the capital of the Tripoli Governorate that consists of the city of Tripoli and five other districts. Tripoli is home to a large seaport as well as commercial and industrial districts. Historically, the city was known as an economic hub competing with the capital of Beirut, but distinguishing itself through its close commercial ties to the neighboring regions in Syria. In the last few decades, however, Tripoli has lost its regional economic standing due to the rise of communal violence, multifold conflicts and emerging Islamist/Salafist trends. In addition, the city has suffered from an overall socio-economic decline, with increasing poverty and social tension. Such trends have been emphasized greatly by research conducted on Tripoli in the last few years<sup>3</sup>.

Saida, one of the oldest Phoenician cities, was founded in the 3rd millennium BC and became prosperous in the 2nd. It is frequently mentioned in the works of the Greek poet Homer and in the Old Testament<sup>4</sup>. Located 45 kilometers south of Beirut, the country's third main city, Saida has traditionally been the gateway to the South with its

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lebanesearabicinstitute.com/areas-beirut/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://civilsociety-centre.org/sites/default/files/resources/ls-car-nov2016-tripoli\\_0.pdf](https://civilsociety-centre.org/sites/default/files/resources/ls-car-nov2016-tripoli_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sidon>

diversified economy, unique natural assets, and rich cultural heritage<sup>5</sup>. The administrative center for the province of the South, which includes the cities of Sour and Bint Jbeil, the city is subdivided into three cadastral zones; the historic core, the Dekerman and Wastani. In the last two decades the city has witnessed phenomenal growth and urbanization, over its adjacent hillside. In turn, this rapid and often uncontrolled urbanization has eroded much of the citrus and other orchards for which the city was famous<sup>6</sup>.

Nabatieh is located 74 kilometers south of the capital. It is the main city in the Jabal Amel area and the chief center for both the governorate and the kaza, both also called Nabatieh. Nabatieh is an important town both economically and culturally. A market is held every Monday where traders and visitors from neighboring villages gather in the center of the town to exchange their goods in an area known in Arabic as the Souq Al Tanen. There are also branches of several banks, hospitals, restaurants and cultural centers of interest to tourists.

The history of Nabatiyeh dates back to the Mesolithic Age. The caves surrounding it like "Ushul Ghorab" (crow's nest) and "Moghor Mehla", with ancient tombs carved in the rocks, and the pottery objects found in them, go back to the Neolithic Age. Colored beads found in Nabatiyeh date back to the Phoenicians<sup>7</sup>.

Every year on the tenth of Moharram, a commemoration of the battle of Karbala and the Martyrdom of Imam Al Hussein Bin Ali Bin Abi Talib, is celebrated in

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[https://www.cmimarseille.org/sites/default/files/newsite/library/files/en//12\\_Saida\\_Review%20of%20National%20Urbanization%20Framework\\_English.pdf](https://www.cmimarseille.org/sites/default/files/newsite/library/files/en//12_Saida_Review%20of%20National%20Urbanization%20Framework_English.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.charbelnahas.org/textes/Amenagement\\_et\\_urbanisme/Cultural\\_Heritage\\_Report/I-Sidon\\_197-237.pdf](http://www.charbelnahas.org/textes/Amenagement_et_urbanisme/Cultural_Heritage_Report/I-Sidon_197-237.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.saidon.com/cities/nabatieh.html>

Nabatiyeh lasting for a week, with nightly marches culminating with the reenactment of the battle that took place thirteen centuries ago. Thousands of Shiia Moslems and others gather in the town for the occasion<sup>7</sup>.

*Official municipal Facebook pages*

<b>Municipality</b>	<b>Facebook page</b>	<b>Facebook followers</b>	<b>Established date</b>	<b>Date logged</b>
<b>Beirut</b> (Figure 4)	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/beirutmunicipality">https://www.facebook.com/beirutmunicipality</a>	19,039	12/14/2012	5/13/2022
<b>Tripoli</b> (Figure 5)	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/MunicipalityTripoli">https://www.facebook.com/MunicipalityTripoli</a>	14,373	10/08/2014	5/13/2022
<b>Saida</b> (Figure 6)	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Saida-Municipality-1577704429226976">https://www.facebook.com/Saida-Municipality-1577704429226976</a>	1,900	5/27/2016	5/13/2022
<b>Nabatieh</b> (Figure 7)	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/nabatieh.gov.lb">https://www.facebook.com/nabatieh.gov.lb</a>	41,855	7/20/2016	5/13/2022

It is important to note that the municipality of Tripoli has another Facebook page that was created on October 6, 2010, and not handed over to the new municipal council that was elected in 2016. This page is still online with a disclaimer placed on it that the page only covers the activities of the municipality during the time of the previous Mayor, between the years 2010 and 2015 (Figure 5b).

It is worth noting that the Facebook page of the municipality of Beirut has a very low number of followers in comparison to the other cities, knowing that Beirut is by far the most populated. This may be attributed to the decreased frequency of posting and possibly to the content of the messages themselves that may not be perceived as substantive.

Figure 4. The Official Facebook Page of the City of Beirut



Figure 5. The Official Facebook Page of the City of Tripoli



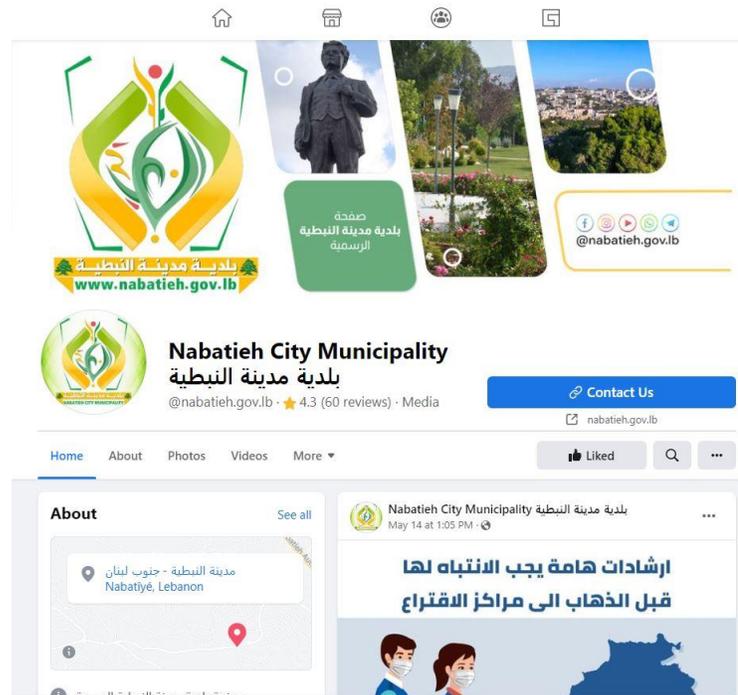
Figure 5b. The Facebook Page of the City of Tripoli between 2010 and 2015



Figure 6. The Official Facebook Page of the City of Saida



Figure 7. The Official Facebook Page of the City of Nabatieh



### 4.3 Conceptualization

The three main concepts of trust, engagement, and crisis are probed within the framework of this research which also shows how these notions interconnect to form an understanding of the relationship between communication at the level of local governments and citizens, be it under normal circumstances or in a crisis context.

The concept of transparency is identified by participants of this study as one of the main prerequisites of trust. Transparency is becoming an unofficial mandate by the public and is often a legal mandate, (Ball, 2009). In Lebanon, with the passing of the Right to Access to Information Law, local authorities are required to disclose any information requested, yet doing so publicly on social media platforms without any requests put in, is still a practice that is not applied as far as the researcher is aware. Within the context of

this research, it is a pillar of measurement of municipal communication practices that would impact the relationship of constituents with their local governments, and as such, it is important to establish a clear definition of what constitutes transparent practices.

### *Trust*

Citizens' trust in government has been studied from various aspects and through numerous definitions of trust (Miller, 1974; Miller & Listhaug, 1990; Feldheim & Wang, 2003). "Public trust is the public confidence in the integrity of public officials to be fair and to uphold the public interest, as well as confidence in the competence of government to carry out its assigned duties" (Wang & Van Wart, 2007, P.266). According to Kim (2005, P.621) "public trust derived from the citizens' willingness to be vulnerable based on a belief that government and public employees will meet the expectations of credible commitment, benevolence, honesty, competency, and fairness without regular monitoring."

For the purpose of this study, the concept of trust in the Lebanese context is measured through semi-structured interviews, where the study seeks to determine the level of the public interest in participation and engagement with local authorities to identify priority needs and develop projects. The concept of trust in relation to citizen control is also depicted from the people's need to regularly monitor the activities of their local authorities especially since the prevalent public perception is that municipalities suffer from a certain degree of incompetence and corruption. Through the interviews, this study also sets out to identify communication practices that positively influence the level of trust, and whether publishing consultative two-way communication messages is one of those practices.

During crises, trust is measured through the interview questions that probe the people's confidence in the competence of their local government to carry out its assigned duties, and the extent to which there is a need for municipalities to reach out to constituents for consultation from a control-trust relationship perspective. Through the Facebook posts' descriptive analysis, the changes in the level of community engagement after the uprising are also considered an indicator of the level of public trust in local authorities.

### *Transparency*

Ball (2009) defines transparency within three metaphors: transparency as a public value embraced by society to counter corruption; subtly intertwined with accountability, transparency is synonymous with open decision-making by governments and nonprofits, and transparency as a complex tool of good governance in programs, policies, organizations, and nations, alongside accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness.

The analysis concludes that these meanings affect the way organization members conduct and will conduct their day-to-day activities and how policies are and will be created.

Transparent communication practices are measured in this study through the content and frequency of messages that previously were considered as classified or private to the institution, and that when published would reduce the risk of corruption and enable holding the publisher accountable for the outcomes of the content disclosed. Financial statements, projects' progress reports, and calls to tender are some of the themes that fall within this category of transparency posts.

### *Crises*

Crises are usually characterized by the complex and chaotic nature that impacts societies, creating instability and uncertainty for citizens. Alexander (2005b) argues that the significance of a crisis is its unexpectedness and uncontrollability which disrupts and/or impedes normal operations. Each crisis is unique and has its own characteristics Shaluf *et al.*, (2003), and for the sake of this study, the crisis is identified as the uprising of October 17, 2019 in Lebanon and the disruption of business as usual that followed for people and public institutions alike. The growing trust gap between citizens and the state constitutes a protracted crisis, over and above the crisis that erupted in the October 2019 uprising.

Crises often have past origins, and diagnosing their original source can help to understand and manage a particular crisis or lead to an alternative state or condition (Farazmand, 2001). This definition is also relevant to understanding how the uprising erupted in 2019, and how the socio-economic deterioration in the country caused by a dysfunctional government led to the creation of a trust gap between citizens and the state in Lebanon.

It is important to note that there is a distinction between crises, disasters, and emergencies, and in this thesis, we are dealing exclusively with the concept of crises and the definitions identified in this section. The crisis that is used as a reference turning point in this research is the October 17, 2019 uprising, and the trust crisis that was manifested by the people from that point onwards. Other references are also made during this research to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut blast of August 4, 2020, as crises that left their marks on the relationship between citizens and their municipalities. Given that

the interviews were conducted in 2022, those crises were still relatively recent and significantly present in people's minds at the time of the interviews.

### *Engagement*

The concept of engagement with local authorities is identified for the purpose of this study as the citizen's provision of input on matters related to local governance through consultative processes, interactive spaces for dialogue, and the digital interaction of the people with content published on social media platforms. These are measured through the descriptive analysis of the Facebook posts before and after the uprising to identify the impact of the crisis on citizens' engagement trends, and how responsive the municipality is to the community comments on the page.

Engagement with local authorities is also identified as citizens' participation in activities of public interest in response to a call made by municipalities.

## ***4.4 Data Collection***

The descriptive analysis of the four official municipal Facebook pages covered 610 posts spanning over a period of 30 weeks before and after the uprising of October 17, 2019. All pages publish in Arabic and the majority of comments are in Arabic as well using Latin letters; common among Arabic-speaking internet users.

### *Facebook pages data*

The posts on the official Facebook pages of the four municipalities were logged and classified under two distinctive time frames; pre and post-uprising of October 17, 2019. The first set of data extracted from each post included the post text or the description of the visual that replaced the text in certain cases, as well as the type of content disseminated under the pillars of engagement and transparency.

Under the engagement pillar, the posts were classified as being either one-way or two-way communication messages, by investigating whether their content include any form of invitation for the community to provide feedback on matters of public interest or an invitation to a physical event for consultation (e.g., one way: public announcements, awareness material, local news, news of municipal activities and works... etc. Two-way messages: polls, invitations to town hall meetings, calls to elections, or other types of engagement messages). The two-way posts if found were then logged by engagement type.

The transparency pillar includes the classification of the content under a category that reflects the transparency of the municipality, and it includes calls to tender, financial disclosure, or internal reports that are not usually shared publicly.

The second set of data extracted is related to public engagement with the posts and it includes the number of likes, negative reactions (thumbs down emoji and laughing emoji – when the content is not meant to trigger that sort of emotion), shares, and comments. The number of official municipal replies to comments is also logged and is categorized with the first data set that falls within the category of municipal actions, while the second set refers to the public's reaction to the posts; the public engagement (Figure 8).

Figure 8. The Facebook Data Extracted

Municipality	Date	Pre/Post Crisis	Content -Text	One/Tw o-way	Engagement Type	Transparency	# Likes	# Negative Reactions	# Shares	# Comments	# Comment replies (municipal)
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*Interviews data*

The semi-structured interviews were conducted online for the convenience and confidentiality of the participants whose identities will remain anonymous in this study. The interviews were conducted between Friday, May 6, 2022, and Sunday, May 8, 2022, with 13 residents in the target cities. A set of interview questions focused on depicting the interviewee's current level of satisfaction with the municipal services as well as the level of trust in local authorities. Another set of questions focused on understanding the level of public interest in engagement with matters of local governance during crises and under normal circumstances., interview questions also addressed the matter of consultation through two-way municipal communication messages and the relationship between public participation and trust in local authorities classified under the ladder of citizen participation.

The level of citizens' interest in engagement with matters of local governance is extrapolated first through the interviewees' interest in finding out information about the municipalities, and whether they actively seek that information. The need to monitor the work of municipalities, regardless of reason, is another indicator to consider, as well as the expressed interest in participating in municipal activities and providing opinion on matters of public interest if given the chance by municipalities. Trust in municipalities emerged as one of the main factors that influence the level of interest in engagement with local authorities.

While depicting citizens' interest in engagement with local authorities in general through interview questions, their interest during crises is also validated through the changes in engagement figures analyses through the descriptive analysis. For example, a

higher engagement with municipal posts after the uprising would imply a higher degree of interest by the community to engage during crises. Views expressed during the interviews on the relationship between two-way municipal communication and citizens' trust in local authorities may be validated through the descriptive analysis of such types of communication messages and the changes in community engagement trends on such messages.

## **5. Findings and Analysis**

### *Municipal Communication and Crises*

Crises are characterized by their ability to disrupt and/or impede normal operations' It was, therefore, important to look into the impact of crises on the flow of communications at the municipal level, especially since the crisis being studied here was that of public trust in institutions where municipal communication messages have the potential to widen or bridge that trust gap. The findings of this study will be analyzed and discussed by research question.

### *Lebanon's Uprising and Municipal Communication*

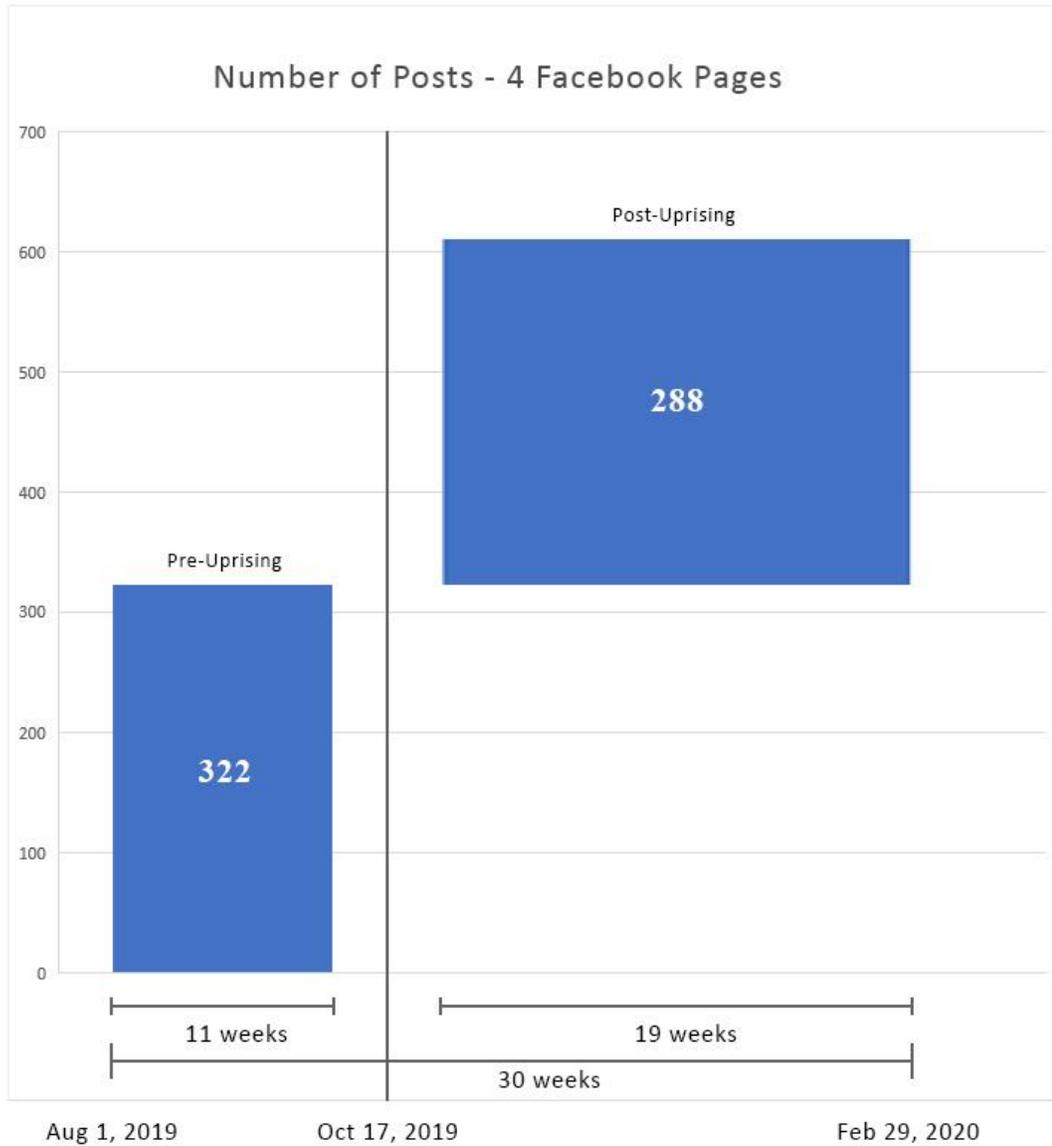
RQ1: How did the uprising of October 17, 2019 in Lebanon impact municipal communication messages on Facebook?

The largest municipality in Lebanon is the least active on Facebook among the four major cities mapped for the purpose of this research, and it relatively has the least number of followers in comparison to its population count. The municipality of Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, published only 32 posts during the 30 weeks mapped, constituting an average of 1.07 posts per week, in comparison to an average of 2.83 posts per week on the Saida page, 7.9 per week on the Nabatieh page, and an 8.53 average per week on the

Tripoli official municipal page. At around 42,000, the Nabatieh page has by far the largest following among the four pages; this is noteworthy especially with it having the smallest population count among the four cities.

The data collected through the descriptive analysis of the 610 Facebook posts published between August 1, 2019 and February 29, 2020 revealed an average of 48% decrease in the frequency of posting on the official municipal Facebook pages after the uprising of October 17, 2019 (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Number of Facebook Posts Published During the Timeframe Under Study



The only page that saw an increase in posting after the uprising was the Beirut Facebook page. Even with a 42% increase in posting in Beirut, the general decreasing trend was not affected given the relatively low number of posts published on the Beirut page which constitute only 5% of the volume of posting done on all four pages during the 30 weeks mapped (Figures 10, 11).

Figure 10. Average Number of Posts Published Per Week Per Municipality

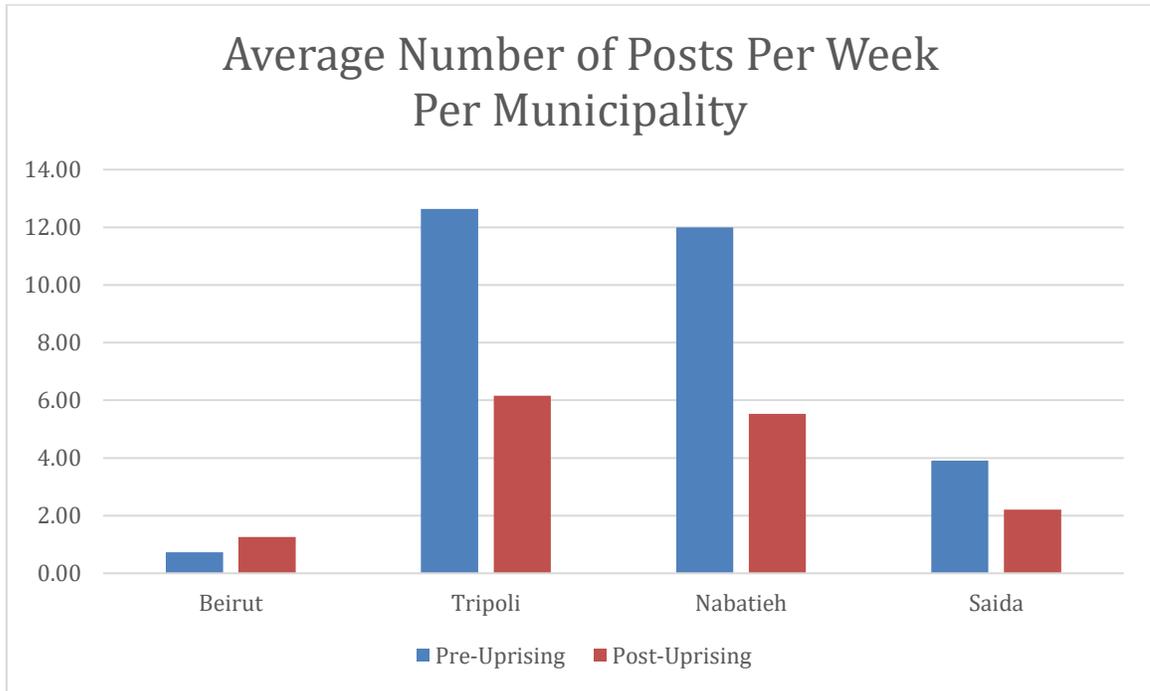
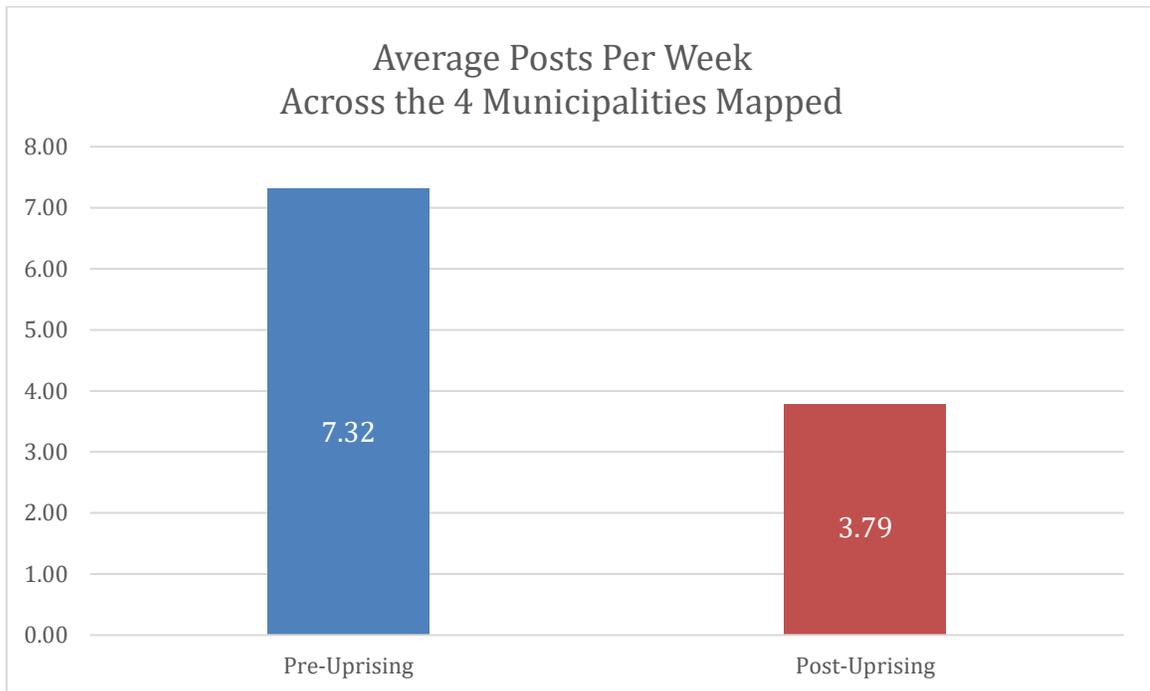


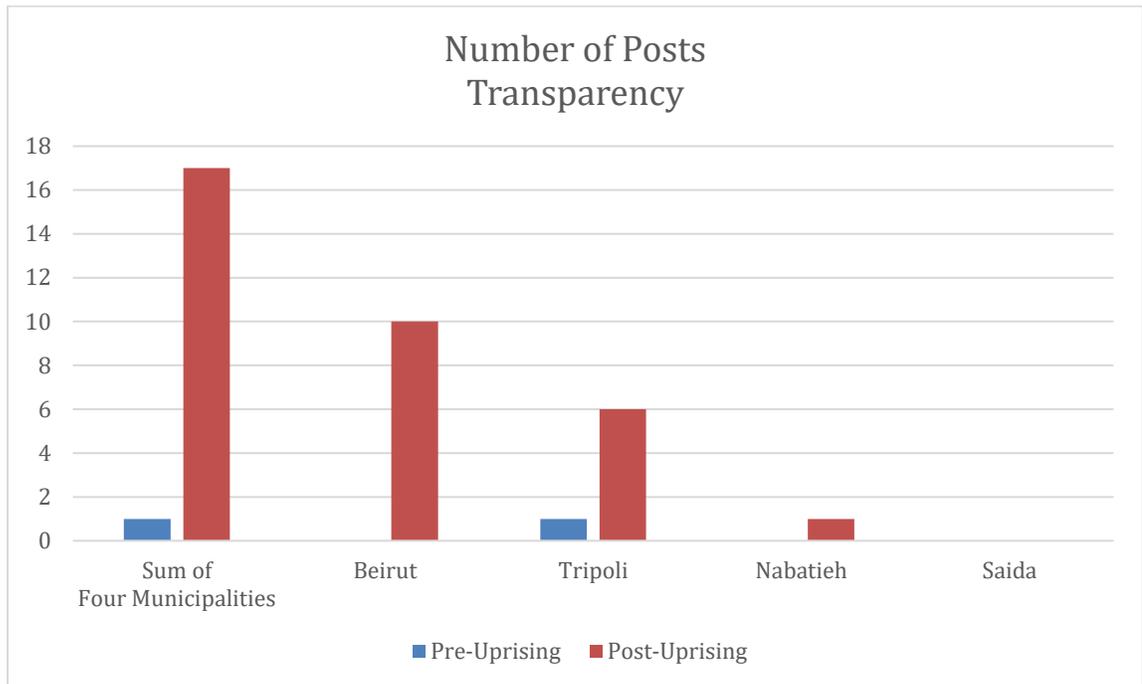
Figure 11. Average Number of Posts Published Per Week Across the 4 Municipalities



All the logged posts were one-way messages that did not include any call to action or request for input from the public. No two-way messages were published neither pre nor post the uprising, whereas there was a 90% average increase in posts that are associated with transparency post the uprising date. Of the 610 posts logged, only 18 were linked to transparency, 17 of which were posted after October 17, 2019. Around 55% of the total number of transparency posts (Figure 12) were published on the Beirut page alone after the uprising. Fifteen of the 18 posts under the transparency category were calls to tender, while the remaining three were reports on municipal decisions in Beirut and one on the legal proceedings related to an issue with the parking meter agreement in the city associated with bad contract management.

This would indicate an attempt by the municipalities of Beirut and Tripoli, who published 17 of the 18 transparency-related posts, to inspire trust for the public after the uprising through these posts that were uncommon before the crisis.

Figure 12. The Total Number of Transparency-Related Posts Per Municipality



No municipal replies to the public's comments were made pre-crisis although 53% of the total posts were made during the 11 weeks before October 17, 2019 out of 30 weeks being studied. Three of the four municipalities interacted with the public through 13 comment replies to the total of 5547 comments made on all four pages during the period under study.

Replying to community comments is considered a form of two-way interaction by the municipality, yet it was limited to providing clarifications, or additional information on questions posted by the public. With no public input on any topic published, such two-way engagement remains on the passive side of the public participation continuum. It is also worth noting that several of the comment replies were made by municipality staff members instead of replying through the official page account. With only nine total public comments made on the Saida page posts, no replies were published by the page, and it is important to note that Saida posts were all published as links to articles placed on

the municipality website, which meant that users should click the links and exit Facebook to read the full content. This may have affected the volume of engagement which is the lowest among the four pages (Figures 13, 14). Such a practice negates the purpose of posting on social media where reach and public engagement are considered primary objectives, and this may imply that no savvy communication specialists were handling the Saida municipal Facebook page.

Figure 13. Saida Facebook page municipal post sample 1 (external links)



Figure 14. Saida Facebook page municipal post sample 2 (external links)



This study analyzes municipal communication practices on Facebook from the receiver's end, the community perspective. The changes in posting trends after the crisis may not be significant in themselves for the public's perception, but rather in what added value these changes bring for communities within the context of the crisis, and ultimately how all this affects citizens' relationship with their municipalities.

It was evident that there was no reactive response in the direction of engaging communities in a discussion to attempt and re-establish trust, yet we are in no position to assess the gravity of the situation at the time of the uprising, and perhaps the surge of negativity toward the state was too extreme to allow for such consultative approaches to take place effectively.

The theory of citizen participation highlights the benefits of citizen participation as a general rule of cause and effect (Cogan & Sharpe, 1986) on the different steps of

Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation. The theory however did not factor in specific contexts that may alter the outcome of citizen participation programs, as in the crisis context of the October 17, 2019 uprising.

At a time when the municipalities themselves were under attack by the public, a natural response would be to reduce the frequency of publishing and become highly selective of every message being posted, hence the 48% decrease in the frequency could be justified.

Posts that had some of the highest engagement rates after the uprising, also had the most negative reaction and comments, indicating that any attempt to address salient issues at the height of public distrust is not recommended, presenting another challenge for identifying appropriate timely content.

An example of such a case is when the municipality of Tripoli attempted to justify the delays in asphaltting the roads and the presence of potholes by indicating that the contractor's tardiness was due to the roads being blocked by protestors among other factors, (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Negative reactions to the Tripoli municipality post about asphaltting at the height of the public uprising



Figure 16. Nabatieh Municipality post declaring the price of generator electricity price updates

 **بلدية مدينة النبطية Nabatieh City Municipality** November 6, 2019

تسعيرة مولدات الكهرباء في مدينة النبطية مقارنة مع باقي المناطق المجاورة. شهر ايلول وشهر تشرين اول ٢٠١٩.

 مقارنة بين تسعيرة المولدات في شهر ايلول وشهر تشرين اول ٢٠١٩

الشهر	معدل ساعات القطع	تسعيرة المقطوعة ل.ل	تسعيرة (دولة) ل.ل	تسعيرة العداد (بلدية) ل.ل	معدل صرف الدولار		
أيلول	٤١٢	٩٥٠٠٠	٣٨٥	٤٢٠	١٥٩٠		
تشرين اول	٣٨٠	٩٠٠٠٠	٣٩٧	٤٣٠	١٦٠٠ (سعر المازوت والريث ولفطع العيار)		
		نسبة القطع بداية الشهر اصنعاف نهاية الشهر		نسبة الزيادة ٦%			
		تسعيرة المناطق المجاورة تول ١٠٠٠٠٠٠ ل.ل النبطية الفوقا ١٠٠٠٠٠٠ ل.ل ككرومان ١٠٠٠٠٠٠ ل.ل مدينة صور ١٥٠٠٠٠٠ ل.ل		يحق للبلدية رفع القيمة المحددة من قبل الدولة حتى نسبة ١٠%		تسعى البلدية لرفع القيمة المحددة من قبل الدولة حتى نسبة ١٠%	
		بالى المناطق المجاورة من ٤٣٧ لفة ٤٥٠ لفة سعر مدينة صور ٥٥٠ لفة سعر الكيلوات					

بناء على التساؤلات الواردة الى بلدية مدينة النبطية حول تسعيرة الاشرالك لشهر تشرين الثاني وحرصاً منا على الشفافية في التعاملات بين البلدية واهل المدينة نضع بين ايديكم مقارنة توضح بشكل دقيق الاختلاف في ساعات القطع وسعر صرف الليرة مقابل الدولار حيث ان كل التعاملات من محروقات وزيوت وقطع غيار يتم التداول بها بالعملة الأجنبية . وهي تشكل العيب المباشر الأكبر على التسعيرة . وبالمقارنة مع تسعيرة باقي القرى والمدن المجاورة يظهر جلياً الفرق بين ما اعتمدهه بلدية النبطية من تسعيرة هي الأدنى خدمة لاهلنا الكرام.

117 69 Comments 10 Shares

The predicament of how to regain public trust through communication messages in this context may not be easily solved through citizen participation as the theory suggests. A deeper analysis of different communication trends and a content analysis over time may help form a better understanding of the most effective approaches.

Based on the findings of this research, the municipality of Nabatieh seemed to have the most comprehensive strategic communication plans in place before the crisis and that may have played a role in restoring some level of normality and calm faster than the other municipalities. The municipality of Nabatieh had a variety of post themes scheduled

before the uprising that ranged from health and nutrition-related topics, religious posts, municipal works, sports, social activities, invitations to children's activities, news of community achievers, and job opportunities to name some. After only two weeks into the crisis, while the public was reacting with high negativity to Facebook posts, and at the height of the uprising, the municipality resorted to a normal trend of posting on a variety of themes that reflected a “business as usual” attitude, adapted from its original communication strategy, (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Themes of the Nabatieh municipal communication posts two weeks after the uprising

Date	Post theme	# Likes	# Negative Reactions	# Shares	# Comments	# Comment replies (municipal)
November 1, 2019	Highlighting a community achiever	151	0	1	21	0
November 4, 2019	Highlighting a community achiever	115	0	15	0	0
November 5, 2019	Municipality committee visiting office of ministry of economy - to help control prices	74	0	4	31	0
November 6, 2019	Diet advice	39	0	1	0	0
November 6, 2019	Prices of electricity generators subscription	97	20	10	69	2
November 13, 2019	Religious poster - Prophet's birthday event	79	0	4	22	0
November 15, 2019	Religious poster - Prophet's birthday event	74	0	7	1	0
November 15, 2019	Maintenance works	145	9	5	45	0
November 16, 2019	Disclaimer on fake municipal pages	91	0	2	10	3
November 17, 2019	News on weather and municipal works	47	0	0	4	0
November 17, 2019	Religious poster - Prophet's birthday event	53	0	0	0	0
November 19, 2019	Health seminar	43	0	0	4	0
November 20, 2019	Diet advice	39	0	0	0	0

November 20, 2019	Maintenance works	46	0	0	3	0
November 21, 2019	Health seminar	101	0	3	6	0
November 22, 2019	Independence Day activity	88	0	0	2	0
November 22, 2019	Sports personality visits municipality	114	0	2	6	0

While some may consider this strategy as passive in the sense that it wasn't directly addressing the crisis at hand, yet, the data reveals a level of community engagement that resembles that of pre-crisis engagement, mostly in the number of likes.

To better understand the findings of the descriptive analysis in relation to the municipality's reaction to the uprising, it is imperative to also determine through future studies whether municipal communication strategies existed at the level of each municipality and whether qualified professionals drafted and implemented those strategies and consequently the messages disseminated at each stage.

#### *Public Participation*

Public participation is always optional for citizens as stated in the theory of public participation, and understanding the level of interest in engagement with local authorities in Lebanon is imperative as a first step to developing adequate recommendations on the part of municipalities.

RQ2.1: To what extent are citizens in Lebanon interested in engagement with matters of local governance?

The majority of the interviewees have expressed interest in finding out information from their municipalities and about them, and only one interviewee from Nabatieh was moderately interested due to other preoccupations while another from Tripoli was not

interested at all due to his complete dissatisfaction with the performance of the municipality; "I have no trust in the municipality whatsoever" he expressed.

A correlation formed between the level of trust and satisfaction with the performance of the municipality and the interest in following its news and the type of information that the interviewees were interested in finding out more about. In Tripoli, Beirut, and Saida where the level of satisfaction was at its lowest and the lack of trust was explicitly expressed; interviewees were either not interested in any information, or interested in a variety of topics related to transparency, available resources, the duties of the municipality; poverty mapping in the city, goals, works, and projects being implemented among others. "We want to know everything, whatever they are responsible for doing" expressed one participant from Beirut, while another from Tripoli flagged the need for transparency through financial disclosures and a clear municipal strategy, "we need information that facilitates citizens' daily affairs and information about projects and their goals".

A pattern also formed among participants within the same areas, possibly due to shared area-specific problems in addition to the level of trust and satisfaction with the performance of the municipality. In Saida for example, the main theme that emerged was related to services and the garbage crisis in the city. In Beirut, no specific information was identified as a need to know, instead, all three interviewees from Beirut wanted to know everything about the municipality and they were interested to know what services the municipality offers.

While the participants from Beirut did not specify the channel through which they would prefer to receive this information, one of them expressed that whenever in the past

the Beirut municipality implemented any activity, small or big, they would communicate about it across every available channel with such high visibility that no one would miss it. This to him meant that the municipality is currently implementing no activities to speak of.

On the topic of interest in information from and about the municipalities, the majority confirmed their interest, yet out of the 13 interviewees, only one participant from Tripoli actively seeks out this information due to the nature of his work at an NGO, and one other occasionally does so for work-related matters as well.

The type of information they expressed interest in was related to ongoing municipal activities and services, vulnerability data, available resources, garbage collection, electricity, available resources, the profiles and qualifications of the members of the municipal council, financial statements, municipal fees, information about projects, as well as plans or strategies if they existed. An interviewee from Beirut summarized that he would want to know all the information that affects his life, "all aspects of our lives are linked to the municipality" he commented.

The personal decision to monitor municipal work is another indicator that implies an interest in engagement with matters of local governance, especially since it requires volunteering time and effort. The relationship between the level of trust in local authorities and the need to monitor their work manifested in two opposing outcomes, where the lack of trust could either lead to participants wanting to closely monitor their municipality's activities, or lose interest in monitoring altogether. For instance, two interviewees from Tripoli who have had negative experiences while engaging with their municipality and have seen malpractices firsthand preferred not to monitor since,

according to their perception, the municipality is already dysfunctional; “there is no need because I know them personally, and I know how corrupt it is in there” expressed one of the two participants. “No need to monitor them, mayor and members, because they don’t want to work” stated another interviewee from Saida.

On the other side of the spectrum, participants highlighted the need to monitor the work of municipalities due to the lack of trust, and this perspective is common among the three least trusted municipalities among the four being studied, Beirut, Tripoli, and Saida; “of course, we need to monitor, and this should be done by a third-party because of the lack of trust” expressed a participant from Tripoli. Only in Nabatieh where the level of satisfaction with the municipality’s performance is relatively high, two of the three participants were interested in monitoring the municipal work simply out of interest and not out of the presence of trust issues, while the third had no interest in monitoring since he felt there is no need to do so, and the subject matter does not appeal to him.

The interest in engagement with municipal activities varied among interviewees between a majority who were interested and a minority who were either categorically against it or simply had limited time to partake in it. one participant from Saida expressed her frustration after trying to engage in a municipal activity and was faced with rejection by the local authorities. According to her perception, this rejection came as a result of the fact that she is not a registered voter in the city, which led to the municipality losing interest in her.

Those who felt strongly against engagement were the same participants who had complete distrust in their local authority and had firsthand negative experience with it. “The municipal council is so divided that nothing gets done”, expressed an interviewee

from Tripoli. "During one council meeting, they actually shot at each other!" he exclaimed, "so why should I risk my life to engage with them on any activity?! I have a family to look after". Another interviewee stated that he had spent months working on a COVID-19 aid distribution plan that the municipality had asked him to draft and implement, and yet after all the hard work, "the mayor woke up one day and canceled the whole thing" he expressed. "I don't know by what criteria the aid was distributed after that, but surely it was not through a fair assessment of vulnerability in the area."

Although the overall sentiment towards three out of four municipalities leaned towards distrust, yet, nine interviewees were interested in engagement, and two of them from Beirut would participate only if the topic of the activity was of interest to them and if they felt that their contribution would be beneficial.

The willingness to collaborate with local authorities on matters of public benefit although there was a decline in the level of trust indicates that the relationship between most of the participants and municipalities could potentially be turned around should the latter create and advertise engagement opportunities and safeguard their implementation to try and guarantee positive experiences and tangible results.

This diverges to a certain extent from Cogan & Sharpe's (1986) description of the intrinsic rewards to citizens that derive from the very act of participation, while it meets with the instrumental rewards resulting from the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of public policy. Cogan & Sharpe (1986) described each form of public involvement and specified that the Public Input techniques, where ideas and opinions are solicited from citizens, are most effective when feedback mechanisms inform participants of the extent to which their input has influenced ultimate decisions. Yet there was no mention of the

risks of negative reactions surfacing if the public input was not ultimately taken into account or if the feedback on the results was not communicated with transparency.

Participation in municipal activities, similar to monitoring municipal work, requires that the citizens put in personal effort over a period of time, and given the declining socio-economic situation in Lebanon at the time when this research was conducted, volunteering may be challenging for most of the population. On the other hand, community consultation as a form of engagement, through polls or town hall meetings, for example, does not require sacrificing much of one's time and effort, and perhaps this explains why 11 out of 13 interviewees have shown interest in giving their opinion on matters of local governance and public interest if given the opportunity through official municipal consultation initiatives. "Yes, I would give my opinion especially if we can benefit and be aware of what's going on" was the viewpoint of an interviewee from Beirut who had little knowledge of what the municipal responsibilities were. She had had a previous encounter in Saida in the context of her business where the municipality called for a meeting with key stakeholders in the city to discuss the issue of fuel shortage and develop a plan in a consultative manner to ensure business continuity through the fair distribution of diesel for generators. The result of the consultation was fruitful as she indicated; "this left a positive impression on all the participants" she concluded.

It is important to note that all participants who are interested in sharing their opinion had never had the opportunity to do so, while two of the three who had reported receiving personal invitations to provide input to their municipalities during the COVID-19 pandemic, given their in-depth knowledge of the local scene, and their expertise in project management and matters of local governance, reported negative experiences and

results, and accordingly lost interest in engaging with the local government on all levels, even on providing feedback through consultation in the future. Both participants are from Tripoli, and it is not possible to generalize this risk across all interviewees and areas, but the findings indicate that based on negative experiences, participants tend to lose interest in future engagement possibilities.

### *Crises and Public Participation*

Public participation and consultation require time and effort on the part of the planner, but once applied they should increase the efficiency of the planning process through multiple factors such as the generation of a spirit of cooperation and trust with the community (Cogan & Sharpe, 1986). Yet during crises, sentiments may differ, as such consultations could delay or hinder the crisis-response efforts. Whether citizens also value the consultative process during crises is a matter to be accurately assessed.

RQ2.2: How is the level of citizens' interest in engagement with matters of local governance affected by crises?

Most subjects have expressed that during crises, they had increased interest in receiving information from their local authorities. During the interviews, they had an impulsive tendency to describe the action or in most cases the lack of action taken by their municipalities during crises. In a crisis context, some described their municipalities as being impotent, mostly in Tripoli, while others mentioned a complete absence of their municipality on the ground, as in Beirut after the port explosion of August 4, 2020.

“Following the August 4 explosion, we all felt the absence of any official entity around us” said one interviewee from Beirut, while another said “After the blast we did not see

anyone from the municipality, not even for moral support, although we know it is a rich municipality with sufficient resources to take some sort of action”.

In the wake of the Beirut blast, the people of Lebanon have proven their high level of interest and willingness to volunteer to help mitigate the impact of the crises when they occur (NBCNEWS, 2020). Active community participation that took place under the umbrella of municipalities during the early days of COVID-19 has left a positive impression on our interviewees who were involved in Saida and Nabatieh, especially since the outcome was perceived by the participants as efficient and successful at the time. The efforts of the municipalities to contain the tension caused by a fuel shortage crisis varied between one municipality and another. In Nabatieh, the municipality called for volunteers to help organize a fuel distribution plan that was not sustainable, and eventually, it was canceled, leaving participants disappointed from the experience. In Beirut however, the community mobilized alone following the blast of August 4, 2020, and not under the umbrella of the municipality. The general impression of the participants was that there was a complete absence of the municipality on the ground in the response and recovery efforts following the blast. Whether or not local authorities were active during that crisis could not be confirmed due to the lack of communication messages shared by the municipality at the time.

Community consultation during crises was seen as a priority by seven out of 13 interviewees from all areas, while two others from Beirut and Tripoli considered that consultation and preparedness should occur before any crisis. Five participants from Beirut, Saida, and Tripoli considered that during crises, the municipality should be ready

with plans and qualified emergency crews to handle any type of emergency, and when one occurs, to intervene and handle the situation without reverting to the public.

The presence of crises decreased the interest in engagement with matters of local governance based on the pretext that during emergencies, such an engagement might delay the relief efforts that need to be taken by local authorities, according to some interviewees who had previously pointed out the importance of community participation under normal circumstances. An example of such a case would be the Beirut blast of August 4, 2020, whereby the municipality ought to mobilize all its resources immediately to provide critical aid for the people without any form of consultation that would cause delays; putting people's lives at risk.

It is important to note the differentiating factors related to the nature and duration of the crises, and whether community mobilization would be needed to ensure an efficient and timely response. During protracted crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the humanitarian crisis following the influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon, the urgency factor no longer had implications and consultations no longer hindered relief efforts, hence viewpoints may eventually vary depending on the characteristics of each crisis.

The crisis that is the subject of this research is the growing trust gap between citizens and the state that underwent a turning point and manifested at a large scale in the uprising of October 17, 2019. As previously mentioned, and based on UNDP's tension monitoring report, communities in Lebanon still have a certain degree of trust in local authorities who are at the frontline, dealing with their constituents' needs and providing useful information through different channels of communication including Facebook.

To understand the impact of the crisis on the level of citizens' interest in engagement with matters of local governance, this study also analyzed the public engagement rate on all the Facebook posts published within the time of interest, pre and post the Uprising. While the analysis had revealed a significant decrease in the average number of posts being published on Facebook after the uprising, the overall level of engagement increased. This may not be a positive indicator, since the engagement type varies between likes, negative reactions, shares, and comments that are mostly negative in nature as indicated below. Although the content of the posts was not part of the analysis design, the negativity was observed in the comments while the researcher was scanning for official municipal replies to community comments. This finding was a bi-product of the originally planned descriptive analysis, and it is recommended to incorporate the level of agreement or negativity of comments in future studies similar to this one.

The average number of likes per post decreased by 9% after the uprising. The average number of likes in Beirut decreased by 72% and in Nabatieh by 8%. Tripoli saw an increase of 13%, while Saida saw a 4% increase.

LIKES	Likes			Average likes per post				
	Total	Pre	Post	Total	Pre	Post	% change	
<b>Four municipalities</b>	36919	20315	16604	60.52	63.09	57.65	9%	Decrease
<b>Beirut</b>	2939	1597	1342	91.84	199.63	55.92	72%	Decrease
<b>Tripoli</b>	12844	6519	6325	50.17	46.90	54.06	13%	Increase
<b>Nabatieh</b>	20973	12118	8855	88.49	91.80	84.33	8%	Decrease
<b>Saida</b>	163	81	82	1.92	1.88	1.95	4%	Increase

The average negative reactions or “emojis” among the four pages increased by an average of 92% after the uprising. In Tripoli, however, negative reactions decreased by

18%, but with such a significant increase in all other areas, this slight increase did not affect the overall average. It is important to note that Tripoli holds the first rank in posts at 42% of the total number of posts mapped between August 1, 2019, and February 29, 2020.

Negative reactions	Negative reactions			Average negative reactions per post				
	Total	Pre	Post	Total	Pre	Post	% change	
<b>Four municipalities</b>	1223	104	1119	2.00	0.32	3.89	92%	Increase
<b>Beirut</b>	41	0	41	1.28	0.00	1.71	100%	Increase
<b>Tripoli</b>	93	55	38	0.36	0.40	0.32	18%	Decrease
<b>Nabatieh</b>	1088	49	1039	4.59	0.37	9.90	96%	Increase
<b>Saida</b>	1	0	1	0.01	0.00	0.02	100%	Increase

The number of shares decreased by 83% in Beirut and 20% in Saida, while they increased by 43% in Tripoli and 29% in Nabatieh. The average number of shares among the four municipalities remained somewhat constant with a slight increase of 3%. Shares may be interpreted as either positive or negative reactions, there are no clear indicators to identify the nature of this shift.

Shares	Shares			Average shares per post				
	Total	Pre	Post	Total	Pre	Post	% change	
<b>Four municipalities</b>	2428	1265	1163	3.98	3.93	4.04	3%	Increase
<b>Beirut</b>	724	484	240	22.63	60.50	10.00	83%	Decrease
<b>Tripoli</b>	397	161	236	1.55	1.16	2.02	43%	Increase
<b>Nabatieh</b>	1282	606	676	5.41	4.59	6.44	29%	Increase
<b>Saida</b>	25	14	11	0.29	0.33	0.26	20%	Decrease

Comments increased by 33% across the four municipalities, while they decreased by 70% in Beirut and 71% in Saida. On the most active pages, in Nabatieh and Tripoli, the average comments per post increased by 48% and 17% respectively. The significant

decrease in comments on the Beirut page can be attributed to the type of messages published whereby around 60% of the posts after the uprising were calls to tender.

Both the number of shares and comments decreased in Saida and Beirut while they increased in Nabatieh and Tripoli. This may be attributed to the fact that the pages of Beirut and Saida were almost inactive in comparison to those of Tripoli and Nabatieh, and the majority of their content revolved around the mayor's activities. During the time of the uprising, communities were protesting and publicly expressing their discontent, and this may have reflected as well on their engagement online through comments and shares on the posts of active pages, and on topics that were relevant to the source of their plight.

Comments	Comments			Average comments per post				
	Total	Pre	Post	Total	Pre	Post	% change	
<b>Four municipalities</b>	5547	2381	3166	9.09	7.39	10.99	33%	Increase
<b>Beirut</b>	578	302	276	18.06	37.75	11.50	70%	Decrease
<b>Tripoli</b>	1115	555	560	4.36	3.99	4.79	17%	Increase
<b>Nabatieh</b>	3845	1517	2328	16.22	11.49	22.17	48%	Increase
<b>Saida</b>	9	7	2	0.11	0.16	0.05	71%	Decrease

Through a preliminary scanning of the content of the comments shared, a trend seemed to form especially around the time of the uprising. Certain posts that seemed provocative within the context of the public demonstrations triggered a relatively high engagement rate with some of the highest number of comments. These comments that stood out were generally negative in nature as observed through the descriptive analysis process, marking the top three posts with the highest number of comments, all on the Nabatieh page. An example of such posts was the video of the Mayor of Nabatieh visiting shop owners after the forced reopening of the city center and the use of force against demonstrators (figures 18, 19, 20, 21).



Figure 18. Nabatieh Facebook page municipal post 1



Figure 19. Nabatieh Facebook page municipal post reactions 1



Figure 20. Nabatieh Facebook page municipal post reactions 2



Figure 21. Nabatieh Facebook page municipal post reactions 3



All four municipalities had not replied to any comment made on the posts before the uprising. After the uprising, a shy number of replies were published. While the total number of community comments reached 5547 after October 17, 2019, the replies were

limited to 13, constituting 0.23% of the total comments posted by the community. There were no comment replies from the Saida municipality, which is expected given the low number of community comments on the Saida page posts that were only limited to two comments after the uprising.

Through the analysis of municipal communications, the findings have confirmed the existence of a relationship between crises and the level of citizens' interest in engagement with matters of local governance. While the nature of this relationship is still to be determined through a recommended in-depth content analysis of the Facebook posts, interview results have revealed an increase in interest from interviewees in finding out more information from municipalities during crises, while more than half of the participants considered that community consultation during crises is highly recommended. With the exception of the interviewees from Beirut, participants from all the areas have expressed an increased interest, with two participants from Nabatieh attributing this interest to how active the municipality was during crises.

### *Consultation and Trust*

This research explores the relationship dynamics between municipal calls for public engagement and the level of citizen trust in local authorities through the lens of the three stages of the ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969).

RQ3: To what extent are municipalities in Lebanon that share consultative two-way messages with their communities more likely to earn public trust than municipalities that share close-ended one-way messages?

Two-way messages include any posts that request feedback or input from the public on matters of public interest, in the form of polls or invitations to town hall meetings or

any other forms of consultative meeting or activity. It is noteworthy that none of the four municipalities posted two-way messages throughout the duration mapped pre and post the uprising of October 17, 2019.

The majority of the interview participants stated that consultancy through two-way communication messages would increase their level of trust in their municipalities. An interviewee from Tripoli asserted that two-way communications are always an added value to the relationship between citizens and the local authorities, yet community feedback should not be ignored once collected otherwise it would backfire, "Municipalities should listen to the public and become reactive to the needs, then with time transform into proactivity. Transparency is key" he exclaimed.

Transparency is a notion that was mentioned as lacking by several interviewees under different sections of the interviews, and it was associated with increasing trust in local authorities. Content that reflects transparency could be identified as public calls to tender, financial statements, and projects' progress reports among others. The descriptive analysis revealed only 18 such posts published across the four municipal Facebook pages over the period of 30 weeks mapped, 17 of which were published after the uprising.

All but one interviewee from Nabatieh had classified their municipality's communication style as leaning towards the passive end of the public participation continuum where messages disseminated are only one-way. While it had been stated that most of the participants did not receive any calls to engage in municipal activities nor provide their opinion, the majority agreed that that would increase their level of trust should it lead to a fruitful collaboration with local authorities.

While no such two-way posts were encountered on Facebook, nor was this concurred by other interviewees from the same area, one interviewee from Nabatieh mentioned that he receives the municipality's yearly public invitation to a town hall meeting for consultation on the specific needs and challenges faced by the local community at the level of neighborhoods. He goes on to elaborate that the municipality is proactive in sending out such invitations, and is also responsive to the community's invitation should it occur to meet and discuss local issues as they arise. This participant has specified that consultation increases trust significantly "especially if decisions are made based on the actual problems that the citizens are facing" he stated.

Based on the findings of the interviews, a correlation exists between the type of messages posted by municipalities and the relationship with their constituents. Although in the course of this research we were unable to analyze the community's reaction and engagement with two-way communication messages due to the lack of such messages on all four pages analyzed, the qualitative analysis of the interviews indicated that the trust factor was dependent not only on the dissemination of two-way messages but also on the outcome of the consultation with the communities.

When observed in relation to the theory of citizen participation, the outcomes of citizen participation programs include the generation of a spirit of cooperation and trust, legitimacy, credibility, and public support. These findings assert the communities' awareness of where they currently stand with their municipalities on Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation and have flagged the risk of transitioning into the non-participation stage instead of gaining a certain degree of citizen power. When interviewees stipulated the condition that their participation should yield positive results

for it to positively impact their level of trust in local authorities, they were intentionally or unintentionally avoiding the trap of manipulation or therapy; the bottom steps on the ladder of citizen participation where the programs are either designed to mislead citizens into believing they are being given power in a process that has been intentionally manufactured to deny them power or pseudo-participatory programs are created in an attempt to convince citizens that they are the problem when in fact the established institutions and policies are creating problems for citizens. One interviewee had mentioned that during a closed group community discussion with members of the municipal council around areas of improvement in garbage collection and street cleaning, blame was indeed placed on citizens of Tripoli that they are the cause of the problem because they litter too much, labelling them as “unclean”.

While this research focuses on the relationship between municipal communication strategies and citizens' level of trust, interesting observations were made about the interviewees' viewpoints that may reflect passiveness on the side of the public and perhaps some degree of prejudice. All interviewees assumed that the mayors and the members of the municipal councils were politically affiliated, whether the interviewees had proof of that affiliation or not, under the pretext that everyone is politically affiliated in public institutions in Lebanon. And whether fact-based or just a perception, almost all of them agreed that this affiliation affects municipal work due to political bickering and is a root cause of corruption and clientelism.

Most interviewees were passive to their needs in the sense that while they were aware of their predicament, yet not willing to take active steps to resolve some of the

issues that may be within their control. This, perhaps, may be because they had lost hope under the protracted crises in Lebanon.

Most interviewees were positive to a certain extent about sharing their opinion if asked, but hesitant to participate in activities. Most of them lacked the knowledge and had expressed their interest in gaining information, yet they don't actively seek out the relevant information about the municipality. Most of them did not trust the municipality, but were not willing to monitor its work. There seems to be a generalization that is not fact-based in the perception of the majority. The only source of validation with regards to the level of performance of local authorities and associated level of trust is derived from interviewees who have had personal experiences and have provided solid examples that reinforced their viewpoint. It seems as if the majority would simply disapprove of the performance of local authorities, even though they don't seek information and proactively address the issue of trust.

## **Limitations and Recommendations**

### *Limitations*

A limitation to the analysis under the theory of citizen participation is that it does not incorporate external factors as influencers to the possible outcomes of participation programs. The uprising of October 17, 2019, was a specific context rooted in the public's distrust in the state, and public participation programs at that time may have had unexpected results had they occurred. Given that no two-way communication messages were posted, it was not possible to test this theory through its outcomes.

It is not possible to consider the Facebook data collected from the municipal pages to be 100% accurate due to a number of limitations. The pages' administrators may have

deleted posts, censored post comments, or banned users which would affect the data collected. The privacy settings of certain users prevented seeing the details of their engagement.

The interviews in this research were conducted in the second quarter of 2022, at the peak of the financial and economic crisis in Lebanon which may have affected the answers of the participants, especially since the timing also coincided with the parliamentary elections. The 93% devaluation of the currency (Reuters, 2022) and loss of purchasing power have affected the capacity of municipalities to deliver adequate services and may have affected communities' perception of the role of municipalities and their efficiency within the new context, consequently decreasing trust in local authorities. It was not possible to isolate this influencing factors that may have affected the sentiments of interviewees. Financial limitations may have also affected the willingness of interviewees to engage in activities with the municipality, especially if it was on a volunteering basis.

The Lebanese context is volatile and complex, and that is a limitation of this research. Sectarian and political considerations may be at the root of negative or positive community engagement on Facebook and may have affected the response of interviewees, although when asked, they assured that their views were completely objective.

#### *Suggestions for future research*

Building on the findings of this research, it is recommended for future studies to conduct interviews with municipality communication teams to delve into the rationale and the elements that help shape municipal communication strategies, as well as other

important information that would allow for a more comprehensive reading of municipal communication messages and the rationale behind them in light of the resources allocated for the municipal communications teams, and to what extent the governing body at the municipality provides input and/or guidance that shape the communications outputs.

Another recommendation would be to conduct a deeper reading of the public comments made on Facebook and analyze and classify their content within the different categories of posts under specific social and political contexts. This advances the understanding of community sentiments and reactions over time and helps develop informed municipal communication strategies.

It is recommended to conduct the same research design directly after the occurrence of a crisis so that the responses of interviewees are more relevant to the subject matter and less influenced by other factors that have changed over time.

## **Conclusion**

Passive communication messages were the prevailing type across all the posts that were mapped before and after the uprising. Publicity is the most passive form of public involvement according to the public participation continuum, (Cogan & Sharpe, 1986), and it is a technique designed to persuade and facilitate public support, relating to citizens as passive consumers. The descriptive analysis conducted in this research indicated that most, if not all messages fall under this category, albeit for some educational content disseminated on the Nabatieh page that would categorize under the second level of citizen involvement under the "public education" form.

The ladder of citizen participation and the benefits and the efficiency associated with implementing citizen participation programs remain an agreed-upon added value to

the trust relationship between citizens and their local authorities, as per the interviews conducted. Yet this remains a theoretical truth until programs are officially activated and the results are measured. "If the municipality consulted with its citizens, I wouldn't be able to give negative feedback the way I did", said one interviewee from Tripoli whose personal experience with the municipality was disappointing as he reported. "Then anyone who had participated in this consultancy would be able to come and tell me I am wrong" he went on to say.

Of the four municipalities that were studied, three placed the majority of their focus on promoting the mayor's activities on Facebook, while the fourth had a broader spectrum of strategic content, including some posts about the mayor. This points to a misinterpretation of the main role of municipal communications, as defined by the interviewees who participated in this study. When asked about the type of content that they thought would help increase their trust in their municipality, none of the participants mentioned the mayor's activities, meetings, or achievements. Citizens were more interested in finding out about the municipalities' responsibilities and services, how municipal funds are spent, and what their local authority is doing to solve systemic problems that affected their daily lives, as well as the possibility to voice their concerns and provide input that influences municipal decision-making. Communication teams could have asked the community through two-way messages for feedback on their needs and then shaped their strategies accordingly, provided of course they are able to sustain the implementation of such an approach and not disappoint their constituents with negative outcomes. This also is time and context-sensitive, in the sense that community consultation for example during a trust crisis similar to that of the uprising of October 17,

2019, may yield unexpectedly negative results, not to mention political affiliations that could come into play within the Lebanese context.

Without community feedback, after the uprising began in October 2019, municipalities only reduced significantly the number of posts, eliminating news of the mayor in most cases, without replacing that content with information of public interest. No dialogue was initiated on the Facebook pages between municipalities and communities to mitigate the anger of the public during a crisis that was rooted in distrust. Messages remained passively one-way, and the people's comments increased in number and in negativity.

This does not automatically mean that in order to bridge the trust gap, municipalities should immediately engage in a consultative process with their constituents. On the contrary, engaging the public may widen the trust gap if the community is not openly ready for it and if consultations were not followed by transparent actions and visible results. When public administration is dysfunctional due to incompetence or because the governing body is influenced by political agendas or corruption, public participation programs are more likely to negatively affect the relationship with citizens than bridge the trust gap. The findings were clear that trust cannot be established through two-way communications and consultation alone, they should be followed by actions that are based on the findings of the consultation.

The analysis of the findings pointed clearly to the citizens' need for a reliable, qualified, and well-prepared municipality during crises to lead the response. If these criteria are met and communicated with the community, then the higher degrees of Tokenism on the ladder of citizen participation does not necessarily empower citizens

during crises, as citizens would look to local authorities to take an informed initiative alone and based on consultations made before the crisis. Surely the nature of a crisis comes into play and based on the specific characteristics of each crisis, municipalities should be prepared to respond, inform, and consult with their constituents if the need arises.

As the literature had conveyed, the role of expert communicators is key to engaging the public, and the lack of importance often placed on communication by management remains one of the primary environmental constraints facing public sector communications, often resulting in skilled communicators leaving the public sector, (Horsley, 2007).

Municipal communication messages should be very well planned and highly strategic to reinforce public trust and maintain a positive relationship between communities and local authorities at all times and under the most challenging situations.

The first step towards achieving a healthy relationship with the community at the local level, as revealed in the findings of this research, is for municipalities to establish communication units led by technically savvy communication professionals who develop area-specific communication strategies that are data-driven and proactive. These strategies should account for the possible occurrence of any type of crisis and have a crisis communication plan prepared ahead of time. The heads of such communication units should be well informed and should act as senior advisors, influencing the decision-making process, working to safeguard the image and reputation of the municipality. All these would be prerequisites to the establishment of community

consultation and citizen engagement programs to ensure that the results match the expectations.

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