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THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL MARKETING ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract:

The use of communication techniques in marketing has become a fundamental component of effective marketing policy, representing an element of differentiation from the competition, which leads to obtaining, on the one hand, a competitive advantage, and on the other hand, to the consolidation of a long-term relationship with the consumer, ultimately determining their loyalty, with a notable effect on the financial outcomes of the organization. The selection of appropriate communication tools and channels, tailored to the interests of the targeted consumer segment requires a considerable effort on the part of marketers in the direction of deciphering consumer behaviour, understanding the influencing factors that shape it in the current economic and social climate, in which the use of digital technologies represents the most suitable means of initiating and conveying messages to consumers, as well as from consumers to the organization. The present study aims to emphasize the importance of using digital communication tools on the orientation of the purchase decision towards the products/services of an organization, without excluding, however, the need for an adequate use of traditional marketing communication tools. In the present article, the impact on consumer behaviour is analysed based on research from secondary data sources.

Key words: consumer journey, integrated marketing communication, digital marketing, digital touchpoints

1. Introduction

The components of today's marketing macro-environment have undergone radical changes, regardless of whether we refer to the social, cultural, political, natural, or technological components. This has forced companies to use the resources they have with great efficiency in order to capitalize on the opportunities offered by the market, respectively to identify optimal solutions to deal with threats from the organization's external environment. Consequently, the changes occurring in the technological environment can be considered both an opportunity that can be exploited and transformed into a competitive advantage, as well as a threat that forces organizations to identify ways to counter the actions of competitors on the market. The Internet, considered by most specialists as an indicator of the degree of technological development of a nation, thus becomes a key factor in the foundation of marketing policy, especially of marketing communication policy, representing a means of connectivity and transparency between the organization and its customers (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017).

The increase in the degree of global connectivity through the Internet has pushed companies towards establishing and implementing strategies that integrate technological innovation in the creation and management of customer databases. Such an approach facilitated the offering of products and services adapted to consumers' needs and also made it easier to obtain real-time feedback from them (Schutte & Chauke, 2022). Consequently, digital technologies are considered to be the determining factor that has produced radical changes in the social and purchasing behaviour of consumers since 2010 (Tomcik & Rosenlacher, 2018).

The efficiency in the activity of organizations is considerably influenced by the way companies understood the transition of the consumer to the digital age, which determined an increase in the interactivity of communication tools in marketing. This translates into an increased synergy of communication activities with actual and potential customers of the company (Kusa, Zauskova & Cabyova, 2021).

In order to be able to differentiate themselves from their competitors, companies had to focus on creating messages that not only attract the attention of consumers (Malthouse et al., 2004), but also manage to create a long-term relationship with them, thus becoming a valuable tool of relational marketing (Blazheska, Ristovska & Klimoska, 2021).

Marketing communication policy should no longer be seen as unidirectional, only from the organization to the consumer, but necessarily bidirectional, moving from the consumer to the company as well. Moreover, the consumer today must be seen as a component part of the organization's communication system, being considered as one of the most credible and effective communication channels when satisfied with the products/services offered by a company. The concept of Generation C (Connected Generation) is increasingly common in the approaches of contemporary specialists, targeting consumers not by year of birth, but by a series of characteristics that refer to psychographic segmentation variables such as: lifestyle, the attitude towards the brand and the relationship with it, the degree of use of digital technologies, etc. (Kusa & Piatrov, 2019).

The rapid evolution of technology in the process of informing consumers, respectively communicating with them, has determined major changes in the way the purchase decision-making process is carried out (Mukhtar, Mohan & Chandra, 2023). Starting from their own interests and needs, consumers can use the tools that digital marketing makes available to get information about the alternatives that the market offers, communicate and exchange ideas with other actual and potential consumers, including the organization.

2. The importance of digital marketing in the process of integrated marketing communication

For marketers, integrated marketing communication includes all the techniques and tools that can be used in creating and disseminating messages. Under this approach, any contact or interaction with actual or potential customers must be seen as a potential communication channel in the future. The synergistic interaction of communication tools facilitates an increase in the specificity of messages and a better coordination thereof.

There are four stages to be taken into account when establishing and carrying out an integrated marketing communication system (IMC) at the level of an organization (Schultz & Kitchen, 2000):

- Stage 1 - the tactical approach to marketing communication. This stage is carried out at the level and by the organization and involves an analysis of the tools of the promotional marketing mix, in terms of their existence and consistency;
- Stage 2- redefining the purpose of marketing communication. During this stage, additional information about the company's customers is collected and a collaboration with agencies external to the organization is established, in order to redefine of the purpose of marketing communication;
- Stage 3- implementation of information technology applications in order to create and manage the customer database. During this process, all data held by the company regarding its customers are transformed into information about them and are used to develop and implement the marketing communication system;
- Stage 4 - strategic and financial integration. At this stage, the performance indicators of the marketing communication activity will be analysed for each consumer segment separately, and the optimal decisions will be made so as to adapt the organization's activity to market forces, as well as to consumer requirements.

By definition, integrated marketing communication involves “coordinating and integrating all marketing communication tools, channels, and sources within an organization into a continuous program that, for the lowest possible cost, optimizes the impact on customers and other end users” (Clow & Baack, 2007). Since consumers used to receive so much information from suppliers targeted at building their loyalty, companies needed a strategy based on coherent messages that can be placed on all media platforms. Thus, by broadcasting coherent and coordinated messages, firms could build strong connections with customers by creating and reinforcing images and messages using integrated marketing (Kotler, 2005).

Defined as a research-based, audience-focused and results-oriented communication plan that aims to deliver a communication program over time so that there is clarity and consistency in brand positioning, integrated marketing communication (IMC) aims to coordinate the various communication tools and channels and the incorporation of several elements of creative content in different media to create synergistic effects. The aim is to achieve a short-term financial gain and an increase in the value of the brand in the long run (Kliatchko, 2008).

Applying integrated marketing communications as part of the organization's promotion policy has a series of advantages, such as (Littlefield, Sellnow D. & Sellnow L., 2021):

- It is focused on the consumer, which represents a real support for customers, providing them with the information they need to base their purchase decision. In addition, IMC is also a means of strengthening a long-term relationship with consumers, which can lead to their loyalty over time;
- It provides consistent and credible messages, being one of the major objectives of IMC. The creation of a credible promotional message, with a carefully analysed promotional axis, which is to be broadcast on several channels with an impact on the receiving public,

is one of the requirements of a successful communication that will ultimately be reflected in the results of the company's economic activity;

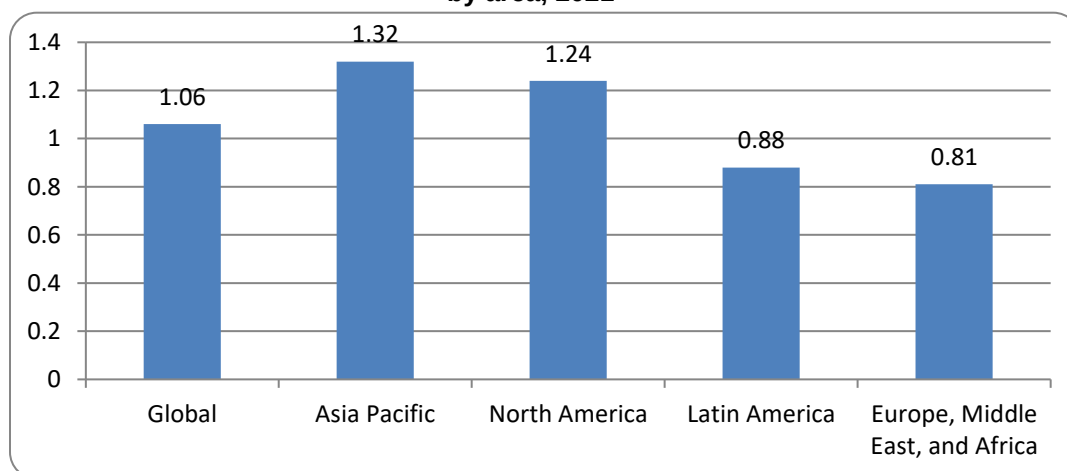
- It offers the possibility of control over the message depending on the stage of the promotion campaign, and also creates a climate of interest before the actual launch of the product on the market, respectively of information and reminder after its market entry;
- It increased the efficiency both in terms of money and time, with an important effect on the financial indicators of the activity. The ease of adapting the message to various channels according to the feedback of the receivers, together with the coordination of the promotion activity by a specialized department that deals with IMC are means of optimizing the activity in terms of costs.

Moreover, several studies published in the specialized literature have highlighted a correlation between the implementation of an integrated system of marketing communication and the performance recorded by the company. Thus, according to the data published by Statista (<https://www.statista.com/>) in 2021, it can be observed that, globally, for every 1 dollar invested in advertising, advertisers obtained 1.06 dollars, the region with the highest efficiency of investment in advertising being Asia Pacific (Fig. 1).

Usually, the more diversified the communication channels, the more effective the promotion campaign. On the other hand, however, a hostile reaction can also be observed on the part of the receivers (46%) who declare that they are bombarded with too many messages when marketing communication tools are not sufficiently well integrated and adapted to the communication channels (Ang, 2021).

As a result of the financial pressure exerted on the organization by the high costs of promoting the activity, on the one hand, and, as a consequence of the fierce market competition on the other hand, companies are forced to find solutions for the efficiency of marketing communication. All these factors need to be corroborated with the boom recorded in how consumers utilize social media and the Internet, as receivers of promotional messages.

Fig.1. The global return on investment (in US dollars) for media advertising by area, 2021



Source: Statista, <https://1511roari-y-https-www-statista-com.z.e-nformation.ro/statistics/1244285/media-advertising-roi-world/>

Thus, a series of trends (directions) have been registered in the marketing communication process in recent years, such as (Clow & Baack, 2018):

- Emphasis on accountability and measurable results;
- Explosion of the digital area;
- Integration of media platforms;
- Changing the power of communication channels;
- Increasing global competition;
- Increasing brand parity;
- Emphasis on customer involvement.

Seen as a strategic response to the increasing use of the Internet by consumers, digital marketing is a core component of integrated marketing communication, by offering users the opportunity to search for the best alternatives offered by the market, to discuss with each other within communities, including getting an instant answer to the problems that concern them (Mukhtar, Mohan & Chandra, 2023).

Being instrumental in shaping the promotion policy of companies, the utilization of social media and search engines in digital marketing is essential for grabbing the public's attention (Sinha & Singh, 2018), the costs generated being incomparably lower than those generated by the traditional channels of communication (Erevelles, Fukawa & Swaybe, 2016).

By using concepts such as web advertising, mobile marketing, e-commerce and search engine optimization (SEO) techniques, digital marketing includes any component that has a digital footprint (Clow & Baack, 2018).

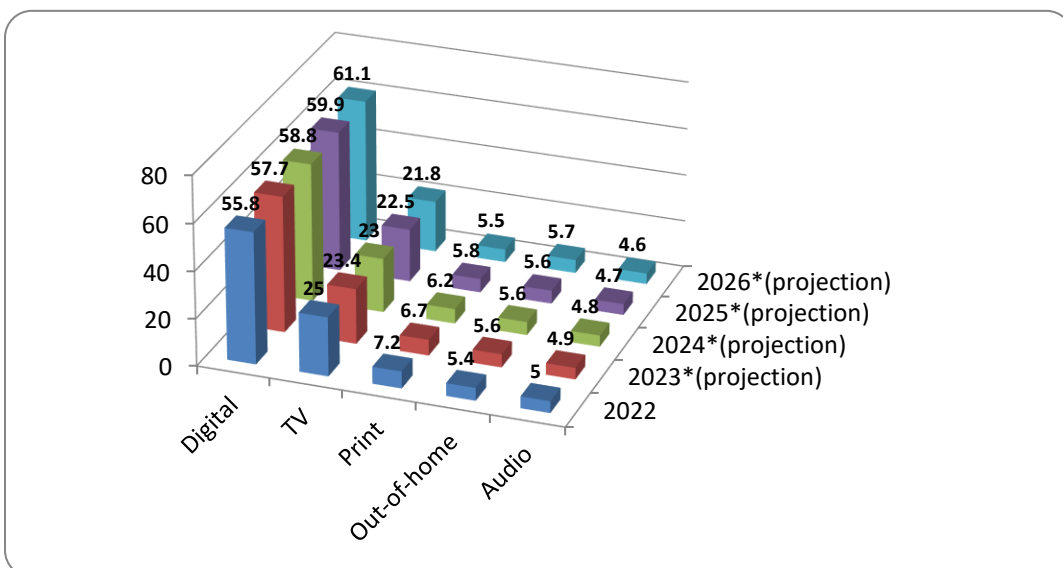
Without excluding the classic communication channels, digital marketing represents the new way of communication that companies adopt in their desire to attract and retain their customers. According to the data published by Statista (<https://www.statista.com/>), at the level of 2022, digital means of communication represented 55.8% of the total advertising expenses worldwide. Also, the forecasts for the following years highlight an increasing trend, in opposition to spending on traditional means of communication, which show decreasing projections from one year to the next (Fig. 2).

Having emerged in the 1990s, digital marketing has seen a spectacular evolution, starting from the concept of Web 1.0, with predominantly static content, to that of Web 4.0, which involves interactive user involvement and cloud operating systems and, more recently, with the concept of Web 5.0, which aims for increased decentralization and transparency for the user, by integrating the user's emotions with the help of AI and blockchain. All these changes in digital technology are definitely reflected in marketing as well, with specialists currently operating with tools and concepts specific to Marketing 5.0. (Kotler et al., 2021) and even Marketing 6.0 (Kotler et al., 2023).

In an era in which marketers face both the digital transformation of businesses and radical changes in consumer behaviour, which practically becomes a co-creator in the marketing activities carried out by the company, digital marketing tools that facilitate two-way communication, interactive and personalized between the organization and consumers end up generating markets of billions of dollars according to the figures published on the Statista website (Figures 3&4). Thus, from the data analysis, it can be observed that the largest market for digital advertising was registered in 2022 in the United States (\$243.89 billion),

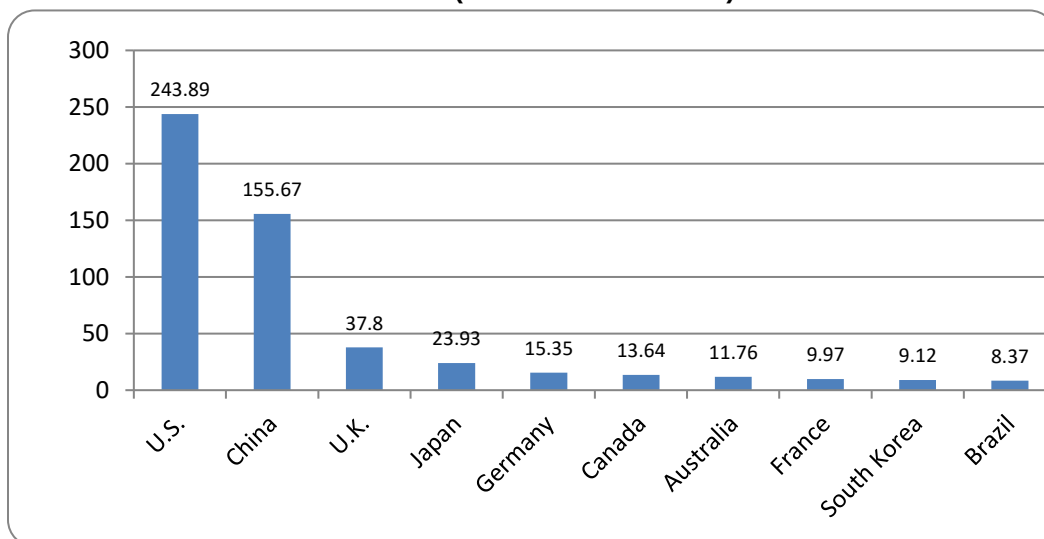
followed by China with \$155.67 billion and, at a considerable distance, by the United Kingdom, with \$37.8 billion. Furthermore, as shown by the data highlighted in Fig. 3, corroborated with the data presented in Fig. 2, the evolution of digital advertising expenses will register constant increases from one year to the next. Consequently, it is expected that at the end of 2027, the expenses will reach approximately \$871 billion worldwide (Fig. 4).

Fig.2. Global distribution of advertising expenditure by medium (%) between 2022 and 2026



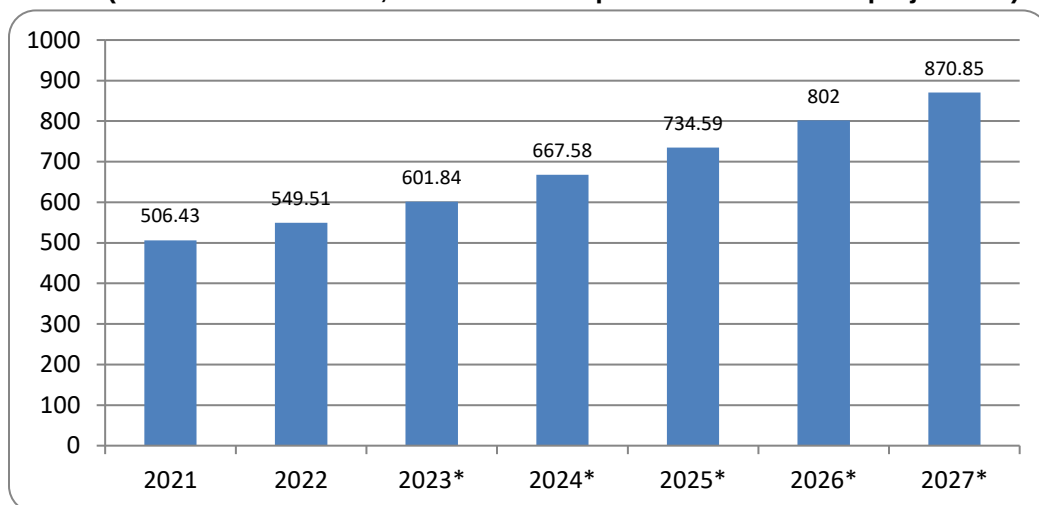
Source: Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/376260/global-ad-spend-distribution-by-medium/>

**Fig.3. Top global markets for digital ads in 2022
(in billion U.S. dollars)**



Source: Statista, <https://www.statista.com/topics/990/global-advertising-market/>

Fig. 4. Global expenditure on digital advertising between 2021 and 2027 (in billion U.S. dollars; the data for the period 2023-2027 are projections)



Source: Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/237974/online-advertising-spending-worldwide/>

However, it is important to recognise that digital marketing is not about understanding technology, but rather aims to understand consumers, in terms of how they use that technology, and how the organization can leverage this interaction to communicate with them more effectively. Consequently, it is essential that marketers learn to use the tools that digital marketing makes available. Moreover, understanding consumer behaviour is the actual key to harnessing the potential of digital marketing.

3. Consumer behaviour in the digital age – research based on secondary data sources

According to the opinion of most specialists, consumer behaviour is influenced by a multitude of factors that fall into three large categories: factors with a directly observable influence, factors with an endogenous influence and factors with an exogenous influence (Cătoiu & Teodorescu, 2004)

In order to facilitate the understanding of the importance of communication techniques and tools on consumer behaviour, the stages of the process of making a purchase decision must also be considered, namely: identification of the unsatisfied need, gathering of information and identification of alternatives, mental evaluation of the alternatives, the result of the evaluation (the decision) and post-purchase behaviour (Solomon, 2004). The role of information provided by companies through various media channels represents important sources of gathering information used by the consumer in the process of market investigation and can also represent the starting point in identifying an unsatisfied need.

With increasing mobility and connectivity, largely due to the benefits provided by digital technology, consumers live and carry out their activities in a space that is constantly changing, which leaves its mark on the decrease in the power of concentration and implicitly of attention, an aspect that can also be highlighted in the pressure exerted to analyse and evaluate the existing brands on the market. Bombarded with excessive advertising

messages, customers choose to perceptually defend themselves by ignoring them and opt to direct their attention towards trustworthy information sources.

Against this background, organizations must be aware that too many communication channels and an increased quantity of messages do not automatically represent a high influence on consumer behaviour. On the contrary, these can generate the so-called boomerang effect, which distances the consumer from the company, instead of bringing them closer.

This leads to a need to realistically connect with the consumer in only a few significant touch points. In fact, just one moment of unexpected positive experience offered by the brand is all that can be done to turn the customer into a loyal brand advocate. In order to achieve this, firms should know the customer's route to purchase, understand the customer's touchpoints along this route, and intervene in the selection of the essential and relevant touchpoints in the communication process (Table 1). Thus, focusing efforts on intensifying communications, simultaneously with strengthening channel presence and improving the customer interface to facilitate the communication process at critical touch points, is a sure way for organizations to win the attention of customers and significantly distinguish themselves from the competition (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017).

Currently, peer-to-peer communication between customers is the most effective form of communication for a company, as customers trust information provided by people in the same customer position as them more, thus turning into ambassadors or brand advocates.

Table 1. Customer touchpoints

Stage	Awareness	Consideration	Purchase	Service	Loyalty
Customer actions	Receives information from different sources: -marketing (advertising through traditional and digital channels) -commercial (physical stores or thier web pages) -personal (friends, family)	Is aware of the need and searches for information about the products, compares them to similar products of the competition in terms of technical characteristics and price	Decides to purchase the product	Reads the users' manual and asks questions if need be	Re-purchases the product and shares the positive experience with others
Physical Touchpoints	Radio, TV, Print, Outdoor, Word of mouth, PR	Store, Traditional mail	Store, Phone/Call Center	Phone, Call Center	Word of mouth, Promotion on Invoice
Digital Touchpoints	Online ads, Viral emails, Digital billboard	Landing page, Blog, 3rd Party Site	Website, mobile app	Chatbot, email	Blog, Email, Review Sites, Newsletter
Customer experience	Interested but still skeptical	Curious and involved in finding relevant information	Anxious to use the product	Willing to deal with the challenges that might appear	Satisfied and enthusiastic

Source: Author's own research and interpretation according to Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, Marketing 4.0. Moving from Traditional to Digital, 2017, pp.61-63

In today's era of connectivity, the direct and personal tunnel-type process of the four "A's" (aware, attitude, act, act again) requires a readjustment as a result of the communication system created between customers. The customer's social environment affects their first impression of the brand, which also determines the positive or negative attitude that will ultimately lead to the purchase or abandonment of the brand. Most of the apparently personal decisions are basically social decisions. In addition, loyalty is finally defined as the desire to promote a brand and to communicate positively about it. Repurchasing with a certain frequency is no longer the essential condition in the assessment of brand loyalty, the transmission of a positive recommendation being possible even if at the time the consumer does not have the company's product.

Based on these mutations occurring at the level of consumer behaviour, the customer's path should be analysed from the perspective of the five A's: aware, appeal, ask, act, advocate (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017):

- Aware – the consumer is passively exposed to information provided through various channels;
- Appeal – he/she processes the previously received information and defines a list of alternatives (products) to which they are attracted;
- Ask – driven by curiosity, the consumer gets involved in a wider process of searching for information, turning to various external sources;
- Act – after a mental evaluation of the set of alternatives, based on their own criteria that are the basis of the choice, they decide to purchase the optimal option for them;
- Advocate – only in the situation of a favourable experience, after which the consumer is satisfied, they decide to repurchase the product and promote it to other consumers. It is the ideal stage for any organization, consumers tending towards loyalty, turning into ambassadors and promoters of the respective brand, becoming, as previously mentioned, the most credible source of communication for a company.

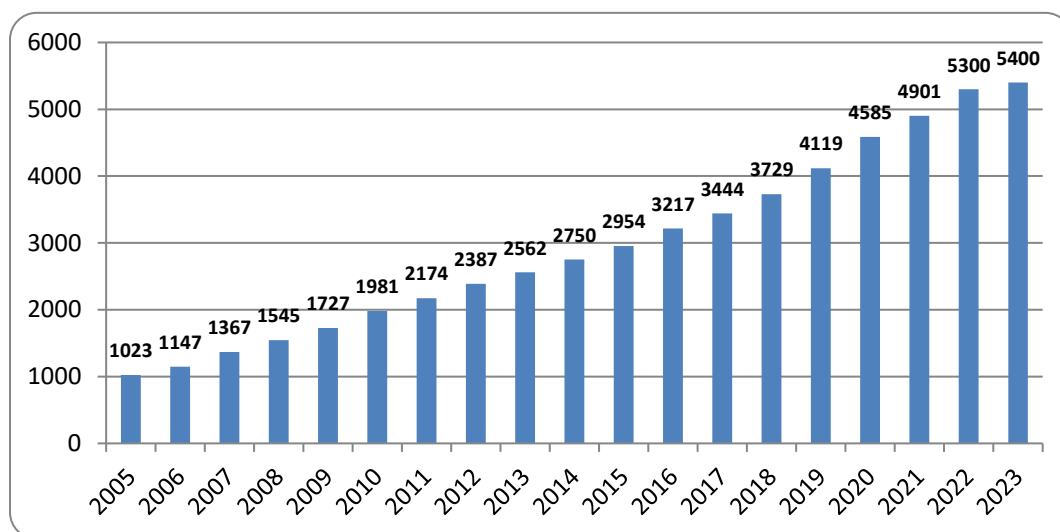
Creating a memorable connection experience for the customer involves much more than an easy navigation of the contact points or coherent interactions on all communication channels, being essential for the company to focus on (Shaw, 2021):

- More informed conversations: People live their lives through screens, looking to share their experiences with everyone they know, no matter how mundane. Thus, in order to overcome the barrier raised by the excess of content, companies should stimulate as much as possible a real dialogue, where ideas and opinions are discussed freely, capitalizing on the information accumulated as a result of previous experiences;
- More beneficial relationships: Today, communication between the organization and the consumers is no longer one-way; therefore, as customers interact through multiple channels, the two-way flow of communication should consider explicit preferences that guide the creation and delivery of content and knowing shared beliefs and values that are the foundation of a long-term relationship;
- More valuable interactions: Firms must communicate with customers in real time, reducing to the maximum possible time costs that customers may experience during the interaction with the organization, regardless of the communication channel chosen.

Emerging technologies have changed the way in which the activity and implicitly the economic results of organizations are influenced by word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, otherwise considered a component of digital marketing with a high weight in the promotion activity. WOM in the digital environment has the advantage of propagating in real time among consumers, which can have a considerable effect on consumer perception, by encouraging or discouraging the purchase decision as a result of shared opinions, encouraging companies to follow social media networks, to involve in a two-way communication with them and respond accordingly (Clow & Baack, 2018).

Advances in technology, especially those related to the Internet and telecommunications, are shaping the behaviour of consumers around the world and radically changing the way they communicate with each other, with their companies or brands. As such, the number of Internet users has registered a constant increase in recent years, reaching in 2023 a number of 5400 million users worldwide (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Global internet user count from 2005 to 2023 (in millions)



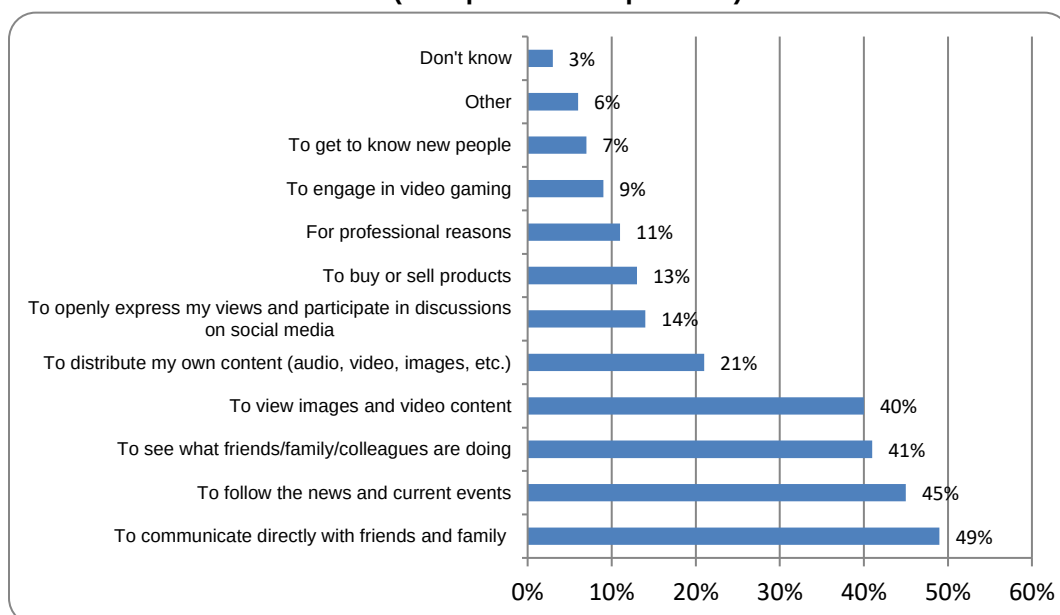
Source: Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273018/number-of-internet-users-worldwide/>

The digital environment has basically become a factor that radically influences the social and purchasing behaviour of the consumer. Consumers purchase products and services on the Internet, follow news on the Internet, communicate on the Internet, work on the Internet, have fun on the Internet, and even search for their soulmate on the Internet. These are all essential aspects that lead companies to understand when, how, and where consumers interact with the organization, the effort being vital in the direction of providing a memorable experience for customers. Thus, an analysis of the data published on the website of the European Commission (<https://data.europa.eu/en>) in a study from 2022, regarding the reasons that lead Europeans to use social media networks, reveals that the need to communicate with friends and family (49%), respectively to follow the news and events (45%), as well as the actions of those in the group of friends (41%), are the essential motives that push respondents to use social media, while reasons such as buying/selling products/services or professional ones register much lower weights (Fig. 6). Moreover,

according to data published on the Statista website (<https://1511roauz-y-https-www-statista-com.z.e-nformation.ro/statistics/715449/social-media-usage-reasons-worldwide/>) the main reason why subjects worldwide use social media networks is the need to socialize, to keep in touch with friends and family (49.7%). Mobile phones related to the purchase behaviour of products/services register a higher share compared to the one registered at European level, respectively of 26.4% .

In what regards the popularity of social media, we can notice that Facebook is the world leader in terms of number of users, followed by YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp (Fig. 7.)

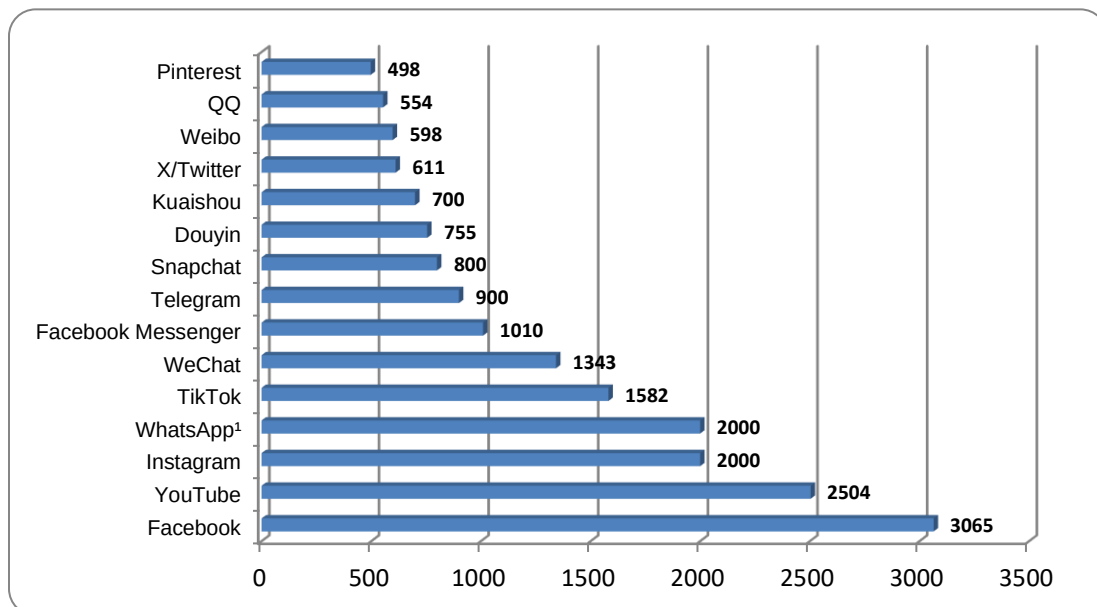
**Fig. 6. The main reasons why Europeans use social networks
(multiple answers possible)**



Source: Flash Eurobarometer FL011EP-Media &News Survey 2022(EU27), p.32,
https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/s2832_fl011ep_eng?locale=en

In summary, it can be seen that, regardless of industry or economy, the role of digital marketing is fundamental in the interaction with actual or potential customers, shaping both their social behaviour, in general, and their purchasing behaviour, in particular. Thus, the advantages of using digital marketing tools give organizations the chance to be more competitive, even in relation to companies that enjoy a dominant position on the market, being a formidable “weapon” against market entry barriers, offering marketers communication techniques widely accepted and used by consumers. In addition, digital marketing tools can be easily customized, and their impact on user behaviour can be easily quantified. However, the risk of “bombarding” the consumer with excessive messages remains the major challenge that marketers must solve, by increasing the specificity of the messages, by appropriately targeting the desired audience, as well as by readjusting the message according to the response of the receivers.

Fig. 7. The most widely used social networks globally as of April 2024, measured in millions of monthly active users



Source: Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>

4. Conclusions

Changes in marketing communication with a major impact on shaping consumer behaviour can no longer be ignored or minimized. In the era of digitalization, actual and potential consumers are bombarded with a multitude of messages daily. Therefore the need to establish and implement an appropriate mix of promotional communication can help the company differentiate itself from competitors and provide a superior customer experience in the decision-making process of purchase, from the need identification stage, to the information or purchase stage and post-purchase (feedback), thus creating the premises for a long-term relationship with the organization.

Consumer behaviour in the digital age is an ongoing research project, with a myriad of challenges that marketers have to face. Consequently, the integration of digitalization and innovative strategies in the organization's development strategy, including in the promotional communication strategy, can represent the only path towards the company's success in the market.

By integrating marketing communication and mobile technology, consumers can easily research the market in order to identify the optimal alternatives for them, compare them in terms of technical-functional characteristics, prices, and related services. This allows them to purchase online the products or services that meet their needs at a higher level, thus saving time, effort, and money. The feeling of inclusion within brand communities, which gives consumers the chance to share their opinions with others, as well as the opportunity to

dialogue with the organization on a peer-to-peer basis, is perhaps one of the great strengths of digital marketing.

The experience felt by the digital customer in accessing media communication channels can become an important attribute in identifying purchase alternatives and in orienting the consumer towards a company's products and services. Thus, optimizing the user experience at all points of contact with the organization is imperative, becoming a decisive factor in achieving marketing objectives, not only circumscribed by the communication policy, but also related to the other components of the marketing mix (product, price, distribution).

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