Digital Marketing In Albania And It's Impact On Consumer Behavior

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Abstract

Purpose: In this research we focus on the role digital marketing has in shaping consumer behavior in Albania.

Methodology: We conducted a survey in the capital of Albania to understand how trustworthy the WOM technique to consumers is and how valuable it is found to companies that rely on it to sell.

Findings: Results indicated that social media has built a positive reputation, as a good sales channel, and that companies should continue investing in digital advertising on social media because it can increase sales and brand image if done properly. Furthermore, companies that do not have a presence on popular social media outlets or have no strategy implemented on their outlets suffer from lack of brand recognition.

Value: Consumer interactions with brands are rapidly changing, due to advances in digital technologies and marketing channels of social media. Marketers nowadays seek to grab more consumer attention on social media than on the physical medium to promote their products or services.

Keywords: digital marketing, social media, WOM, consumer behavior.

Introduction

Nowadays, the internet has opened the doors for various firms to avail tremendous digital marketing opportunities. The advancement of markets and technologies that are highly competitive with the use of the internet have made digital marketing strategies replace those of traditional marketing (Alnsour, 2018). Moreover, digital marketing covers a wide area in the global market and includes business models that use digital technologies that reduce costs and increase businesses worldwide (Rafiq & Malik, 2018). Currently, digital marketing aims to grow businesses in the future, because customers are much more satisfied with online shopping, and they see digital marketing as safer than traditional marketing (Alzyoud, 2018).

Digital marketing has been around since the 1990s. "Online Marketing", "Internet Marketing" and "Web Marketing" are all terms used to describe digital marketing. The use of electronic media to promote goods and services in the market is known as digital marketing. The goal of digital marketing is to attract customers and allow them to interact with companies they are interested in through digital media. Through a series of digital marketing strategies, the main goal is to promote businesses, build preferences and increase sales.

Digital marketing is an important platform in brand development, promotion and brand management as it encompasses all marketing efforts that use an electronic device or the Internet. Businesses use digital channels, such as search engines, social media, e-mail and their websites to connect with current and potential customers. The main advantage of digital marketing is that the target audience can be reached in a more cost effective and measurable way. Other advantages of digital marketing include increased brand loyalty and greater online sales (Alexander, 2021).

Digitalization has revolutionized the world of marketing during the last 15 years. The digital marketing industry gave positive signs during 2021 even in Albania, where one of the main factors was the outbreak of the global pandemic of COVID-19. Previously, consumers did not focus on online communication, sales or as it is otherwise known "e-commerce", and the moment they faced the situation where the world stopped and the only communication window with the market became the internet, orders directed to digital marketing increased dramatically. Of course, the situation in Albania is quite different from years ago. The digital

part grew significantly in 2020 and results point to an average increase of 8%, compared to 2019. Traditional media (TV, radio, print) fell in 2020 drastically by about 18%.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the impact of social media marketing on the consumer's purchase decision. This study sheds light on consumer culture, how each of us experiences, is influenced and reacts to these very digital environments that we surround ourselves with as part of our daily lives. But this work also has limitations which are mainly considered for the generalization part of the data, since the survey was carried out only with a small part of the consumers of the city of Tirana. The obtained results are not intended to serve professional marketers but are intended to give non-field researchers an insight into how digital marketing is used today and what impact it has on consumer behavior.

Data Methodology

A comparative method of literature review, based on numerous research of foreign and Albanian authors, articles, scientific papers, books, scientific journals on the latest trends in the field of digital marketing, has served for the realization of this analytical, descriptive and comparative work. The obtained data are primary data, collected from 95 questionnaires, addressed to consumers in the city of Tirana, during the period September - October 2022. The interviewed consumers were chosen randomly, not all social media users, as well as residents not only in city center but also in rural areas. The questionnaire was designed in a simple sampling technique in such a way as to obtain all the important information necessary for the realization of this study. A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed and 95 filled samples were collected. The questionnaire was constructed from 11 questions, which received valid responses, providing information about demographics and consumer behavior towards digital marketing. The collected data have been analyzed through statistical programs, helping to reach the valid conclusions of this paper.

Literature Review

Marketing can be described as a management process between a firm and the consumer. There are many definitions of marketing, but they all revolve around the activities carried out in the context of improving customer relations. Shopper marketing is a new concept that has emerged, creating a new touchpoint for interactions between businesses and consumers. Shopper marketing is "the planning and execution of all marketing activities that influence a buyer along

and beyond the entire purchase path, from the point at which the motivation to buy first manifests itself through purchase, consumption, repurchase and recommendation" (Shankar et al 2011). The development in marketing theory has seen the conceptualization of the "marketing mix". This theory has been used strategically by marketers to adapt a product to a specific market based on the characteristics of that market (Gilaninia et al., 2013). While the marketing mix is still widely used by many organizations to drive their strategies, the development of relationship marketing (Stauss, 2000) brought another dimension to marketing which created another change in the way firms sell their products and services.

Digital marketing has been proven to change consumer behavior (Khwaja et al., 2020). Many businesses claim that social media and digital marketing have become integral components of their marketing business plan (Cait Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). The use of digital marketing allows companies to achieve their marketing goals at a relatively low cost (Ajina & Tvaronavičienė, 2019). Organizations can also benefit significantly from creating social media, an integral element of the overall business strategy (Salma et al., 2016). Even during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, not only the needs and purchasing behavior of customers partially changed, but also the internet and social media contributed to their change (Yogesh, 2021). Consumers spent more time shopping online when digital marketing flourished during this period (Coresight Research, 2020). Moreover, it is believed that digital platforms are a sustainable strategy of increasing consumer purchase (Verhoef et al., 2021).

One area that has been greatly influenced by various technological developments is marketing. But digital marketing that is carried out through a digital platform cannot be thought of without effective online advertising channels such as Facebook Ads, Google Ads or email marketing. Digital marketing helps businesses to sell their products to consumers through several channels such as E-Mail Marketing, online advertising, social media marketing, mobile marketing, etc. Digital marketing channels, (Levy & Gvili, 2015) are a set of channels that marketers use to interact with customers to sell their products.

- e-mail marketing is one of the digital marketing methods used to deliver orders to the same individuals at a convenient time. With Email, businesses can send emails that meet customer needs (Ugonna et al., 2017).
- online advertising is a form of promotion that persuades customers to make purchasing decisions and provides information about the audience. Also, a strategy that uses the internet to get website traffic and attract the right potential customers (Budiman, 2021).

- mobile marketing is considered one of the most important channels of digital marketing which provides access to consumers to know the benefits, needs and impact on their purchase decisions (Tiffany et al., 2018).
- social media marketing is a new trend and a fast-growing method to reach target consumers effortlessly and efficiently (Bansal et al., 2014).

The growth and spread of the internet also led to the emergence of a new form of "Word of Mouth Marketing" (WOM) considered one of the most influential informal media among consumers, businesses and the general population. Consumers increasingly use online tools (e.g., social media, blogs, etc.) to share their opinions about the products and services they consume (Gupta and Harris, 2010; Lee et al., 2011) and to research the companies that sell them. These tools are significantly changing daily life and relationships between customers and businesses (Lee et al., 2011). The rapid growth of online communication through social media, websites, blogs, etc., has increased academic interest in word of mouth (WOM) (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hussain et al., 2017; Yang, 2017). Today's new form of online WOM communication is known as electronic word of mouth or eWOM (Yang, 2017). This form of communication has gained particular importance with the emergence of online platforms, which have made it one of the most influential sources of information on the web (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016). One of the most comprehensive concepts of WOM was proposed by Litvin et al. (2008), who described it as "All informal communication via the internet directed at consumers and related to the use or characteristics of goods or services. The advantage of this tool is its availability to all consumers, who can use online platforms to share their opinions and ratings with other users.

In the field of consumer behavior, some previous studies (e.g., Park and Lee, 2009) have shown that consumers pay more attention to negative information than to positive information (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). For example, the most satisfied customers with a product or service tend to become its loyal representatives through positive WOM (Royo-Vela and Casamassima, 2011), which can bring very competitive advantages to enterprises, businesses or sellers, especially small ones, which tend to have fewer resources. Several studies have suggested that traditional WOM is the sales and marketing tactic most often used by small businesses. Furthermore, WOM offers businesses a way to identify customer needs and perceptions and even a cost-effective way to communicate with them (Nieto et al., 2014). Today, WOM has become an important medium for companies' social media marketing (Hussain et al., 2017).

The new digital age has brought about a change in the way of thinking and doing things. The traditional marketing paradigm has shifted to a new paradigm facilitated by digital technologies. Many countries have used this change to

their advantage and adopted new age technologies and digital media marketing channels to respond to changing customer needs, while others have not been able to adapt to the revolution. digital and use the various opportunities available to them effectively (Goel, 2020). After the advent of the Internet and the evolution in digital technologies, there has been a drastic change in the wants and needs of consumers. Two-way communication tools, especially social media, have brought about changes in the traditional model of communication. Consumers now prefer to interact directly with brands and share their opinions and preferences publicly. Consumers expect brands to be more accessible and available across multiple touch points for ease of communication and interaction (Goel, 2020; Reynolds-Pearson & Hyman, 2020).

As traditional advertising media channels are losing popularity, marketers and advertisers must find new strategies to get their commercial messages to the consumer. Marketing practitioners must pay attention to how consumers interact with brands, how they respond to and engage with marketing promotions. Ho et al. (2020) in their study propose a strategic content marketing framework with the aim of providing guidance to companies starting fresh their content marketing strategies, guiding marketers through the strategic elements of vertical content marketing, and the opportunities of growing and executing content marketing horizontally. This model provides the essential elements for a content marketing strategy, depending on the maturity level of the company in relation to content marketing practices in general (emerging, developing or mature).

In addition, digital marketing uses channels to reach the preferred target audience through several channels, including social media, websites, multimedia advertising, online advertising, e-marketing, communication marketing such as opinion polls, adding games, mobile marketing (Garg et al., 2021). According to these researchers, marketers can conduct online surveys to get the information they need from customers, analyze the responses, and take appropriate actions based on customer responses to meet their needs.

Social media is a relatively new term that has evolved as a way to describe various platforms for online communication. In general, the term social media refers to "any technology that facilitates the distribution and sharing of information online" (Robbins and Singer, 2014: 387). More specifically, Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as a "group of internet-based applications that are based on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and sharing of User-Generated Content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Social media marketing is a new trend and a fast-growing method to reach target consumers effortlessly and efficiently. Furthermore, social media marketing can be modestly defined as the use of social media channels to promote a business and its products (Bansal et al., 2014). This type of marketing can be considered

a subset of online marketing activities that complement traditional web-based promotional strategies, for example, email newsletters and online advertising campaigns (Omar & Atteya, 2020). Thus, with this new marketing approach, new channels are being created and improved for businesses.

Social media as explained by Mayfield (2011) is changing the way information is communicated to and by people around the world. The rapid use of social media is changing the way organizations respond to the needs and wants of consumers and is changing the way they respond to their competitors (Mayfield, 2011). Marketers now have the opportunity to engage in broader and more innovative forms of online mass communication using social media marketing tools (Stelzner, 2010). Social media marketing is about passion, emotion and genuine expression towards a brand (Brandz, 2010). Social media marketing represents communication opportunities for marketers to reach wider audiences (Kweskin, 2007), and allows marketers to access valuable information that influences building and maintaining relationships with consumers (Evans, 2010).

Social media marketers are now becoming better and more influential by introducing analytics applications from the official social networking website platform (Nur, 2021). Social Media refers to any software channel that allows and encourages engagement in discussions. Thus, the general forms of social media are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube. Currently, social media is a platform for businesses to have more conversations and interaction with consumers. Moreover, it is the brand that is now attracting consumers through social media (Budiman, 2021). Social media has also spawned websites and apps designed to allow customers to share content faster, more efficiently, and in real time.

Consumer behavior is a term that can be used generally to refer to the actions and decisions that influence the purchasing behavior of consumers (Solomon et al., 2017). Consumer behavior mainly includes purchasing activities, consumption and disposal actions, behavioral, mental and emotional responses related to the decision to make a purchase (Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). However, its understanding on the digital platform is quite possible through some analytical software. The behavior of any consumer depends on many factors which are very important for any marketing management team in any business or any organization that deals directly with consumers. The study of consumer behavior is very important for businesses because it enables them to understand and predict the buying behavior of consumers in the market; it is not only about what consumers buy, but also why they buy it, when, where and how they buy it, how often they buy it, and also how they consume it. New technology has changed consumer behavior online.

In today's digital age, consumers have many more opportunities to search and gather information to make decisions about their planned purchases. Rami (2012) in his study on factors influencing consumer behavior, explains that buyer behavior

and purchase decision are strongly influenced by cultural, social, personal and psychological characteristics. Understanding the impact of these factors is essential for businesses in order to develop appropriate marketing methods to attract the target customer. Cultural factors refer to the social environment, ideas, customs and social behavior of a certain people or society; social factors include groups (reference groups, aspirational groups and member groups), family and social roles and status; personal factors include such variables as age and life cycle stage, occupation, economic circumstances, lifestyle (activities, interests, opinions, and demographics), and psychological factors include motivation, perception, learning, beliefs, and attitudes.

Advantages and disadvantages of using digital marketing:

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Updated information on products or services. Consumers can stay up-to-date with information, while companies can update information about their products and services.	Reliability in technology. Digital marketing is completely based on technology and internet connectivity also plays a crucial role in consumer behavior. On the other hand, the reach and usability of digital devices/technologies still remains a challenge for a large portion of consumers everywhere.
Greater exchange of information. Digital communication can help exchange information in a more convenient way and with greater speed. Customers can engage with various company activities by visiting websites, reading posts about products or services, placing online orders, and providing feedback or sharing experiences with others. The Internet provides comprehensive information that helps customers make purchasing decisions.	Security, Copyright and Privacy Issues. Cyber security is the main requirement for the successful implementation of digital marketing. The problems of online payment frauds are also increasing day by day and that is why many of the consumers do not trust electronic payment methods and give up online shopping because of this.
Easier comparison with other companies. There are many companies in the market promoting the same products and services. By using digital marketing, the customer can compare these products or services with cost and time without visiting another retail store, to get knowledge about these products or services.	Consumer Mindset. Digital marketing is still not fully accepted by all consumers. Digital platforms do not allow the consumer to "touch and feel" the products before buying it, preferring to use traditional shopping methods. Also, there is a lack of consumer confidence in digital platforms due to numerous scams with virtual promotions, payments, non-delivery of products or services as shown on portals/posts etc.
Enables 24/7 shopping. E-marketing platforms provide 24/7 services to the customer, which is not possible in the traditional way of marketing.	The impossibility of small business development. There is a need to have a trained and specialized team to manage the elements of digital marketing. Also, tools, platforms and trends change rapidly, which require keeping up to date to meet customer demands. These are the main obstacles for small business owners to use digital marketing strategies to expand and reach a larger number of customers.

Cost efficiency and personalized services. Digital marketing is cost effective solution compared to traditional mass media marketing. Also, it is possible to create personalized offers and programs based on customer profiles and preferences.	Complaints and customer feedback. Many times competitors use famous brand personalities, bloggers, influencers and opinion leaders to advertise or to criticize the image of a certain brand that affects the business. Also, using the digital platform, consumers can give any negative or critical feedback about the brand online, which can be visible to any other consumer who visits the post / portals or social media and reviews the websites. Thus, performing effective online customer service is a challenge for protecting against brand reputation damage.

Data Analysis

The results obtained from the questionnaire will prove the fact that Albanian consumers are recently massively using social media for their purchases. In the following, more specifically, we will present all the empirical data with analysis and comments from the respondents.

Demographic data analysis for the questionnaire.

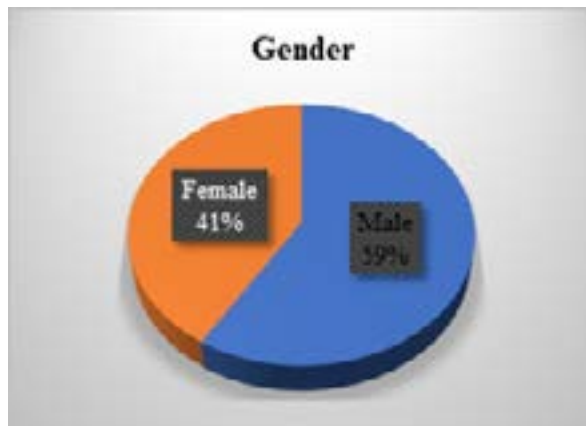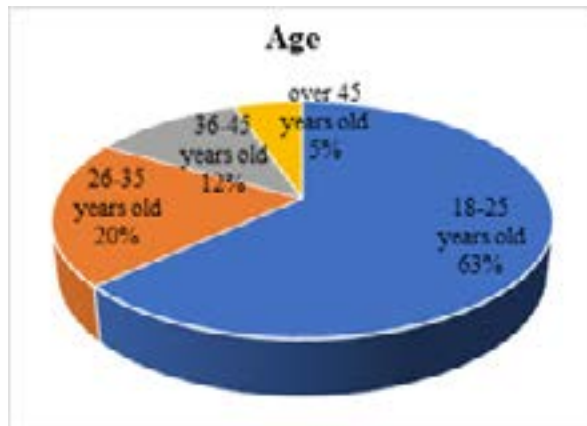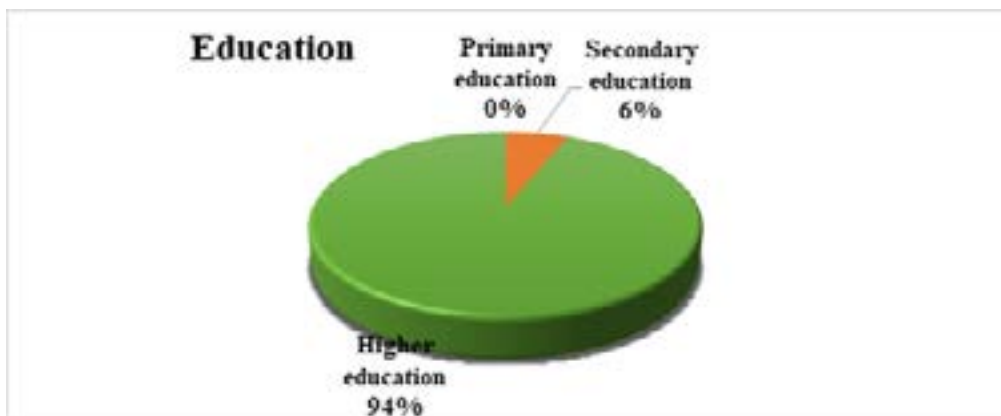**FIGURE 1.** Questionnaire results based on Gender of participants.

Based on the demographic data of the 95 people interviewed, the dominant gender was men with 59%, whilst women 41% (See Figure 1). The predominant age group in this study was the 18-25 age group with 63%, followed by the 26-35 age group with 20% of the interviewed population, 12% age group 36-45 years and 5% over 45 years old (See Figure 2). Asked about their educational level, 95% of them had a higher education and only 5% of them had a secondary education (Figure 3).

Data analysis for assessing the importance of using social media.

In order to get information about whether they were users of social media or not, they were asked the question presented in the graph below (Figure 4). The

interviewees stated that they use social networks and have open profiles on these platforms (73%), and only 27% of them stated that they are not social media users. This part included consumers living in suburban areas.

FIGURE 4. Are you users of social media?
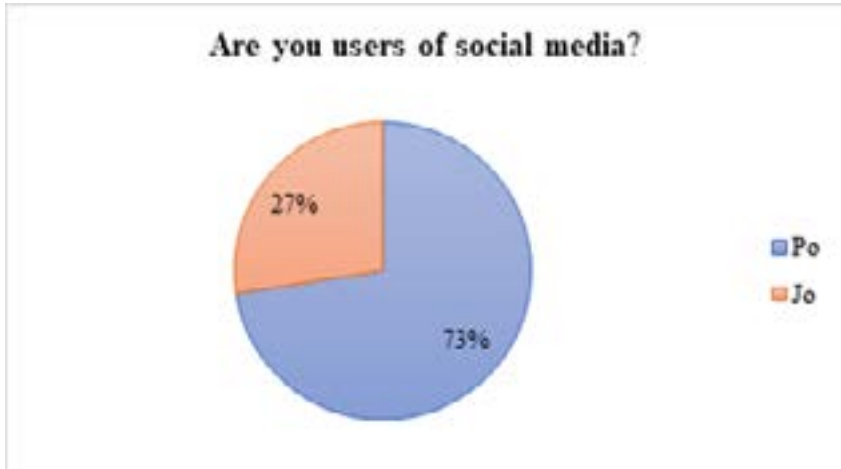
According to the questionnaires distributed to different people chosen randomly, it was found that many of them use different categories of social networks (Figure 5). The social network Instagram is the social network that dominates in terms of use, 81% of the participants stated that they are users of this social media channel, followed by Facebook which is used by 16% of the participants, YouTube by 2% and Twitter by 1% of the respondents of the questionnaire.

FIGURE 5. Social media platforms used by the participants
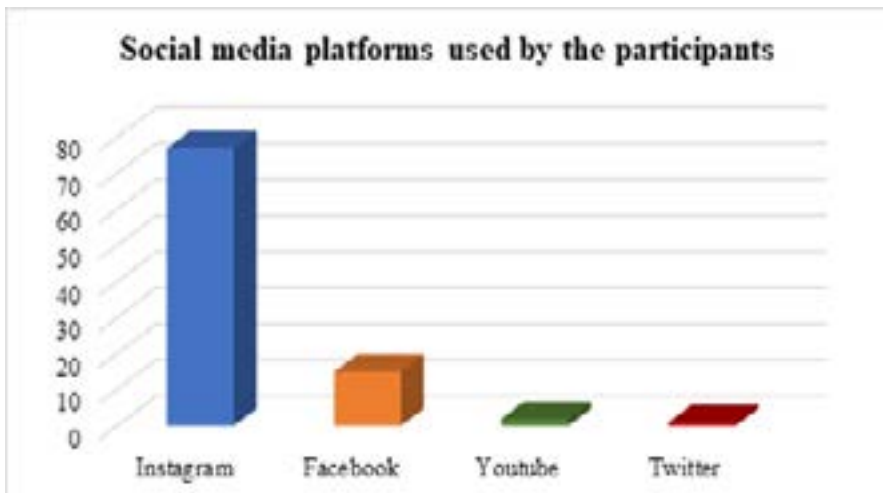
The results obtained from the answers to the question below (Figure 6), show that for the majority of respondents, the use of social media is very important in their decisions for the purchase of products. 84% have affirmed this, while 13% consider it important, and very few of them do not attach importance to the use of social media in informing about the products that companies offer on their sites.

FIGURE 6. Importance of using social media
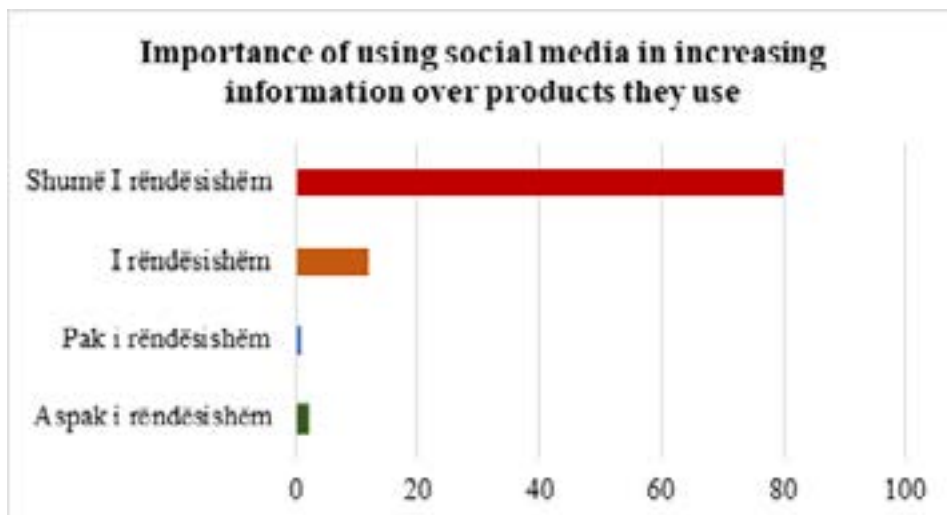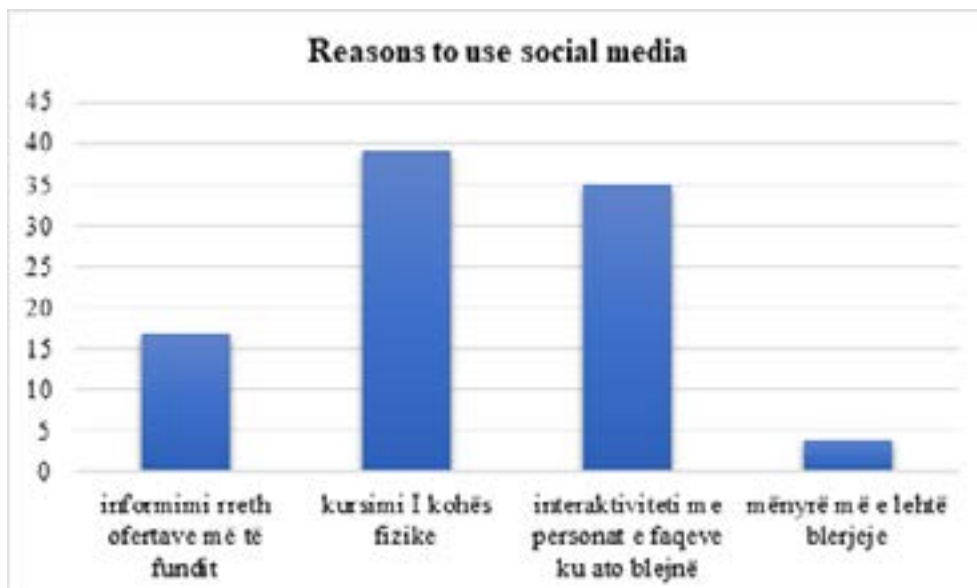in increasing information over products they use.

FIGURE 7. Reasons to use social media.

Undoubtedly, social media nowadays has become the best means for consumers to be informed about the latest offers and discounts on a company's products. This was confirmed by the answers given by the respondents in the next question of the questionnaire, where they were asked what are the reasons they use social media (Figure 7). 18% of the respondents answered to be informed about the latest offers. 41% of the answers from the respondents are because buying online saves more time and they don't get "tired" at all by going directly to see the offers or discounts of companies in physical stores, since something like this is all done from the phone, where obviously they enter social networks and see their offers. 37% of the respondents answered that there is interactivity with the responsible persons of the pages where they can ask them on social media about the questions they may have about products and this makes it easier to decide to buy a certain product.

The following questions were designed to provide information on how familiar the respondents in this study are with WOM strategies and what influences it has on their purchase decisions.

**FIGURE 8.** Are you informed on WOM strategy?

FIGURE 9. Does WOM strategy impact your decision to purchase?

The two figures above (Figures 8 and 9) prove that most of the individuals questioned have information about the WOM strategy, which they see as an important strategy that also affects their consumer behavior.

FIGURE 10. The impact of social media marketing on the decision to purchase
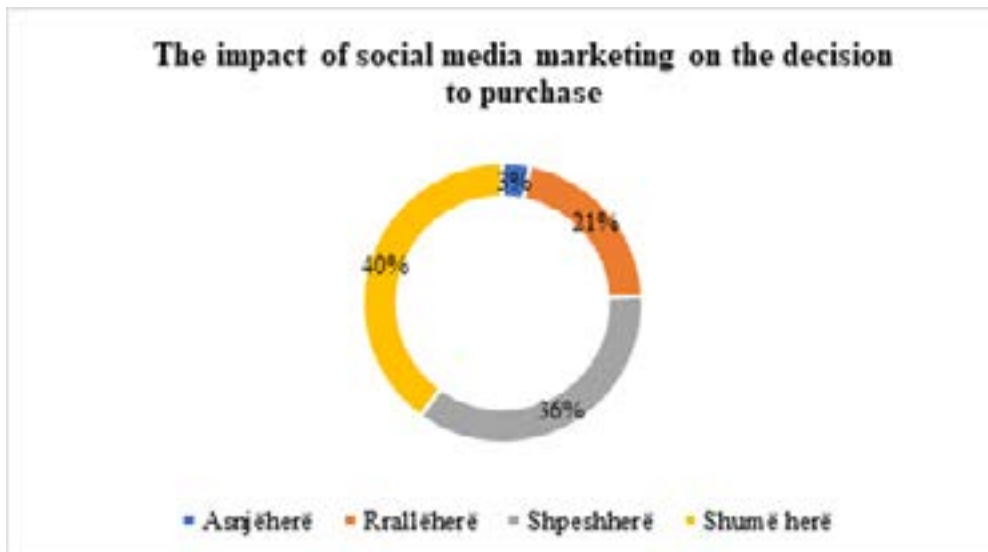
After the previous questions, the respondents were also asked about the fact that social media marketing has influenced them to buy the products of a company operating in our country (See Figure 10). Some40% of the respondents stated that social media marketing has influenced many times that they choose and then buy products of different companies or enterprises. About 36% of respondents answered that social media marketing has often influenced them to buy a company's products. Roughly 21% of the respondents rarely had an impact, who expressed the opinion that they rarely bought company products from the marketing they did on social media. Only 3% of them stated that the marketing of these companies on social media has never influenced the purchase of any product.

Finally, the interviewees were asked if they recommend different businesses to do marketing in different social media (See Figure 11).

FIGURE 11. Would you recommend businesses to use social media for marketing?
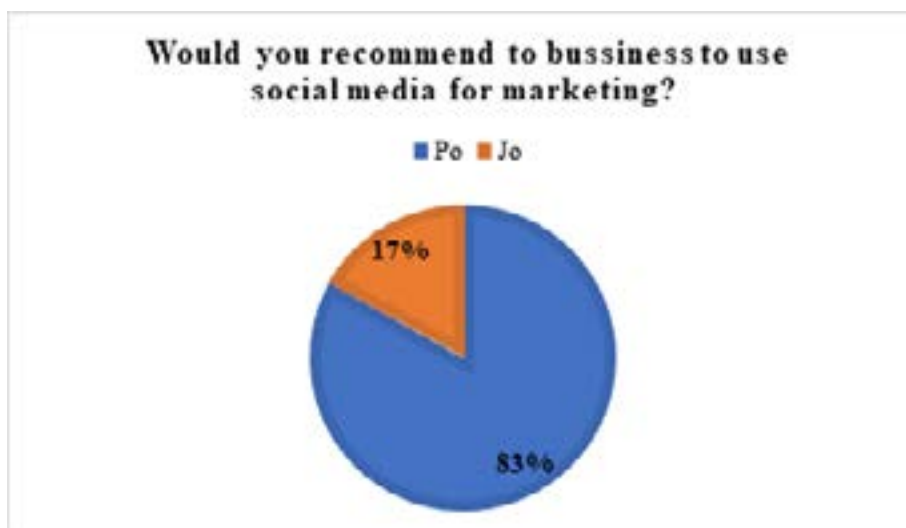
Undoubtedly, the majority of the interviewees (83%) have affirmed that they recommend different companies to develop marketing in social media, in order to be as attractive as possible, and clearer about their products as this will it was a more convenient way for them to establish relationships with customers and to be as close to them as possible.

Conclusions

In recent years, technological developments have played a vital role by increasing the awareness of consumers who are fully convinced of the effectiveness of various social media in their purchasing behavior. However, the consumer mindset has changed from mall to mobile, as consumer behavior has changed, companies are also trying to attract customers through the digital age. Digitalization has inspired people to market through social media platforms, and consumers are constantly changing their mindset and taking advantage of online shopping. Undoubtedly, social media is playing an important role in making people aware of social media companies, which are offering online sales and increasing their profits through social media. Through digital marketing, the company has created all the facilities that the customer needs.

Marketing has always aimed to connect the company with the audience at the right time and place. Today, companies must meet consumers where they spend most of their time: online. People's lives changed a lot with the invention of the internet, and the way of doing business changed forever. The goal of companies in

the past has been to meet consumer needs while meeting target profits. Today, with all the information that is available to everyone and free of charge, companies are forced to provide a customer experience in addition to fulfilling needs.

Therefore, today it is not enough for companies to simply fulfill these needs, but to provide satisfaction to consumers. Also, Word of Mouth Marketing (WOM) is an action taken recently by various companies that have begun to pay attention to motivating people to talk about their products, services or brand spontaneously, becoming into a valuable marketing resource.

From the answers obtained from the interviewees in this study, we noticed that:

- They attached very high importance to the quality of the product or service in choosing the product/service brand. This is a very important point that directly affects the company's marketing since the whole company can be destroyed from negative feedback by its customers, whether they are new or existing customers.
- They were users of social media, mainly the Instagram platform, where they bought new and existing products of companies thanks to the digital marketing of the product through social media. They could be considered loyal customers, as long as the company met its targets and marketed the identical product as marketed.
- The main reasons why these interviewees used social media were: information about the latest offers, saving physical time, interactivity with the people of the pages where they buy, easier way of buying.
- Digital marketing had a significant impact on the selection and then on the purchase process of a product.
- They were informed about the WOM strategy and the importance it had on consumer behavior.

Regardless of the positive impact social media has on consumer behavior, assumption that we derived from the questionnaire responses, Albanian consumers should be more loyal to social media, seeing it as an opportunity and not as a risk. But this is insufficient as there is always a need for improvement. Since the fight for survival in the market is becoming more and more fierce, companies operating in our country must work to improve marketing incentives in order to be able to convey the right information in the right way to consumers. It would also be recommended that companies use to their advantage other forms of social media platforms in order to differentiate themselves from other competitors in the market.

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