

Study on the Behavior and Preferences of Social Media Users, after the Pandemic Era

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Abstract. *In recent years, the virtual environment has grown, experiencing new perspectives of use and an increasing number of new users. Older studies showing that the desktop and laptop will be abandoned, and information will be produced and disseminated online via mobile telephone have proven to be relevant, and these things are happening nowadays. This paper highlights a brief analysis of existing management processes and proposes an improvement of the communication process through social media networks in industrial organizations. Social networks have developed a new side, a commercial one, which has changed simple users into real consumers, outlining a new, different nuance of the way of communication. The attitude of social media users is also influenced by other personal characteristics, such as age, gender, job, or time spent on virtual activities.*

Keywords: social media, consumer behavior, consumer preferences, marketing, communication.

Introduction

The most significant consequence of social media has been the shift of power from the institution to the individual. Social media gave users a voice, and an open platform where they could connect, collaborate, and co-create content for themselves and others. This user-generated content is perceived to be more trustworthy and has been found to be a bigger influence on consumer behavior and purchase decisions.

A social network is a structure that includes people or organizations (usually represented as nodes) and social relationships (links between nodes). Supported platforms for social networking on the Internet (social media) are applications for creating, sharing, and sharing user-generated content, which manifests itself in various forms: forum, blog, instant messaging (chat), collaborative project, and virtual communities (Bădău, 2011).

Social media dominance has increased dramatically over the past few years with popular social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, etc. leading the race. Social media usage has witnessed unprecedented growth over the past decade, thanks to Facebook and Instagram which dominate the social media ecosystem.

Social media has seen a significant surge in active monthly users in the last two years and looking at the numbers, it's only increasing with no signs of going back, as it is shown in figure 1, based on the statistics collected for the year 2022.

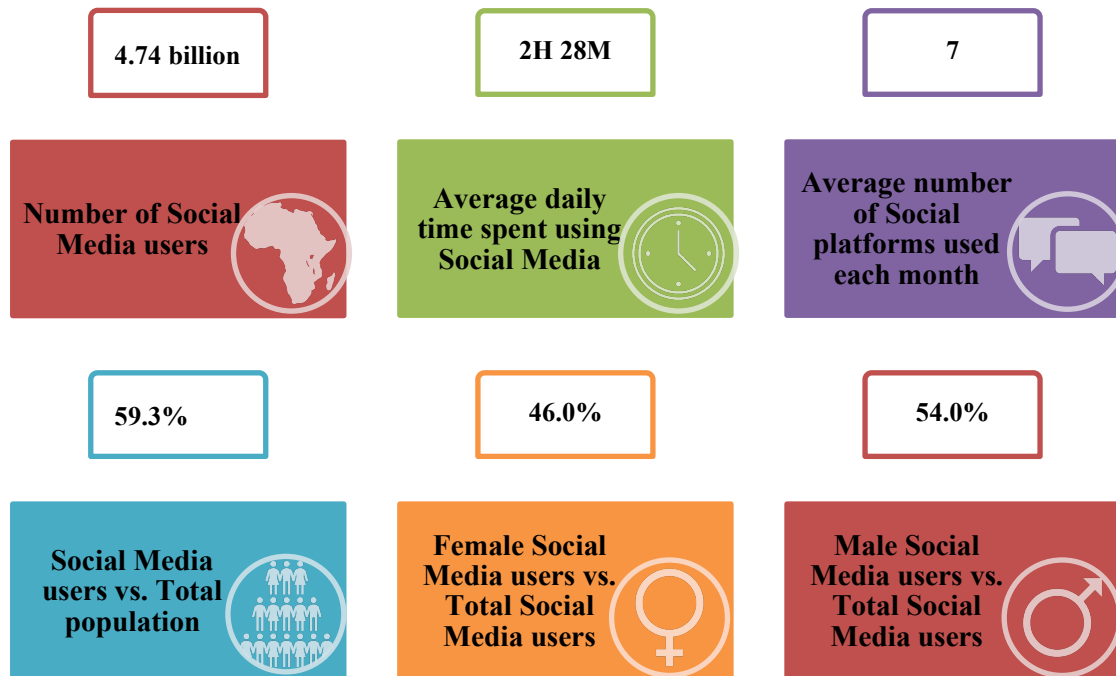


Figure 1. Essential social media statistics

Source: adapted from <https://datareportal.com/global-digital-overview>.

Using the Google Trends search engine as a reference, a public service that shows how often a certain term is searched in several countries, the author observed the graph of the evolution of interest over time on "social media", starting in 2013, until the present.

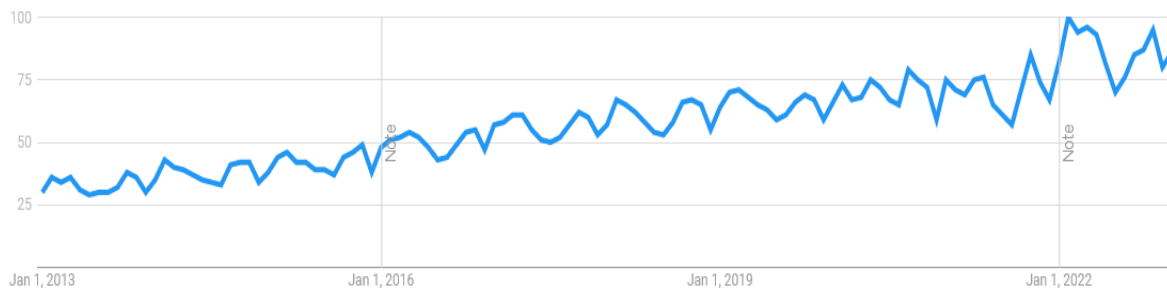


Figure 2. The evolution of interest in social media from 2013 to the present

Source: adapted from <https://trends.google.com/trends/>

Social Media Marketing (SMM) has been widely used to refer to the use of online SMPs (Social Media Platforms) for the purpose of marketing. Akar and Topcu (2011) have defined SMM as the “use of social media channels to promote a company and its products.” This is similar to the definition expressed by Drury (2008) where SMM is the “usage of the existing social media platforms for increasing the brand awareness among consumers on online platforms through the utilization of the WOM (word-of-mouth) principles”. While these definitions of SMM converge on the “promotional” aspect, they ignore the relational aspect of conversing with consumers on social media and the benefits accrued therefrom.

SMM can provide several advantages to companies. In addition to enabling the free exchange of ideas and information among consumers, SMPs allow them to engage in two-way communication with brands. This helps reduce consumer prejudice toward brands, enhancing brand value (Kim & Ko, 2012). By participating actively in online conversations, companies can provide direction and enrich the conversation experience, making the content more meaningful and focused. This allows companies to involve their consumers more closely with brands through collaboration for marketing campaigns, and so on.

Literature review

Social media

Digital transformation initiatives are forcing organizations to envision new ways of marketing their products and services. Notwithstanding the fact that academic research has examined social media marketing and its implications from diverse perspectives such as service science, information systems, psychology, and law, it is still a nascent research domain with several unanswered questions.

Communication through social networks

From the beginning of understanding the efficient ways of communication within the organizations, the managers wanted to synthesize the results of the most efficient means of communication. However, they are effective according to the originally proposed objective, as can be seen in the first table found below.

Table 1. Types of communication media

Type of communication media	Efficient for	Example
Written	Transmission of a <i>long and detailed material</i>	Reports, diagrams, bulletins, internal publications
Oral	Communication that needs to be developed to be <i>easy for the recipient to understand</i> , which may have linguistic differences	Face-to-face dialogue, telephone conversation, conference
Multimedia	Harmonization of events, communication of changes, remediation of deficiencies	Take different forms depending on the possibilities: written/ oral, written/ visual, oral/ visual, written/ oral/ visual

Source: Authors' own research.

Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein (2010) define social media as "*a group of online applications that grow on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user-produced content.*" An important concept in social media is "*the world of word-of-mouth information*".

A social network is a structure that includes people or organizations (usually represented as nodes) and social relationships (connections between nodes). Support platforms for social networks on the Internet (social media) are *applications* for creating, sharing, and sharing user-generated content, which manifests itself in various combinations of forms: forums, blogs, instant messaging (chat), and virtual communities.

Adopting the style of the author McLuhan, we can say that we witnessed a revolution of social networks (a term generally used as social media), through which the reader becomes a producer of information, in a public space, where perceptions of reality are radically modified. The

social media revolution, in terms of development and effects, is comparable to the Industrial Revolution but is much faster.

With Facebook and Instagram as the principal social media applications, figure 3 presents the total user engagement that can be obtained by industry. Instagram is well known to be the best way to express fashion and beauty content, as the main activity is based on posting photography.

Facebook vs. Instagram

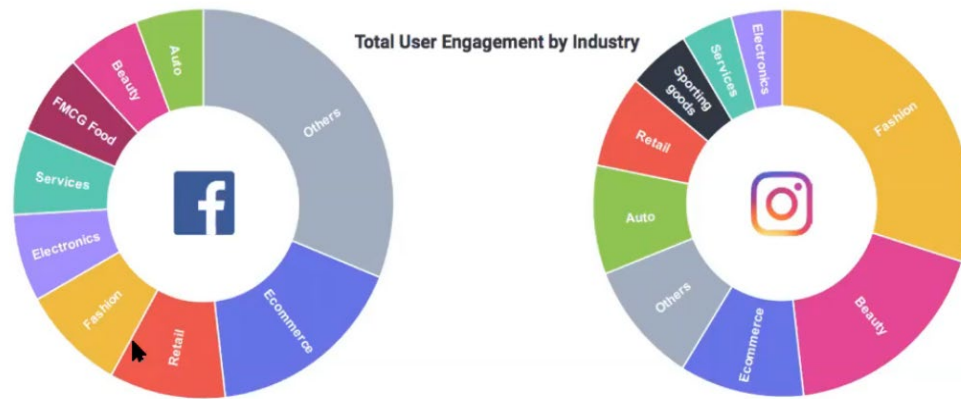


Figure 3. User engagement by industry on Facebook and Instagram

Source: Authors' own research.

In addition to other findings, a systematic literature review of the subject helped unearth certain core actors (stakeholders) that are interdependent within the sociotechnical system. Using the stakeholder lens will help examine the phenomenon holistically from a user perspective.

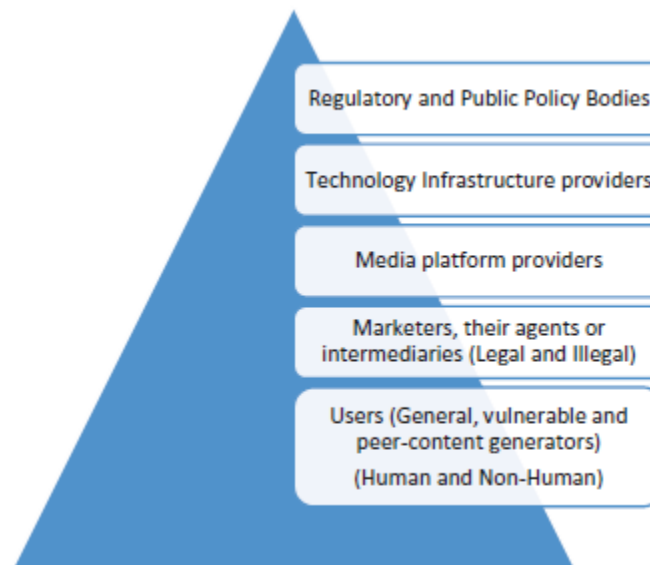


Figure 4. Key stakeholders' groups in social media

Source: Authors' own research.

Figure 4 provides a pictorial depiction of the actors derived from the review. The topmost category relates to regulatory bodies and public policy bodies, including governments that are trying to enforce social media regulations to provide affordances for businesses and individuals.

Marketing

As Perreault, Cannon, and McCarthy (2012) say, there are several ways in which a company can meet the needs of its target customers. A product may have a specific set of features. The level of support and advice provided to customers before or after the sale can be adjusted. The packaging, brand identity, and warranty may be changed. Different promotional media can be used: newspapers, magazines, television, and the internet. However, all these variables can be intelligently organized so that we can reduce them to the basic four: product, placement, promotion, and price.

The marketing mix involves the choice, merging, and routing of the company's resources, weights, and the dosage of the investment in the total effort to achieve the objectives proposed through efficient use of the effort put in.

It is worth noting that "the central place in the marketing mix lies with the product, as the main means of communication of the enterprise with the market; it is, in this sense, eloquent that, paraphrasing a biblical dictum – if the product is nothing, there is nothing" (Balaure et al., 2003). Smedescu (2004) is of the same opinion, stating that it has gone from trying to sell to customers to serving them as effectively as possible to strengthen a long-term relationship with them.

Using Figure 5, the author illustrates the purpose of determining, executing, and evaluating a social media strategy. The figure shows that the use of social media by organizations should follow one or more social media strategies, which in turn should be in line with the overall organizational strategy.

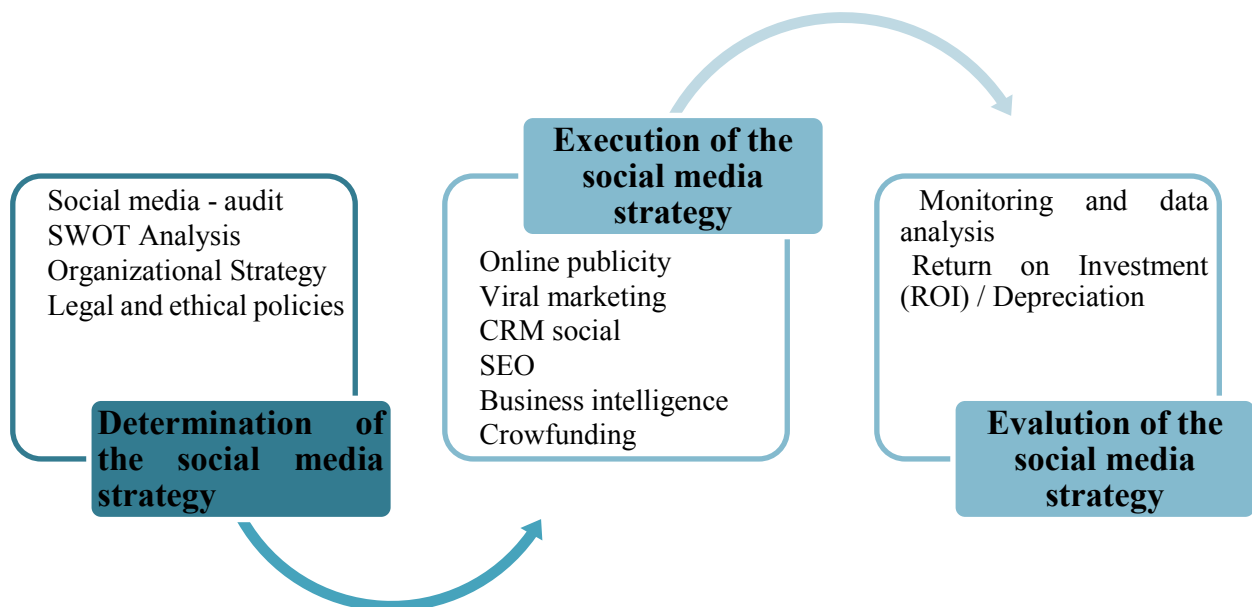


Figure 5. Social media strategy

Source: Authors' own research contribution.

In particular, social media actions should not be separated from other business actions, as organizations should act in accordance with their overall strategy to support the business mission and proposed objectives.

Methodology

The landscape of online social networking has completely changed with the advent of Facebook in 2004, the first online social network to reach 1 billion users. Its innovative features and unparalleled popularity have led to the emergence of new forms of social interaction and self-presentation, probably the most intriguing types that have ever existed.

The specific objectives of this research were:

1. Identifying the expectations of social network users regarding the content and behavior displayed by the social network Facebook;
2. Investigating the reasons for using the social network;
3. Investigating how often to use the various social networks available at the moment;
4. Studying the expectations that the users of the social networks Facebook and Instagram have regarding the presence of different organizations within these platforms;
5. Identify why users are accessing Facebook and Instagram pages;

In order to carry out the proposed study, the author considered numerous research methods, starting from the choice of the research topic and the motivation of its choice to the detailed analysis of the subject. The chosen methods were: the study of the issue through the materials provided by various reference institutions, the consultation of specialized papers on the topic of interest, followed by the extraction of useful information.

Furthermore, because "there is a tendency to evaluate our own opinions and abilities" (Festinger, 1954) and given the fact that Facebook and Instagram abound in social comparison mechanisms, the author found it useful to include social comparison in the analysis of strategies. As far as it is known, there is currently no research that has correlated the strategies. A novelty of this research is the extension of the survey to a wider population than students, namely young adults.

In the elaboration of this analysis, the survey method was used to capture the perception of the local community regarding the behavior of social media users. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms, and is of a semi-structured type, with a series of 22 closed questions, as well as open questions. It was applied in Romania, through the virtual environment (Facebook, WhatsApp, email), in October, on a sample of 112 people, aged between 18 and 46 years. Data processing was performed using the software descriptive statistics, the main variables of the research being shown in table 2.

Table 2. Research variables

The Purpose of The Research	Variable Name (Research)	Conceptual Definition	Operational Definition Operational Variables	Scale of Measurement	Scaling Technique Used
Demographic profile of the sample	Q2. Age	Indication of the age-appropriate category	☐ 18-23 ☐ 24-28 ☐ 29-33 ☐ 34-38 ☐ 39-44 ☐ >45	ORDINAL SCALE	Distribution of frequency

The Purpose of The Research	Variable Name (Research)	Conceptual Definition	Operational Definition Operational Variables	Scale of Measurement	Scaling Technique Used
	Q1. Sex	Gender indication	☐ Feminine ☐ Masculine	NOMINAL scale with elections	Distribution of frequency
	Q3. Residence environment	Indication of the place of residence	☐ Urban ☐ Rural	NOMINAL scale with elections	Distribution of frequency
	Q4. Occupation	Indication of the field of professional activity	☐ Sales ☐ Services ☐ IT ☐ Student	NOMINAL scale with multiple choices	Distribution of frequency
Identifying the expectations of social media users regarding the behavior displayed on Facebook;	Q10. Type of content you've watched on Facebook	Indicate the category of content that the user follows on Facebook	☐ Nutrition and sports ☐ News and news ☐ Entertainment ☐ Artistic ☐ Public figures ☐ Friends ☐ Organizations	NOMINAL scale with elections	Distribution of frequency
Identifying why users access Facebook and Instagram pages;	Q8. Purpose of use of social networks	Indication of the right personal options for each social network	☐ Interacting with friends ☐ Shopping ☐ Music ☐ Gaming ☐ Self-promotion ☐ Expressing opinions ☐ Education ☐ Supervision the activity ☐ Amusement	NOMINAL scale with elections	Distribution of frequency
	Q9. Choosing the right statements for the social media user	Indication of the truth value of claims about user behavior	☐ Dependency ☐ Off-line communication ☐ Involvement in volunteering ☐ Source of income	NOMINAL SCALE	True False
	Q11. The true value of tracking the official pages of organizations	Indication of the affirmative or negative value of the statement on the follow-up of the official pages of organizations	☐ Yes ☐ Not	NOMINAL scale with elections	Yes Not
	Q12. The motivation for following pages	Indicating personal motivations for following the	Free response	NOMINAL SCALE	Distribution of frequency

The Purpose of The Research	Variable Name (Research)	Conceptual Definition	Operational Definition Operational Variables	Scale of Measurement	Scaling Technique Used
		pages of organizations			
	Q18. The main content on your personal Instagram profile	Indication of the main content that the user has on Instagram,	☐ Own images ☐ Pictures of places visited ☐ Professional images ☐ Inspirational images	NOMINAL scale with elections	Method of ordering ranks
	Q19. Choosing the right personal statements for Instagram activity	Indicate behaviorally appropriate claims on Instagram	☐ I give "Love" ☐ I follow profiles ☐ I don't care about other opinions ☐ I'm looking for models to follow	NOMINAL scale with elections	Distribution of frequency
Studying the expectations that users of the social networks Facebook and Instagram have regarding the presence of different organizations within these platforms;	Q13. Favorite forms of structuring content in an organization Facebook post	Indicating the 3 preferred forms of sharing messages on Facebook	☐ Block of plain text ☐ Text and visual image ☐ Text and link ☐ Text and video ☐ Simple image	NOMINAL scale with elections	Method of ordering ranks
	Q14. The importance of the quality of visual material provided by organizations on Facebook	Indication of the degree of importance of the quality of the visual material	1-5	ORDINAL SCALE	LIKERT scale
	Q15. The importance of grammatical correctness of texts published on Facebook	Indication of the importance of grammatically correct texts in organizations' Facebook posts	1-5	ORDINAL SCALE	LIKERT scale
	Q16. The optimal frequency of your organization's weekly Facebook posts	Indicate your opinion about how often an organization's Facebook post is best	☐ More than one post per day ☐ daily post ☐ posting at 2-3 days ☐ weekly posting ☐ A post after a week	NOMINAL scale with elections	LIKERT scale, based on a noncomparative technique
	Q21. The importance of having an Instagram profile for the organization	Indicating the importance of having an Instagram account for your organization	1-5	ORDINAL SCALE	LIKERT scale

The Purpose of The Research	Variable Name (Research)	Conceptual Definition	Operational Definition Operational Variables	Scale of Measurement	Scaling Technique Used
Knowledge of the frequency of use of the various social networks currently accessible;	Q7. Frequency of accessing social relays	Indication of the frequency of use of those listed networks	☐ Not at all ☐ Less than once a week ☐ date per week ☐ 2-3 times a week ☐ Frequently, daily, less than an hour a day ☐ Very common, daily, more than an hour a day	ORDINAL SCALE	LIKERT scale, based on a non-comparative technique
	Q17. Active Instagram user	Indicating the true value of the idea if he is an active Instagram user	☐ Yes ☐ Not	NOMINAL scale with elections	Yes Not
	Q20. Frequent appreciation for a certain type of content on Instagram	Indicating the most frequently liked materials you've seen on Instagram	☐ People ☐ Food ☐ Livestock ☐ Funny ☐ celebrities on	NOMINAL scale with elections	Distribution of frequency
Studying the opinions of Instagram users regarding improvements in the profiles of organizations	Q22. Suggested improvements to your organization's Instagram profiles	Indicating possible improvements needed for Instagram profiles followed by users	Free response	NOMINAL SCALE	Distribution of frequency

Source: Authors' own research.

Online communication facilitates that sense of belonging and encourages self-disclosure. However, it has been pointed out that users of online social networks strive to balance two contradictory needs: the need to increase intimacy and liberation by revealing the self on the one hand, and the need to protect their privacy on the other.

Results and discussions

The demographic profile of the respondents resulted in 71.4% being women, 81.3% of them aged between 18 and 23 years, and 83% living in urban areas. A percent of 59.8% are students, without another job, but, in total, 100% own a smartphone and use virtual social media.

Taking into consideration the fact that the total number of internet users around the world grew by 171 million in the past 12 months – that's an average of almost half a million new users every day and that the average global internet user now spends 6 hours and 37 minutes online each day, but this is actually 5 percent less than the daily average for October 2021 (Hootsuite, 2023), it is no surprise that the interest in using social media platforms grew as well.

Figure 6 shows that among the 112 respondents, a very high frequency of "more than an hour a day" is shown in the use of Instagram, followed by YouTube and Facebook, and a null access goes to Twitter, resulting in the fact that it is not popular in Romania compared to other

countries. TikTok has shown a slow increase in use since its launch outside of China, in 2017, while Instagram outdated Facebook by its attractiveness for youngsters.

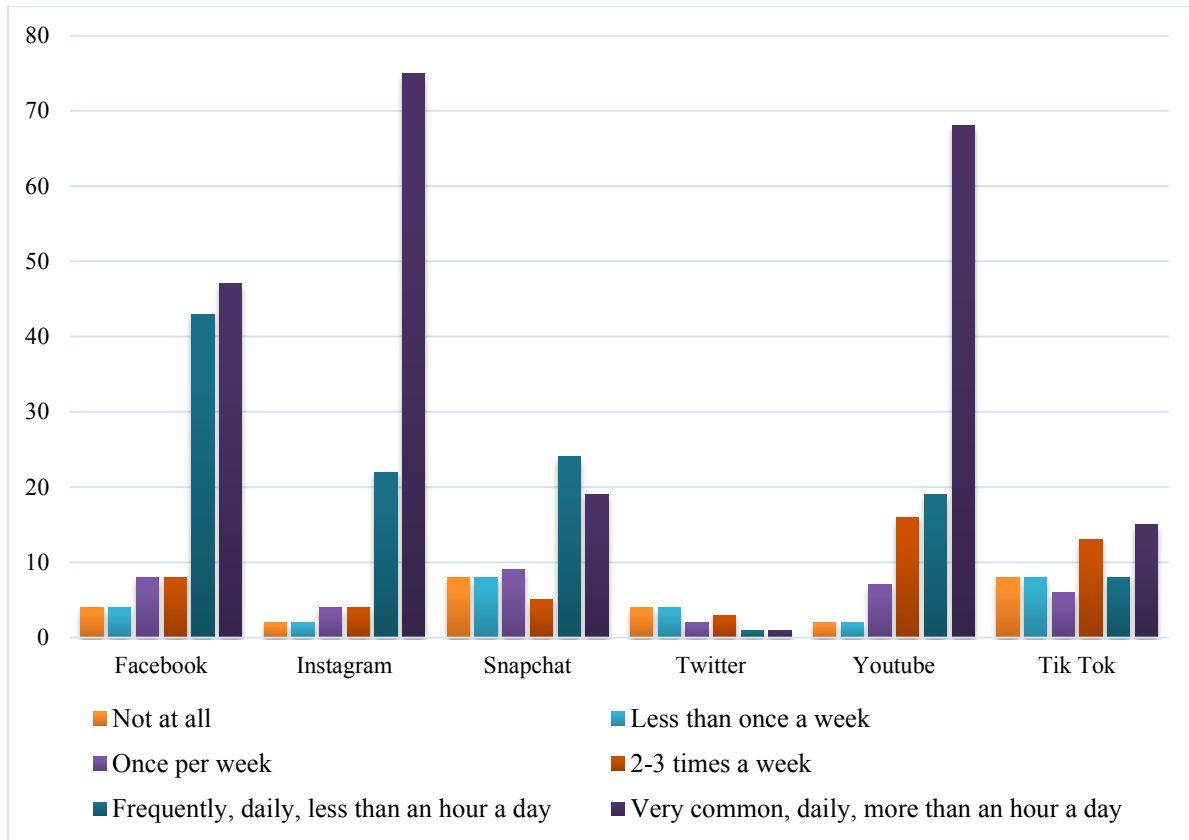


Figure 6. Frequency of use of social networks

Source: Authors' own research results

Unique mobile users are currently growing at a rate of 3.2 percent per year. Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of people have also upgraded from basic phones to smartphones over the past 12 months. Smartphones facilitate access to a great number of social media platforms, which users find multiple purposes to download and make a habit of using.

The affirmation with the greatest degree of truth, illustrated in figure 7, is "It helps me to find out new, up-to-date information", demonstrating once again the usefulness that social media possesses. The following statement was chosen to be true for the respondents: "They are useful for keeping relationships at a distance", with 106 out of 112 respondents considering its practical use in day-to-day life.

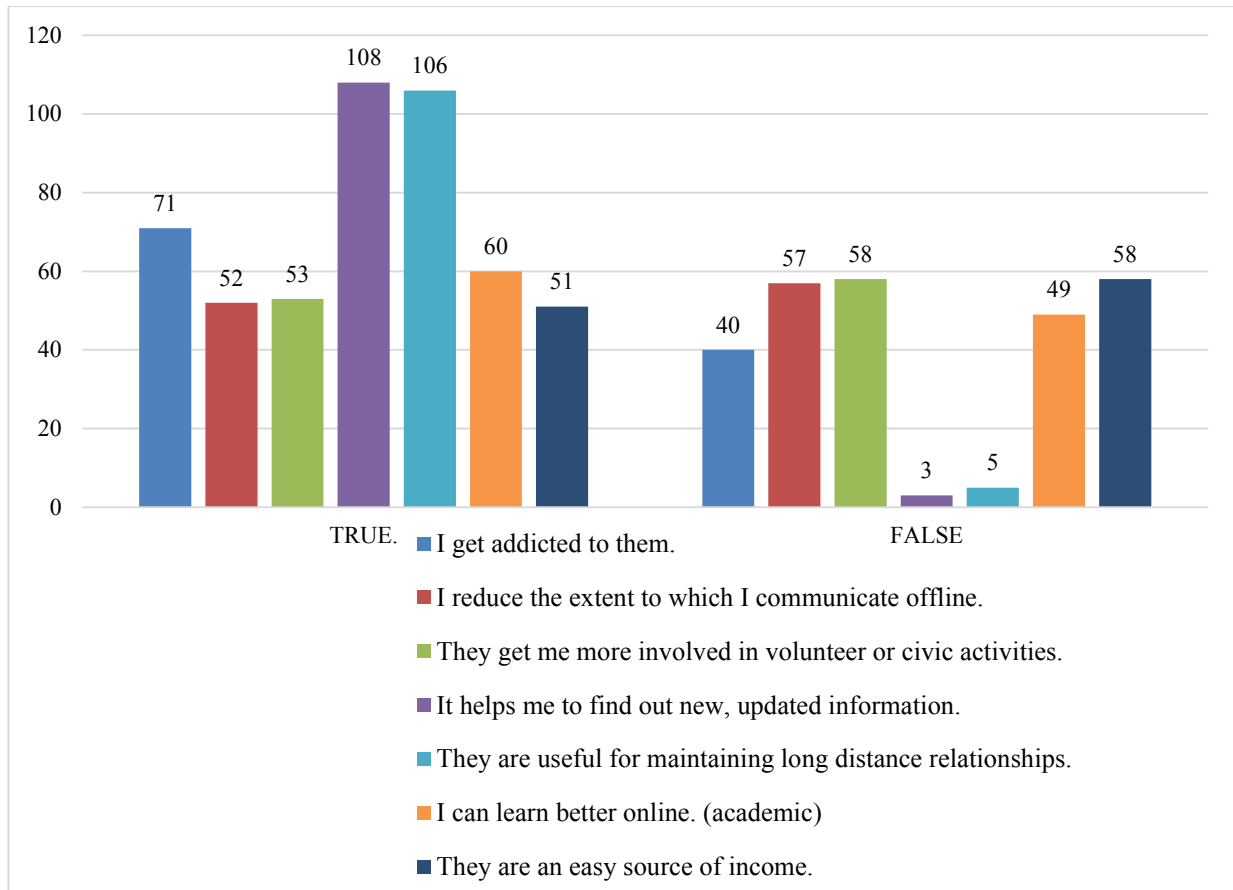


Figure 7. The usefulness of social media networks for users

Source: Authors' own research.

With an impressive 92%, “friends, family, and acquaintances” are at the top of the type of content followed by respondents, followed by the entertainment category (86.6%).

The coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on online time spent, motivating the need of trying to connect with each other by any means and also, finding entertainment from social media can be a way of coping with the events around the globe.

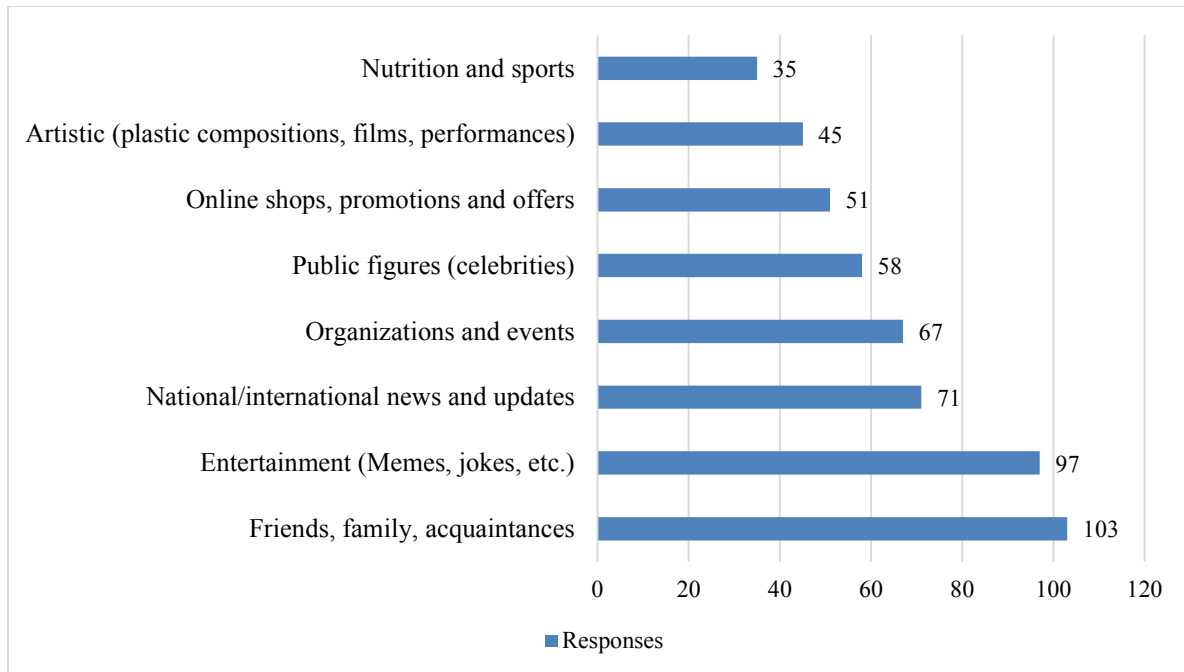


Figure 8. The type of content followed on Facebook

Source: Authors' own research results.

Regarding the importance measured using the Likert scale, in figure 9, it is noted that the respondents give a higher value to grammatical correctness, with 92.2% giving the maximum score, while for the quality of the visual material provided by a Facebook page of the organization, only 63.4% gives the maximum importance.

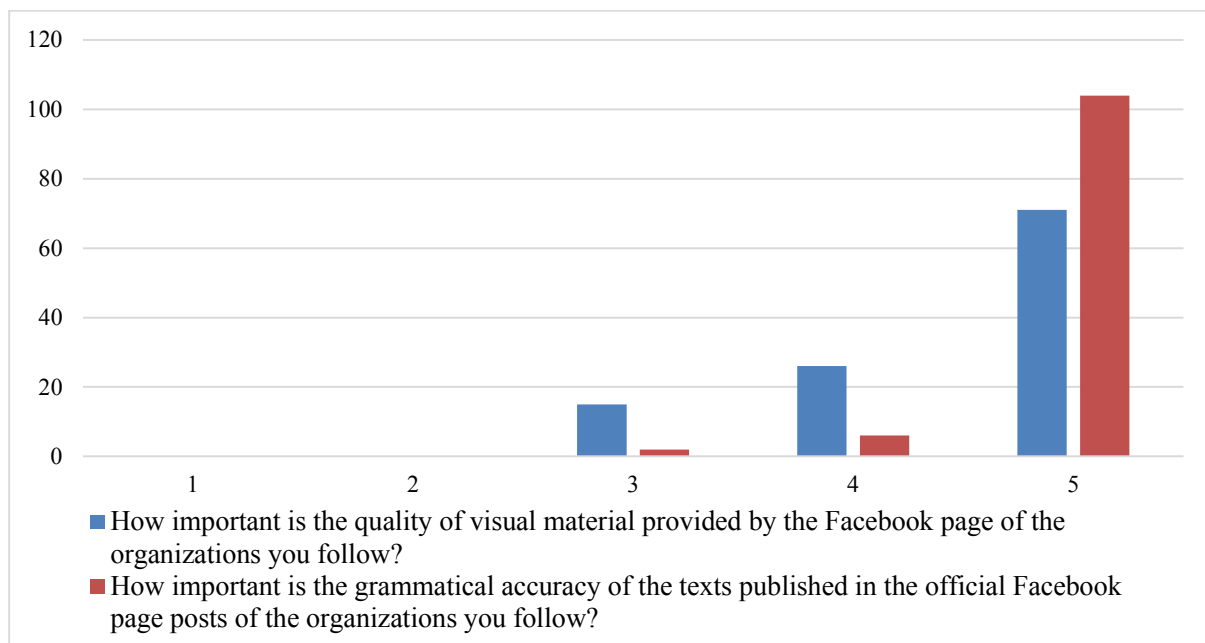


Figure 9. The importance given to the quality of visual material and grammatical correctness on the Facebook pages of organizations

Source: Authors' own research results.

As for the behavior of the Instagram user, 87% of the respondents to the questionnaire confess that "I give "Love" only to the posts that attracted attention" and very close, 85% of them say they "Follow Instagram profiles of people I know in real life", figure 10 showing the values resulted for each affirmation item.

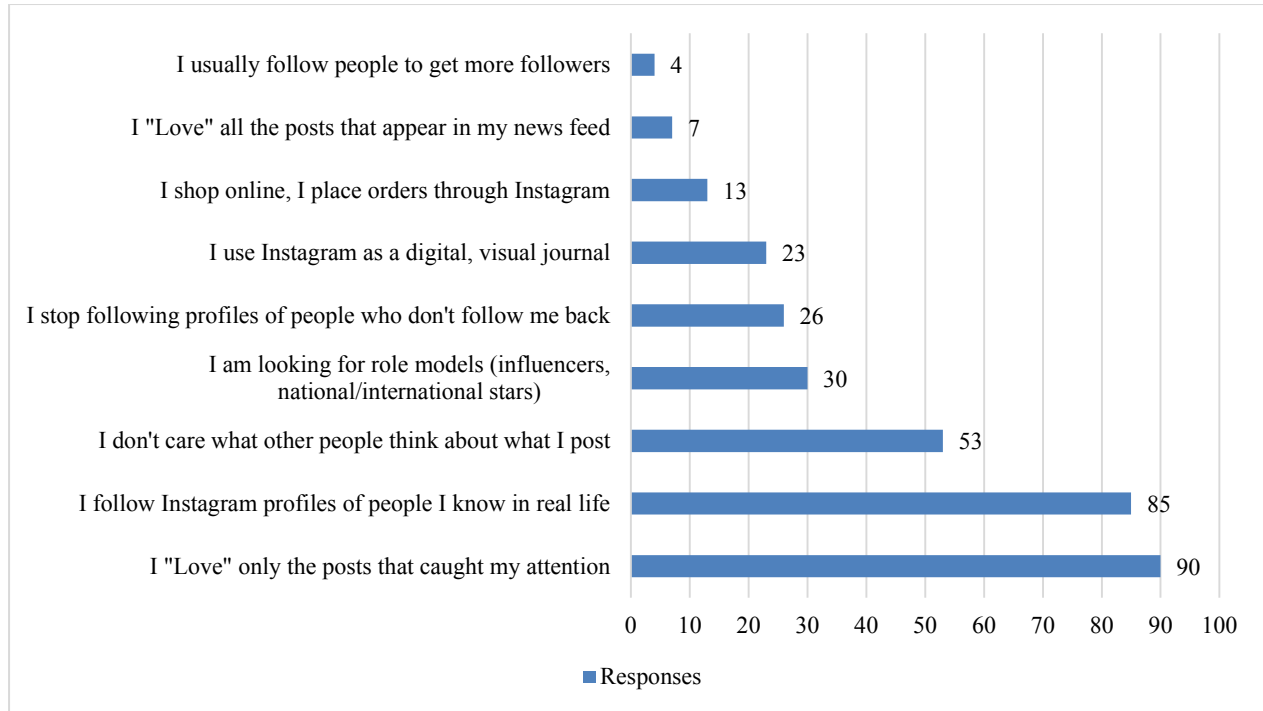


Figure 10. Instagram user behavior

Source: Authors' own research results.

On the answers given to question 12 (What motivated you to follow the pages of organizations?), by observation, the most commonly used responses were focused on curiosity, the need for information, and the high quality of the posted material.

The last open-answer question provided various answers on the potential improvements to the Instagram pages of the organizations they follow. Although some of them did not know what to say, others expressed their desire to increase the quality of the content, both visually and textually.

This response was not a surprise since society has increased its expectations with industrial and technological developments all around. The quality of social media posts can vary greatly. Some posts are well-written, informative, and thought-provoking, while others are poorly written, misleading, or irrelevant. The quality of a social media post can also depend on the platform it is posted on and the audience it is intended for.

Additionally, the quality of social media posts can be affected by factors such as the credibility of the source and the accuracy of the information presented. Having a good service or product means nothing if it is sold online with eye-candy posts and campaigns.

The respondents also mentioned they would like closer communication between the page and its audience by using Instagram features (free answer questions, live video, polls, and reels), since even Instagram regularly updates its features to improve the user experience.

A significant number of respondents had spoken about the need for diversity in posts, modeling funny, trendy posts (specific memes or jokes), but keeping it professional, maybe also by establishing a post pattern in an organization-specific theme. On Instagram, a common pattern for posting is to share a mix of different types of content, such as photos, videos, and stories. Many users will post regularly, but not too frequently, to keep their followers engaged without overwhelming them with too much content.

After completing the questionnaire, the author was able to measure the quality perceived by the followers. Thus, it turned out that there is a need for improvement in the external communication process with the followers, in order to increase satisfaction with its content.

The improvements needed by the pages of the organizations they follow are mainly related to the need for diversity in the content, the increase in the quality of the posted materials, and the development of a closer communication relationship with them. Managers' attention should be directed to social media specialists, who manage the profiles of the organization in a professional manner.

The employees of an organization can be trained in the direction of improving their personal communication skills in a virtual environment by participating in workshops and conferences specific to the field of communication through social media networks.

In this sense, for learning about the employees of the organization, the author proposes a free version, made available even by Facebook (now called Meta) starting in 2020, for all organizations that have a page on their platform. Meta for Business is a social media management tool that helps businesses manage their social media accounts and engage with their audience. Meta for Business offers video-based courses on Facebook pages and how to advertise on Facebook; how to use Messenger effectively for the marketing department, basically how to promote effectively on Facebook, tips, and more.

It is important to note that the feedback on Meta for Business may vary depending on the specific use case and the individual user's experience. It's always a good idea to research and compare different social media management tools before making a decision.

Conclusions

Marketing research forms today an absolutely pragmatic framework of the business environment, which is in direct and close connection with the marketing activities themselves. Social media platforms are more than a unidirectional communication tool.

The paper addresses the topic of the behavior and preferences of social media users and focuses specifically on Facebook and Instagram platforms, giving potential improvements that can be added to the profiles of organizations in Romania.

The proposed objectives of the research paper were achieved, and the essential information was identified, analyzed, and extracted. One of the conclusions of the paper is that the most used social network is Instagram, based on the number of respondents keen on this platform.

Another idea is that the respondents believe that social media helps them find out new, up-to-date information and keep relationships at bay, mainly by following friends, family, and acquaintances on Facebook, and behaviorally, most of them give "Love" only to posts that have caught their attention.

The last notable conclusion is that the improvements needed by the pages of the organizations they follow are mainly related to the need for diversity in the content, the increase in the quality of the posted materials, and the development of a closer communication relationship with them.

The study can be continued by the author with an increase in the degree of trust, by maximizing the number of respondents and diversifying the age categories and occupations. The other social networks, less popular among respondents of Romanian nationality, can also be addressed and compared.

All the operations undertaken in this paper result from the application and implementation of the methods and techniques of social media management of the services approached, the personal contributions being reflected by the implementation of the theories, deepening the knowledge in the field. These proposals could be further developed and properly applied in a future project.

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