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Entrepreneurship Orientation in an Emerging Market: A Grounded Theory Approach

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Abstract
This study explores entrepreneurship orientation in an emerging market. The review from existing literature describes the interest of marketing scholars in the understudied African emerging market. Ghana is among the emerging market characterized with the advancement in market climate for entrepreneurship. The level of awareness to create business opportunities to entrepreneurs is driven by the government economic policy. However, the nature of the challenges faced by entrepreneurs in an emerging market suggest that the outcome of entrepreneurship orientation is often uncertain. The aim of the study is to explore an in-depth understanding of entrepreneurship orientation which is under researched in an emerging market. Drawing from the data obtained through an in-depth interview in sub–Saharan Africa, Ghana, a grounded theory method was used. The study generates insight on the concept of entrepreneurship orientation as the central themes in the life world of the participants. This was established from the data through the three stages of coding: Open Coding, Axial Coding, and Selective Coding. It contributes to theoretical contribution by urging marketing scholars to contextualize entrepreneurship orientation research in emerging countries by applying new theories, other than those relevant to the context of developed economies.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship Orientation, Emerging Market, Grounded theory, Ghana.

JEL classification: M5, M21. L26.

1. Introduction

Emerging Market research is becoming increasingly important to academics and managers as the role of emerging markets in economic production continues to climb. It constitutes 65 percentage of the world's population and 40 percentage of the global economic output. (Narasimhan et al., 2015; Gruber-Muecke & Hofer, 2015). To understand the growth of emerging market which offers new perspective and practices in marketing, research may help us to ask and answer new questions about the fast growing African markets and improve our understanding of the theoretical knowledge of marketing and practice in the emerging afican context (Kumar & Srivastava, 2020).

Academics (e.g., Peng 2003; Cavusgil et al. 2002) and international development agency (for example, World Bank 2002) appear to agree that emerging market include the transition economies, for example: east Asia, central and eastern Europe, and newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, Latin America, and Africa. Ghana is among the emerging market characterized with the advancement in market climate for entrepreneurship. The level of awareness to create business opportunities to entrepreneurs is driven by the government economic policy (Ratten, 2020). The economic objective and history of the country in this context, has been pursued on the path of inclusive growth through public – private collaboration since 1980 (Affum-Osei et al., 2019; Adu-Asare Idun & Q.Q. Aboagye, 2014), this is because the socio-economic, culture and regulative context differs sharply from high-income countries like USA and Europeans (Zhang et al., 2014; Meyer & Peng, 2016) which should cause for a new perspective of understanding marketing.

Despite making economic and social progress, entrepreneurs in emerging market continue to suffer from periodic economic slumps and such constraints as lack of stable political structure, absence of credible legal framework and physical infrastructure (i.e., telecommunication, roads, sanitation, and power). These challenges posit that, the outcome of entrepreneurship in emerging market is often uncertain. (Tracey & Phillips, 2011). To shed light on the above, this paper explores entrepreneurship orientation in the context of firms operating in Ghana and the experience of managers in the business ecosystem. What insight can be generated from entrepreneurs about the subject of inquiry in an emerging market? The purposes of the study are : (1) to explore entrepreneurship orientation in Ghana as one of the countries with an advantage of creating new businesses in an emerging market (Ratten, 2020). (2) to explain the use of grounded theory methods in the entrepreneurial marketing domain(Kraus et al., 2010; Seyyedamiri & Faghih, 2015).

The following is the structure of this paper: (1) After this section of the Introduction, (2) a survey of literature review and the conceptual framework of entrepreneurship orientation is offered, (3) the research methodology is presented (4) the findings.(5) the conclusion and implication (6) Limitations and Future Directions.

2. Literature Review

The ever-evolving conversation of entrepreneurship orientation in management literature has caused further investigation by the academic scholars to look into other perspective of the concepts and report what hitherto has not been captured in the discussion of the concept (Wales, 2016) the root discussion of the concept has been amply reviewed by scholars in recent time including Anderson et al. (2015), Basso et al. (2009), Covin and Wales (2012), Edmond and Wiklund (2010), and Miller (2011). Other scholars have called for a ‘concept travel’ of entrepreneurship orientation to other specific context so that more dimensions can be observed and added to the characteristics of EO dimension in a particular context and to examine EO as a phenomenon which may reflect entrepreneurship process through an exploratory initiative. (George & Marino, 2011).

2.1. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of EO may be traced back roughly over five decades now, beginning with the Aston Group's work in the early 1960s and concluding with Danny Miller's work in 1983. (Landström & Lohrke, 2010). This time span begins with a paradigm shift in how scholars look at businesses and ends with the creation of a measurement scale for evaluating firm-level entrepreneurship. The ten years between 1986 and 1996 saw significant changes to the EO measuring scale and the EO conceptual model. During this time, the term "entrepreneurial orientation" was coined, as well as new talks about EO research technique.

Miller (1983, 2011) first defined entrepreneurial orientation as "a firm that engages in product-market innovation, pursues relatively hazardous undertakings, and is the first to come up with 'proactive' innovations, beating competitors to the punch.". He offered three qualities to characterize and measure entrepreneurship. These were: "innovativeness," "proactivity," and "risk-taking" (Rezaei & Ortt, 2018). Innovativeness is defined as the firm’s tendency to engage in and support new ideas, novelty, experimentation, and creative processes that may result in new product, services, or technological processes. (Kraus et al., 2017; Lumpkin and Dess, 1996). Risk taking is also defined as the willingness for managers to make large and risky resource commitment, i.e., those with the reasonable chance of costly failures” (Schoenherr, 2017), whereas proactiveness is also defined as seeking new opportunities that may or may not be related to the current line of operation, introduction of new products and brands ahead of competition, strategically eliminating operations that are in the mature or declining stages of

the firm operation (Soares & Perin, 2019).

2.2. Emerging Market

According to Hoskisson et al, (2000), emerging markets is defined as low-income, fast-growing countries that use economic liberalization as their principal engine of growth (Tracey & Phillips, 2011). As a result, not all developing countries qualify as emerging markets. Only those developing countries that are: (1) undergoing an economic reform process to address poverty and enhance the living standards of their citizens; and (2) have an economy that has experienced continuous positive economic growth can be classed as "really" emerging markets (Cavusgil et al. 2002).

Emerging markets are the world's growth engines today, and they are frequently the major objectives for doing business (Paul, 2019; Bang et al., 2016; Sinha and Sheth, 2018; Nkamnebe, 2011). It is increasingly recognized as a diverse set of business environment that offer the opportunities to gain deeper insight into prevailing theories and their supporting evidence. It also leads researchers to test, reassess and renew wisdom on how the world of business work in other environment or make discoveries that improves the business environment (Kearney, 2012). Therefore, the interest of marketing scholars to understand the challenges and opportunities between customers in developed and emerging market for both domestic and international market become significant (Sharma et al., 2018).

3. Methodology

The design of the research used a qualitative approach based on a grounded theory. Using an in-depth interview, a purposive sample of 20 participants were selected from the owners of SME businesses and entrepreneurs in Ghana. (Turkson et al., 2020; (Mintah & Darkwah, 2018) The researcher identified relevant issues of entrepreneurship orientation to generate more insight during the discussion with participants about the subject of inquiry. Further probes for the purpose to obtain a full description of the phenomena were explored to provide the mapping questions which were posed (Salmons, 2015; Braun et al., 2021) In a qualitative interview, the researcher asks the participant a series of open-ended questions, and the participant responds using their own words. The spoken conversation with the participants applied the basic process of virtual interview (i.e.: using instant messaging or chat software like WhatsApp, skype and zoom) (Hay-Gibson, 2009; Burke & Miller, 2001).

In addition to the interview processes, handwritten notes were added to the recordings using a transcription software (e.g., https://otter.ai) to transcribe the data captured through zoom platform. To ensure that the transcription was accurate and that no key concepts were overlooked or lost in the transcription process, the researcher checked the transcribed data by listening to most of the recorded material and referring to handwritten notes. Reading the transcripts multiple times to get a sense of the overall data, familiarizing himself with the nuances of each dimension of entrepreneurship orientation, and making notes in the database about any ideas or notions that sprang to mind, were all part of the data analysis. This was followed by a procedure suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990) that involved coding the interview data (open coding) and then merging them into larger categories (axial coding) and (selective coding). Coding was undertaken manually with the aid of Microsoft word. Some basic coding guidelines were adopted such as creating table, making notes on the margin. The codes were then examined for similarities and connectedness on which basis, the codes were grouped, and categories set up (Cho & Lee, 2014; Evangelista, 2005). while grouping and the setting up of the categories, concepts were developed, and interrelationship identified. The major elements that emerged are summarized in Table 1& 2 and Figure 1.

Table 1. Open coding

Taking advantage of technology	Regarding innovation on our brand, I think one of the important things that we have used is taking advantage of technology because at the point of starting, the business was virtually run without an office. So, we were making use of social media and tech tools, to reach out to people to sell our products and to create awareness for our services
Being among the first enterprise to introduce local bar in the food industry	And then of course, one of the things that we have done that is so innovative is the kind of package that we give to our services. We were among the first people that introduced what we called "local bar" in the food industry in Ghana.
Being afloat in the midst of competition	So, of course we live in a global village, right. And as an entrepreneur you always must have the mindset of what others are doing. that is your competitors and that will give you the edge to move with your entrepreneurial ideas, so that you're able to stay afloat in the midst of all this competition
Crazy ideas keep coming because of uncertainty	oh yeah, I mean, uncertainty happens to be part of the game. Sometimes some crazy ideas keep coming, you would not know the outcome of it, but you see, that's part of the package you do get. For instance, this COVID -19 that came, by the way, I have interest in the hospitality industry as one of the areas that I have my business in, and when COVID set in, we were all not sure whether this industry is going to be sustainable
Not giving -up early	I think that being an entrepreneur in Ghana, it wouldn't be an easier area because it is a developing economy even though opportunities abound. So, one needs to be very tactical in your entrepreneurial quest for you to succeed. you need to be determined not give-up early. It would be difficult at the early stages to sustain the business.
Not knowing the risk associated with what is expected to happen	you're asking of uncertainty. And I'm saying that, in business risk is always associated with what we do. I was telling you that, in the hospitality industry, we deal with human movement. And when that is curtailed, then we obviously would have problems or challenges with our businesses. So, not knowing when the covid restriction is going to be lifted and how our businesses are going to survive without this movement pose a challenge to us in the sector
Being tactical to succeed in a developing economy	So, one needs to be very tactical in your entrepreneurial quest for you to succeed
Having contingencies plans for unexpected cases	I feel like you know, this forms part of whatever you're going to do because you may not have all the facts or information, so one must plan for contingencies in case the unexpected happens
Speed in the marketplace is very important	Speed to marketing is very important. If you have an idea, if you have a solution, if you have a product, you have to get it to the market as fast as you can and with too much aggression ….. making sure that you're hitting all the channels of the marketing stages and preventing the competitor to sweep your customers from you
Not being quiet about your marketing strategies	Yes, it has always been one of the things that has helped so many institutions to succeed. What we have realized is that when you are quiet about your marketing strategies, your product also remains quiet. Having an aggressive strategy or approach to marketing certainly helps in doing that. For example, we did aggressive adverts on social media, and we have seen results in less than two months
Being independent in what one does	having an autonomy, especially in Ghana, is one of the things that can sustain someone especially when individual business cannot rely on government policy So, there is the need for one to try to be independent by working for his own objective and given freedom to other workers to act and be creative in what they do for our enterprise

Source: Author's research, 2022.

Table 2. Axial Coding

Innovative	Taking advantage of technology
	Being among the first enterprise to introduce local bar in the food industry

	Being afloat in the midst of competition
Risk- taking	Not giving -up early
	Not knowing the risk associated with what is expected to happen
Proactiveness	Being tactical to succeed in a developing economy
	Being proactive to sustain once business
	Having contingencies plans for unexpected cases
Aggressiveness	Speed in the marketplace is very important
	Not being quiet about your marketing strategies
Autonomy	Being independent in what one does

Source: Author's research, 2022.

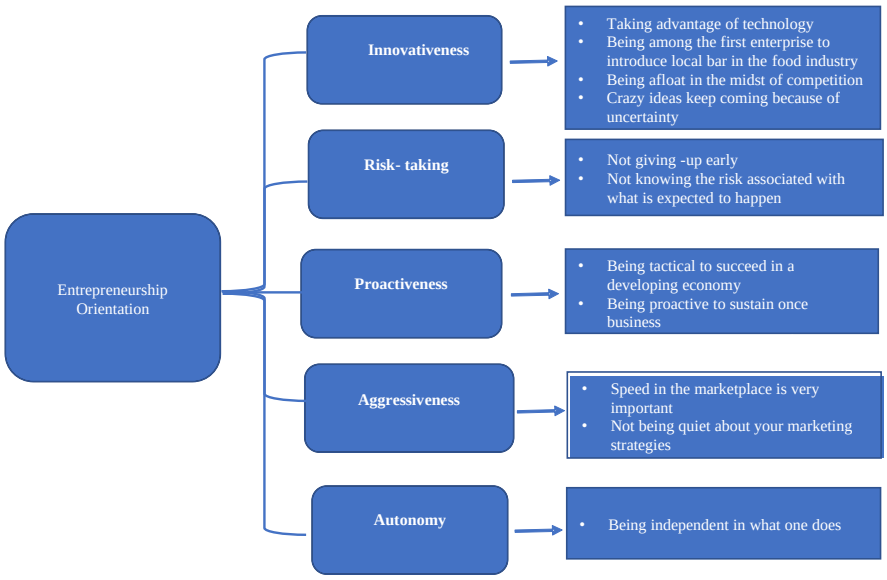

Figure 1: Selective Coding
Source: Author's research, 2022

4. Findings

The research seeks to generate an insight on the concept of entrepreneurship orientation as the central themes in the life world of the participants. This was established from the data through the three stages of coding: Open Coding, Axial Coding, and Selective Coding. (Chong and Yeo, 2015). The technique of breaking down data into distinct units of meaning is known as open coding (Goulding, 1999). It occurs during the start of a research project. The goal is to conceptualize and label data to arrange more abstract categories from the data and gather them around a common topic. The researcher analyzed the data and looked for codes, which was unfocused and open. During this process several codes which might have potential meaning and relevance were recognized. key words or phrases which connect the participant's description to the experience under study were identified and associated with the concepts development as described in table 1. The second stage of coding was axial coding. The researcher minimizes the number of codes and groups them together in a way that demonstrates a relationship between them through systematic analysis and frequent data comparison. During this stage, four additional analytical processes took place: (a) constantly relating subcategories to a category, (b) comparing categories to the collected data, (c) expanding the density of the categories by detailing their properties and dimensions, and (d) exploring variations in the phenomena. The final stage of the data analyses was selective coding. Through selective coding, the researcher integrated the categories and further validate those relationship of the

categories into a developed theory. This matrix helps to frame the story from the data which was a key aspect in formulating the grounded theory. This final stage brings together the concepts and integrated them into categories which explained the context of the research objective.

Judging from the context of the research objective, the three stages of coding revealed the situation of entrepreneurs and their experiences and how the concept of entrepreneurship orientation is understood from emerging market. The perspectives of firms and business operators using concepts and theories developed and tested in the developed market is distinct from the emerging market. The elements of entrepreneurship orientation (i.e.: innovative, risk-taking proactiveness, aggressiveness and autonomy) as used and tested in a developed market do not reflect the real picture of entrepreneurs in the emerging market by looking through the lenses of the socio-economic and regulatory context from developed economy.

5. Conclusion and Implication

The research covers two outstanding perspectives in the study of entrepreneurship orientation in an emerging market, which include: (i) seeking to understand entrepreneurship orientation as the central themes in the life world of the participants or entrepreneurs in an emerging market research and (ii) the application and explanations of various stages of grounded theory methods as a research paradigm used in the studies. The cases of participants as established through the analyzed data gave an insight into the daily business experiences of entrepreneurs in an emerging market including risk taking, proactive, innovative, autonomous and being aggressive in certain decisions of their firms. As a consequence, we can imply that, this research can contribute to the theoretical contribution of entrepreneurship orientation by urging marketing scholars to examine which appropriate strategies to adopt in conducting further research in an emerging market on the concept of entrepreneurship orientation (EO).

The application of grounded theory to the study of entrepreneurship orientation research revealed that entrepreneurship researchers frequently justified their use of the grounded theory technique by citing insufficient qualitative research on the subject in an emerging market. Besides, the complexity of the topic under investigation was also not delineated in the context of an emerging market and as a reason for conducting grounded theory research (Goulding 2002). This paper has the potential to promote greater research and thought in this crucial field, particularly in Ghana.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

As mentioned in the introduction, the research explores entrepreneurship orientation in the context of an emerging market and illustrate by means of grounded theory approach, some relevant limitations needed to be pointed out. One of such limitations, is that the Entrepreneurship Orientation in an emerging market is understudied, while the global business environment is pointing to changes through the rise of an emerging market. Another limitation is the number of papers that reported the qualitative research on entrepreneurship orientation in an emerging market context. A lot of the research were published using validated scale of the construct through quantitative research to predict results of their research.

To circumvent the limitation, greater emphasis on emerging market research by marketing discipline should portray the true picture of conducting businesses in these regions because developing markets account for a sizeable portion of the world's population as well as economic growth. This may help to expand the theoretical understanding and offer substantial practical advantages and managerial implication to marketing managers. Moreover, there is the need to better contextualize entrepreneurship orientation research in emerging countries by applying new theories, other than those relevant to the context of developed economies.

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Understanding the Green Purchasing Behaviour of Millennials Living in Bucharest

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Abstract
In recent times, green purchasing behaviour has received considerable attention from researchers, consumers and companies. According to specialists, buying products that are sustainable and environmentally friendly is critical to reducing environmental degradation. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to investigate the impact of various factors on the green purchasing behaviour of Romanian consumers. The factors investigated are attitude, level of knowledge and subjective norm. The current study is part of a larger quantitative research. An online survey was used to collect data, relying on convenience sampling. Data was collected from 213 green consumers living in Bucharest. Millennials represent the demographic cohort chosen for analysis. This group is considered to be the most concerned and informed about environmental problems and sustainability. The data sets obtained were analysed with the help of SPSS software package. The main statistical techniques implemented were correlation analysis, independent t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Data analysis revealed that attitude, level of knowledge and subjective norm influence in a positive manner the green purchasing behaviour of millennials living in Bucharest. The strongest correlation was found between green buying behaviour and level of knowledge. Among the demographic characteristics explored, it was found that gender, education level and income can stimulate green purchasing behaviour. The findings presented in this study offer relevant and valuable insights regarding the green purchasing behaviour of millennials living in Bucharest. Based on these results, companies can develop tailored promotional activities that will increase the sales of organic products. We hope this research theme will receive more attention at local level, considering that the organic market is rapidly expanding in Romania.

Keywords: Sustainability, green purchasing behaviour, organic market, green marketing.

JEL classification: M31, Q56.

1. Introduction

Maintaining the natural resources of Earth for as long as possible represents one of the key objectives of the current century. Therefore, curbing environmental degradation has become a global effort. According to researchers and environmental specialists, buying products that are sustainable and environmentally friendly can help to reduce environmental degradation and protect the ecosystem (Krystallis and Chryssohoidis, 2005).

In recent times, especially the last decade, green purchasing behavior has received considerable attention from researchers, consumers and businesses. As a result, the issue of ecological consumerism has moved „from being an issue on the periphery of society to the mainstream" (Dowd and Burke, 2013, p. 137).

The connection between environmental protection and consumer behavior is high on the agenda of marketing, consumer and social psychology studies. Considering the popularity of this topic, the main purpose of the current paper is to investigate the driving forces behind the green purchasing behavior of Romanian consumers. The factors investigated are attitude, level

of knowledge and subjective norm. These factors are studied with regard to millennials living in Bucharest.

It is well-known that consumer behavior is very heterogeneous, therefore different types of behavior are motivated by different influencing factors (Gatersleben, Steg and Vlek, 2002). At the same time, because "environmental consciousness evolves over time, the findings of studies from previous years will not necessarily be valid in the future" (Chamorro, Rubio and Miranda, 2009, p. 233). To add more, studies concerning green consumption in countries where environmental awareness is less developed, specifically in Central and Eastern Europe, are limited. Therefore, the topic under investigation requires on-going attention and validation.

The present paper has the following structure. The study starts with a discussion on the current literature regarding green products and the variables that affect buying and consuming such products. The methodology section discusses the research hypotheses and relevant information about the sample investigated. Next, key results are presented and compared with findings from previous local and international studies. Finally, in the conclusion section, the major findings of the research are summarized, also highlighting study limitations.

2. Literature review

Most of the literature surrounding consumer behavior and environmental protection focuses on analyzing the green purchasing behavior of individuals. Green purchase behavior is one of the most common types of behavior that can help protect the environment and "refers to the purchase of environmentally friendly products and avoiding products that harm the environment" (Joshi and Rahman, 2015, p. 129). Green products, also named organic or bio products, are products that have a low environmental impact during every phase of their life-cycle. They contain recyclable and recycled materials and fewer toxic chemical ingredients (Mohd Suki, 2015).

The food industry represents the most developed market of environmentally friendly products, mostly driven by the high consumer demand. In some European countries, the share of organic food, especially vegetables and fruits, has increased substantially and its development is considered remarkable (Pieniak, Aertsens and Verbeke, 2010). For example, Denmark has the world's highest organic share, around 13%, and is thought to be the most well-developed organic market globally (Kaad-Hansen, 2022). The food sector is also the fastest growing organic market in Romania. According to the latest official data, the total market for organic products in Romania was worth 41 million euros in 2016 (Willer, Travnicek, Meier and Schlatter, 2021). But, although the sales of green products are increasing, the share of these products remains modest in Romania.

Regarding the factors that determine buying green products, these have been studied extensively, especially in the Western countries where people are considered to be more aware and interested in nature and the environment. When it comes to organic food consumption, studies have highlighted that there are both altruistic motives, related to eco-consciousness, as well as egocentric values, such as pleasure and health, that motivate consumers (Didier and Lucie, 2008). In general, individuals perceive organic food „to be better with respect to taste, quality, safety and impact on health and on the environment" (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2008, p. 543). It is believed that people's heightened interest in food safety and ingredients will increase even more because of the pandemic.

Previous studies in the green marketing literature have confirmed that some of the most powerful factors that determine green purchase behavior are attitude, level of knowledge and subjective norm. These three factors are detailed below.

Many authors consider attitude to be the strongest predictor of green purchasing behavior (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2008) and the consumption of organic food (Pieniak et al., 2010). In

this context, attitude refers to how people evaluate buying and consuming green products (Sun and Wang, 2020). On the other hand, there are some researchers who believe that attitude is not related to green buying (Moser, 2015). Often, these authors report a gap or inconsistency between persons declared positive opinions and their real buying habits.

Regarding the link between ecological attitudes and age, scientists affirmed that younger consumers tend to have more favorable attitudes towards buying green products compared to older respondents (Akehurst, Afonso and Goncalves, 2012). At the same time, other studies highlighted that age does not influence green behavior. For example, according to Krystallis and Chryssohoidis (2005), „although younger consumers have greater environmental consciousness, their willingness to buy green products does not translate into demand due to their lower purchasing power" (p. 322).

Next, level of knowledge is another factor that requires investigation in the context of Romanian consumers. This variable refers to the information that a person has about green products or environmental protection. According to researchers, there are three types of knowledge: objective knowledge, subjective knowledge and previous experience. Objective knowledge is about "the accurate information about the product stored in consumer's long-term memory", while subjective knowledge refers to "people's subjective perceptions of what or how much they know about a product" (Pieniak et al., 2010, p. 582). In the current study, the level of subjective knowledge is investigated because it was found that this type of knowledge holds the biggest influence on pro-environmental purchasing behavior (Sun and Wang, 2020).

And finally, subjective norm refers to the social influence on consumer behavior and is defined as "the social pressure of complying with a certain behavior" (Moser, 2015, p. 169). This social pressure can come from significant others, such as family members, close friends or work colleagues. Multiple studies have confirmed that this is a significant variable that influences purchasing behavior (Dean, Raats and Shepherd, 2012).

When it comes to Romania, despite the fact that the green market has tremendous potential, it is not explored sufficiently at local level. Therefore, there is a huge need to identify the factors that can influence the development of green buying behavior. Moreover, Romanian papers that thoroughly reflect on the topic of consumer behavior and green products are missing. At the same time, the fast industrialization of the country has brought serious environmental issues, related to natural resource depletion, toxic waste and pollution. Therefore, more needs to be done to limit the negative impact on the environment.

3. Methodology

The research method chosen for this study is a quantitative one, in the form of an online survey. The tool used for collecting primary data from Romanian consumers is a questionnaire developed on Lime Survey platform. The survey link was distributed on social media channels as well as through email. Data was collected during November 2021 and January 2022. The data sets obtained were analyzed with the help of SPSS software package. The main statistical techniques implemented were correlation analysis, independent t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Relying on a non-probabilistic convenience sampling technique, a total of 213 responses were collected. The current study is part of a larger quantitative research administered at national level. But in order to achieve the objectives of the current paper, only specific questions were selected for analysis. At the same time, the demographic cohort investigated are millennials, people aged between 18 and 35 years old, living in Bucharest, the capital of Romania and the biggest city in the country.

The decision to develop a research study that focuses on this age group was guided by various motivations. First of all, millennials tend to be more open to new ideas compared to older generations. Second of all, when it comes to green purchasing behavior, younger generations are more interested in green products and more willing to buy them in the store (Sun and Wang, 2020). Another reason for deliberately choosing to study millennials is that they have more knowledge about environmental protection and their purchasing power and influence in the household are on the rise. This argument is further supported by other researchers in the field. According to Witek and Kuzniar (2021), younger generations "constitute a significant group of customers that deserve special attention" (p. 13), while Vermeir and Verbeke (2008) argued that „young adults are the consumers of the future, capable of making a difference in the next decades" (p. 545).

As mentioned earlier, the variables investigated in relation to green purchasing behavior are attitude, level of knowledge and subjective norm. Following the literature review process, the next hypotheses are proposed:

H1. There is a positive and significant relationship between attitude towards green products and environmental protection and purchasing green products.

H2. There is a positive and significant relationship between level of subjective knowledge regarding green products and environmental protection and purchasing green products.

H3. There is a positive and significant relationship between subjective norm and purchasing green products.

The questionnaire consisted of 16 items measured on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 equal "Strongly disagree" and 7 means "Strongly agree". The statements developed for each construct are presented in Table 1 below. As the original study was in Romanian language, the wording of statements was slightly changed to match the study background.

Table 1. Items developed for each construct

Construct	Item
Attitude	It is important for me that the products I use are not harming the environment.
Attitude	I pay a lot of attention to my environmental impact.
Attitude	I consider myself to be ecologically responsible.
Attitude	Environmental protection is very important for me.
Attitude	I enjoy buying green products.
Attitude	I have a favorable attitude towards buying green products.
Knowledge	I believe I have a lot of knowledge about green products.
Knowledge	Compared to other people, I know a lot about green products.
Knowledge	I know how to appreciate the quality of green products.
Knowledge	People who know me think I am an expert in green products.
Subjective norm	Most people who are important to me buy green products.
Subjective norm	My family and close friends influence me to buy green products.
Subjective norm	Most people who are important to me want me to buy green products.
Green purchasing behavior	I buy green products regularly.
Green purchasing behavior	I buy green products even when conventional ones are on sale.
Green purchasing behavior	I do not mind paying a higher price for green products.

Source: Adapted from Singh and Verma (2017) and Aertsens, Mondelaers, Verbeke, Buysse and Huylenbroeck, (2011)

4. Results

4.1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

The first section of the Results part is dedicated to presenting the demographic characteristics of respondents. This information is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	139	65.3
Female	74	34.7
Level of income		
High	27	12.7
Middle	93	43.7
Low	93	43.7
Level of education		
Completed higher education	153	71.8
Did not complete higher education	60	28.2
Current occupation		
Student	71	33.3
Employed	130	61.0
Entrepreneur	7	3.3
Unemployed	5	2.3

Source: Analysis run by author in SPSS

As it can be observed above, most respondents are women (65.3%), while the remaining 34.7% are men. Regarding income level, the number of respondents with middle income (between 3.000 RON and 7.500 RON) is equal to the number of those with low income (below 3.000 RON), resulting in a percentage of 43.7% for each category. Less than 13% of the total sample declared they earn more than 7.500 RON each month. With reference to education level, around one in seven respondents completed higher education (71.8%), either bachelor's degree or postgraduate studies. The rest of 28.2% did not complete higher education. This result came as no surprise, considering that the sample analyzed is composed of young adults. This finding is confirmed by the results regarding current occupation. Data analysis revealed that more than a third of the sample is still studying (33.3%), while around 65% are working, either as employees (61.0%) or managing their own company (3.3%). Only five respondents mentioned that they are unemployed. In the present paper, the main role of demographic data is to describe and analyze the sample structure.

4.2. The outcomes of univariate data analysis

Next, in order to ease the process of data interpretation, all individual items were grouped together based on the construct they measured. The mean and standard deviation for each construct are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the constructs measured

Construct	Mean	σ
Attitude	4.62	1.16
Knowledge	3.25	1.40
Subjective norm	2.77	1.40
Green purchasing behavior	3.65	1.55

Source: Analysis run by author in SPSS

It can be seen from the data in Table 3 above that attitude received that highest mean score (4.62) from all constructs. Therefore, most respondents tend to somewhat agree with the statements about attitude. Based on this result, it can be argued that, on average, respondents have a positive attitude towards buying green products.

Green purchasing behavior (3.65) and level of knowledge (3.25) recorded mean values below 4.00, the neutral midpoint of 7-point Likert scales. This means that most respondents are between somewhat disagree and a neutral opinion regarding these statements. Therefore,

on average, they did not necessarily perceive themselves as heavy green buyers or very knowledgeable about the topic investigated. It could be argued that the level of knowledge of the respondents is not very high and could be improved. In addition, compared to the mean score for attitude, the values for level of knowledge and green purchasing behaviour are lower. According to Pieniak et al. (2010), "improving the knowledge about organic foods is beneficial for both non-users, as well as existing consumers, because it increases consumption" (p. 582).

And finally, subjective norm obtained the lowest mean score (2.77) from all constructs, a value below 3.00. This result indicates that most responses are grouped between disagree and somewhat disagree. Thus, the majority of the sample tends to not agree that family and close friends influence them to buy green products.

4.3. Demographic characteristics and green purchasing behavior

Following that, independent-samples t-test and ANOVA analyses were run to compare the mean scores of two or more different groups of respondents for green purchasing behavior (Pallant, 2011). With the help of these tools, it was investigated whether there are statistically significant differences between males and females, those who completed higher education and those who did not, as well as the three levels of income (high, middle, low).

Regarding gender, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the green purchasing behavior scores for women and men. There was a significant difference in scores for women ($M = 4.22$, $\sigma = 1.48$) and men ($M = 2.58$, $\sigma = 1.03$), $t(194) = 9.44$, $p < 0.001$. Therefore, it could be argued that millennials women are more likely to be green buyers compared to millennials men. Most studies on green consumer behavior have confirmed that women tend to buy green products more often and more frequently than men (Krystallis and Chryssohoidis, 2005).

When it comes to education, data analysis revealed that there is a significant difference in mean scores for those who completed higher education ($M = 4.11$, $\sigma = 1.36$) and those who did not ($M = 2.51$, $\sigma = 1.42$), $t(210) = 7.57$, $p < 0.001$. Some authors have highlighted that people who are more educated pay more attention to green products (Feng and Reisner, 2011), while other studies did not point out major differences in green behavior with regards to education level (Krystallis and Chryssohoidis, 2005).

In order to compare the mean scores of three different categories, one-way analysis of variance was conducted. As a result, the impact of income level (high, middle, low) on green purchasing behavior was explored.

A statistically significant difference was recorded in green purchasing behavior scores for the three income levels: $F(2, 209) = 39.37$, $p < 0.001$. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for the high-income group ($M = 5.31$, $\sigma = 1.24$) was significantly different from the middle-income group ($M = 3.95$, $\sigma = 1.29$) and the low-income group ($M = 2.87$, $\sigma = 1.39$). To add more, middle income group ($M = 3.95$, $\sigma = 1.29$) did differ significantly from low-income group ($M = 2.87$, $\sigma = 1.39$). Many studies on green consumer behavior have highlighted that people who have more money to spend are more likely to buy green products (Akehurst et al., 2012).

The findings presented above further support the idea that green purchase behaviour is stronger for female millennials who are more educated and have a higher income.

4.4. Hypotheses testing

The next section is dedicated to testing the hypotheses of the study. As a result, correlation analysis was performed to evaluate the strength and direction of the relationship between variables. In order to run superior statistical analyses, it was decided to transform Likert scale variables, generally considered ordinal data, into metric, interval variables. Thus,

each point on the scale received an interval score. This procedure of rescaling is considered by some specialists to be "the most attractive and practical method for handling ordinal data that can resolve the dilemma of coupling measurement scales with statistical analyses" (Harwell and Gatti, 2001, p. 113).

Because the variables were considered interval type, Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was calculated. Table 4 below illustrates the correlation matrix resulted for the variables examined.

Table 4. Correlation matrix for the constructs measured

Construct	1	2	3	4
1. Attitude	1	0.80**	0.60**	0.79**
2. Knowledge		1	0.71**	0.80**
3. Subjective norm			1	0.69**
4. Green purchasing behavior				1

Note: **p < 0.01
Source: Analysis run by author in SPSS

It is apparent from this table that all correlations between the variables investigated are significant. At the same time, it can be observed that the analyzed variables do not exceed a correlation coefficient higher than 0.90, therefore the principle of collinearity is respected (Pallant, 2011).

Regarding attitude, a strong, positive correlation was recorded with green purchasing behavior ($r = 0.79$, $p < 0.001$). This means that high levels of attitude are associated with high levels of green purchasing behavior. Therefore, H1 is supported. This finding is in line with previous studies (Akehurst et al., 2012).

Next, the strongest correlation was found between level of knowledge and green purchasing behavior ($r = 0.80$, $p < 0.001$). There is a positive link between the two variables, which means that they move in the same direction, if one increases, so does the other one, and vice versa. Based on this result, H2 is confirmed. Regarding the link between knowledge and green consumer behavior, specialists explained that "when consumers have more knowledge and information about green products, they more easily understand that green products, compared with products of the same quality, can save resources and energy" (Sun and Wang, 2020, p. 5).

And finally, data analysis revealed that there is a strong, positive correlation between subjective norm and green purchasing behavior ($r = 0.69$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, as the scores for subjective norm increase, so do the scores for green purchasing behavior. Thus, H3 is supported. Some studies have found that subjective norms are positively correlated with the intention to buy and purchase organic products (Dowd and Burke, 2013), while other papers highlighted a negative correlation between social influence and green buying behavior (Connell, 2010).

The strong correlations observed between the three analyzed factors and green purchasing behavior imply that individuals with more positive green attitudes, and higher levels of subjective knowledge and perceived social influence, are more likely to buy green products.

Conclusion

There are many motivations and values behind buying products that are good for the environment. In the present paper, it was found that the variables analyzed (attitude, level of knowledge and subjective norm) are significantly and positively related to green purchasing behavior. The correlations identified are of high strength, consistent with other similar studies in the field (Ellen, 1994; Sun and Wang, 2020).

Therefore, it can be summarized that people who have more knowledge and higher positive attitudes towards purchasing green products, and perceive higher social influence from significant others (family members, close friends or work colleagues) to engage in such behavior, are more likely to buy green products. Data analysis also highlighted that this type of green behavior can be fostered by demographic characteristics, such as gender, education or income level.

The information presented in this paper could help enhance the understanding of green purchasing behavior in Romania, as well as increase the number of green consumers in the country. Marketing professionals and policy makers can use these insights to develop effective marketing strategies. The main suggestion is to offer citizens more relevant information about the health and environmental benefits of green products, in order for the public to have more knowledge about this topic and stimulate engagement among consumers.

At the same time, the findings in this report are subject to at least three limitations. First, this study focused on factors that determine green behavior, without taking into account the barriers that can hinder this type of behavior. Thus, future studies could also investigate and consider the internal and external barriers to green buying. Second of all, due to the sample method, the results are not representative of the entire population. And last, but not least, this research only investigated consumers in Bucharest aged between 18 and 35 years old. As a consequence, future research could use different methodology options or aim to reach representative consumer samples at national level in order to corroborate the findings discussed in this article.

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Consumer Perspectives on Fairtrade Prices

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Abstract
Worldwide consumer support of disadvantaged producers from developing countries has been encouraged through a variety of options, including the acquisition of Fairtrade-certified products. Prior studies showed that consumers' purchases of Fairtrade products are driven by moral incentives and economic factors. Among the economic factors, only cursory research attention has been paid to a key aspect influencing purchases: the specific price of the Fairtrade item as compared to the price of non-Fairtrade items in the same product category. The price difference between Fairtrade and non-Fairtrade items can range anywhere from 0% to 70% or higher. This aspect is becoming ever more important in light of recent calls toward setting a price premium level of 100%, up to 200% in some categories, to reflect the changes in producers' working conditions and living standards triggered by the global pandemic. Our studies suggest that such increases may not have the desired outcome. We hypothesize a negative relationship between the price premium and consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) for Fairtrade items, testing this proposition in six cross-cultural studies. Our studies involve surveys administered to cross-sectional samples of consumers from the United States, from Canada, and samples of students from large North American universities. The surveys assessed consumers' willingness to buy Fairtrade products using 7-point Likert scales (1 = "very unlikely to choose the Fairtrade product"; 7 = "very likely to choose the Fairtrade product" at the specified price premium level), for various product categories. Linear mixed-effects models for repeated measures (within-participants data) were employed for the key analyses. The significant finding of a negative relationship between the price premium and WTP supports our Hypothesis in each study, underscoring that as the Fairtrade premium is set at increasing levels (from 0% to 2%, 10%, and 25% higher price for the Fairtrade items), consumers' average willingness to pay is significantly diminished, decreasing from 6.43 (MWTPat0%premium) to 5.56 (MWTPat2%premium) to 4.19 (MWTPat10%premium) to 2.95 (MWTPat25%premium) in Study 1; from 6.15 (MWTPat0%premium) to 5.37 (MWTPat2%premium) to 4.08 (MWTPat10%premium) to 2.98 (MWTPat25%premium) in Study 2; from 6.16 (MWTPat0%premium) to 5.34 (MWTPat2%premium) to 3.89 (MWTPat10%premium) to 2.27 (MWTPat25%premium) in Study 3, and from 6.39 (MWTPat0%premium) to 5.62 (MWTPat2%premium) to 4.45 (MWTPat10%premium) to 3.22 (MWTPat25%premium) in Study 4. These findings highlight actionable policy implications of marketing Fairtrade products to consumers, with a focus on the price component of the marketing mix. From a theoretical perspective, our research sheds light on the less-than-straightforward consequence of Fairtrade premium increases: we propose and show that the economic model is more applicable than the contributions/donations model in the context of Fairtrade. We emphasize that Fairtrade should not be regarded conceptually as just a special case of social contributions, because general helping theory is not able to account for the particularities of Fairtrade. Also, the impact of the price premium level on Fairtrade purchases is shown to have a different direction compared to the field of cause-related marketing purchases, revealing notable conceptual and empirical distinctions between these fields.

Keywords: Fairtrade, Fair Trade, marketing mix, consumer behavior, price.

JEL classification: M31, M30, M20, M14, L31, L32, L38.

1. Introduction

The Fairtrade system is part of the series of solutions designed to address the sustainability problem at the global level (Arnould, Plastina, and Ball, 2009; Popa Sârghie and

Pracejus, 2021). Based on socio-economic equity principles, Fairtrade encourages respect toward the farmers and producers from marginalized countries who provide a significant part of the worldwide food supply and manufacturing. These producers receive inadequate compensation in the free trade system, which results in their precarious or sub-standard living conditions, and their inability to invest in farm renovations or technological/process innovations (Knößlsdorfer, Sellare, and Qaim, 2021; Zhu et al., 2021). Without momentous improvements, the existing global system of commercial transactions is prone to volatility, food shortages and social tensions (Lyon, 2021). Fairtrade has gradually gained popularity on the background of the wider trend toward "ethical consumerism" (Davies and Gutsche, 2016; Low and Davenport, 2009): consumers from wealthier regions can pay a higher price for Fairtrade items, and part of the price premium is directed to enhance the farmers/producers' standard of living. The premiums are also used for community projects selected by the farmers, for their children's education and healthcare initiatives (Fairtrade International, 2022a).

The importance and success of the Fairtrade labeling system who is now certifying over 30,000 products and helping more than 1.8 million farmers/workers internationally (Fairtrade International, 2022b) has sparked keen research interest. A wealth of studies on Fairtrade have been amassed to date within and outside the marketing field (Loureiro and Lotade, 2005; Mar, De Los Salmones and Pérez, 2019; White, MacDonnell, and Ellard 2012; Witkowski, 2015). While many of the studies have examined consumers' behavior and attitude toward Fairtrade (Balasubramanian and Soman, 2019; De Pelsmacker, et al., 2005; Pérez and De Los Salmones, 2018; Steinrucken and Jaenichen, 2006), only cursory attention has been paid to a key aspect influencing purchases: the specific price of the Fairtrade item as compared to the price of non-Fairtrade items in the same product category (Basu and Hicks, 2008; Didier and Lucie, 2008).

In recent years countries have either introduced or consider introducing minimum levels of the Fairtrade premium (the *minimum price* that must be paid by buyers to producers for an item to become certified against the Fairtrade Standards; Fairtrade International, 2021). In this process, each country is contemplating the adequate level of the premium from multiple perspectives. Moreover, there are calls for dramatically increasing the *average price* premiums post-pandemic such that the Fairtrade price might become double the market price in the case of coffee, to reflect the needs of farmers and the dire realities they are confronted with (Vanbrenda, 2020).

The important policy issue of deciding what level of the price premium should be set to maximize involvement with Fairtrade is a rather puzzling question, given the scarcity of research in this area. The few existing studies tend to be focused on coffee as the product category, conducted predominantly with European consumers, and published more than fifteen years ago (De Pelsmacker, Driesen and Rayp, 2005; Maietta, 2003). We provide a more detailed, updated perspective focusing on consumers from the United States and Canada (who tend to be a major target in the Fairtrade system due to their buying power).

From a theoretical perspective, the impact of the Fairtrade price premium on consumers' willingness to pay is not necessarily a straightforward relationship. According to classic economic theory based on utility-maximization, when consumers are confronted with price increases for a standard good, their willingness to pay (WTP) for the product tends to decrease (Swait, Popa & Wang, 2016). Therefore, a negative relationship between the Fairtrade price premium and WTP could be predicted. Yet, it is necessary to keep in mind that the Fairtrade item is in fact a bundle of a standard product purchase and a donation toward sustainable/fair production (Steinrücken and Jaenichen 2007; Low and Davenport 2009). Consumers' willingness to contribute to Fairtrade could be described by theory concerning donations, such as the Schwartz model of altruistic behaviour (Schwartz, 1970) or the amended model of impure altruism in social contributions (Andreoni, 1989). Studies testing the classic conceptual

accounts of altruistic behaviour showed that individuals can be insensitive to increases in requested contribution levels or even positively responding to such increases in terms of their willingness to pay/contribute to public goods solicitations (Guagnano, Dietz and Stern, 1994). From this lens focused on helping behavior, a positive relationship between the Fairtrade price premium and WTP could be suggested. This possible occurrence of a positive relationship is further echoed by research in cause-related marketing (CRM).

Buying cause-related marketing products is similar to buying Fairtrade products because in both instances the consumer pays a higher price for a regular product and part of the price premium is given to a disadvantaged party or social cause (Pracejus & Olsen, 2004). Both Fairtrade and CRM purchases allow consumers to satisfy their economic/functional needs while at the same time making a contribution that benefits society and helps them feel better on an emotional level (Popa Sârghie & Pracejus, 2021). CRM research has generally found a positive concave relationship between the price premium and consumers' WTP (Elfenbein & McManus, 2010; Popkowski Leszczyc & Rothkopf, 2010). For example, in one of the multiple studies by Koschate-Fischer, Stefan and Hoyer (2012), the buying decision involving chocolate cereal bars revealed an increase in consumers' WTP as the CRM contribution increased from 1 to 40 cents (the contribution level was manipulated in increments of 5 cents: 1, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, as appropriate to the product category and in line with prior CRM research). Note that despite the overall positive relationship reported in such studies, a segment of consumers was not willing to pay the premium for contributing to the cause (in this specific case, 12.6% of the sample was unwilling to pay the CRM premium).

To ascertain the direction of the relationship between the Fairtrade price premium and consumers' WTP, an overall consideration of five types of consumer motives for buying Fairtrade products is pertinent. Firstly, an altruistic motive would focus on helping farmers, producers, and their families, along with the wider societal benefits resulting from the total sum contributed to Fairtrade. If consumers are driven exclusively by the altruistic motive, it can be expected (in line with the previously discussed research) that as the price premium increases, consumers' WTP increases as well.

Secondly, a prosocial component distinct from altruism could include the fairness motive envisioning the social justice achieved with the Fairtrade system (White, MacDonnell, and Ellard 2012). From this standpoint, as the price premium is increased up to a certain threshold considered "fair" by consumers, WTP should be increasing as well.

Thirdly, according to the impure altruism model (Andreoni, 1989), an egoistic motive would focus on the ability of the Fairtrade purchase to make the individual feel better about him or herself (i.e., feeling the "warm glow"). It could be argued that simply buying the Fairtrade product (even at a low level of the price premium) is sufficient for experiencing the "warm glow"; paying higher premiums for the product may not be necessary to achieve the positive feelings. From this perspective, increases in the Fairtrade price could generate either a constant or a negative WTP.

Fourthly, extensions of impure altruism point to a further egoistic motive resulting from an increase in reputation and/or prestige when buying socially esteemed products (Koschate-Fischer, Stefan and Hoyer 2012). From this perspective, it is unclear if the increased reputation is contingent on a higher premium level. It is possible that the mere purchase of the Fairtrade product (regardless of the price premium level) is perceived as a reputation booster; if so, increases in the Fairtrade price could either have no impact or could decrease consumers' WTP.

Finally, the economic motive of utility-based benefits from buying the Fairtrade product would dictate, as previously discussed, that when the price premium increases, consumers' WTP would decrease.

Pondering this range of motives, we are emphasizing the fact that the Fairtrade purchase is still a marketplace behavior that entails buying a product. While prosocial/altruistic motives are certainly likely to emerge, particularly for specific sub-segments of consumers (e.g., consumers who are more empathetic or more aware of the impoverished conditions of the producers/farmers; consumers who tend to take more personal responsibility for ameliorating social injustices; Guagnano, Dietz and Stern, 1994), in general consumers would not completely lose sight of the economic impact of their purchase on their own budget. As such, we propose that their behavior would be more in line with the economic model than with the donations/contributions model when it comes to their willingness to purchase Fairtrade products. Formally, we put forth the following proposition:

HYPOTHESIS: There is a negative relationship between the Fairtrade price premium and consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) for the Fairtrade product.

2. Research Methodology

We empirically examine consumers' willingness to pay the Fairtrade premium across four studies presented below. Sample characteristics such as gender and age are reported wherever demographic data was collected. Respondents participated voluntarily in the studies and were paid a small compensation in USD or CAD, appropriate for the type of panel or research participation pool they were involved with. The data collection typically entailed the bundling of our focal study with other studies for which responses were collected at the same time from the respondents. All studies received research ethics approval from the relevant Research Ethics Boards.

Prior to the start of the actual study respondents answered questions regarding their familiarity and previous involvement with Fairtrade products. Due to space limitations a detailed account of the intricacies of these measures and their impact on WTP for each study is not feasible herein. In general, the studies included participants of various levels of familiarity with Fairtrade; some of the participants purchased Fairtrade items in the past and others did not, with a similar distribution on these factors across the four studies.

To ensure adequate grounding (particularly for participants who were less familiar with the Fairtrade system) and a common understanding of questions, we provided a brief introduction at the beginning of the survey in each of the studies, based on the information available on the Fairtrade labeling organization website: "Fair Trade certified products guarantee that the people who produce the product receive equitable and stable compensation for them". Further information was provided using an image typical in Fairtrade promotions (e.g., the image of a truck carrying farming goods through the fields), with the Fairtrade logo and a description (e.g. "Fair Trade allows more children to go to school instead of working in the fields. Fair Trade money is invested in school buildings and materials. Premiums can also be invested in better health services for children. Choosing Fair Trade products improves education and health care for thousands of children").

2.1. Research Methodology – Study 1

The first study simply focused on Fairtrade rice as the product category, and four possible price premium levels: 0%, 2%, 10%, 25% premium. The study involved one hundred and thirty-one students from a large Canadian university (74 females, 57 males, average age 20 years old). They completed a survey that included the introductory Fairtrade description and the main dependent variable, WTP. The willingness-to-pay question was presented to participants repeatedly for each premium level as follows: "If Fair Trade rice costs 0% [or 2%, or 10%, or 25%] more than other rice, how likely is it that you would choose Fair Trade rice?".

Thus, each participant completed four WTP questions, one for each premium level. Responses were recorded on seven-point item scales (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely).

2.2. Results – Study 1

We used a linear mixed-effects regression model (LME model; Yu et al., 2021) for the analysis, to account for the fact that each participant evaluated the Fairtrade product multiple times (repeated measures). The dependent variable was WTP, and the within-subjects factor was the premium level. The results of the LME model indicated a significant negative effect of the price premium, supporting the Hypothesis: as the premium for Fairtrade increased, consumers' willingness to pay the premium decreased significantly (β = -0.13, t = 29.7, p < .0001) from 6.43 ($M_{WTPat0\%premium}$) to 5.56 ($M_{WTPat2\%premium}$) to 4.19 ($M_{WTPat10\%premium}$) to 2.95 ($M_{WTPat25\%premium}$) - see ***Table 1*** for means and ***Table 2*** for standard deviations.

Table 1. Studies 1-4: Means of the WTP (Willingness to Pay) the Fairtrade Price Premium at Different Premium Levels

Study	Sample	Product	N	Mprem 0%	Mprem 2%	Mprem 10%	Mprem 25%
1	**Canadian university students**	Rice	131	6.43	5.56	4.19	2.95
2	**Canadian university students**	Rice	23	6.22	5.09	3.74	2.70
2	**Canadian university students**	Chocolate	29	6.10	5.59	4.34	3.21
2	**Canadian university students**	Total St2	52	6.15	5.37	4.08	2.98
3	**Canadian consumers panel**	Chocolate	76	6.21	5.54	4.11	2.37
3	**Canadian consumers panel**	Flowers	76	6.01	5.08	3.49	2.13
3	**Canadian consumers panel**	Rice	77	6.31	5.55	4.04	2.39
3	**Canadian consumers panel**	Sugar	77	6.12	5.18	3.92	2.19
3	**Canadian consumers panel**	Total St3	306	6.16	5.34	3.89	2.27
4	**U.S. consumers panel**	Rice	58	6.43	5.79	4.53	3.17
4	**U.S. consumers panel**	Chocolate	58	6.34	5.45	4.36	3.26
4	**U.S. consumers panel**	Total St4	116	6.39	5.62	4.45	3.22

Note: WTP (Willingness to Pay) was measured on 7-point Likert scales (1 = "very unlikely to choose the Fairtrade product"; 7 = "very likely to choose the Fairtrade product" at the specified price premium level)

Table 2. Studies 1-4: Standard Deviations of the WTP (Willingness to Pay) the Fairtrade Price Premium at Different Premium Levels

Study	Sample	Product	N	StDpre 0%	StDpre 2%	StDpre 10%	StDpre 25%
1	**Canadian university students**	Rice	131	0.95	1.31	1.62	1.63
2	**Canadian university students**	Rice	23	1.13	1.62	1.63	1.66
2	**Canadian university students**	Chocolate	29	1.01	1.21	1.34	1.50
2	**Canadian university students**	Total St2	52	1.06	1.41	1.49	1.58
3	**Canadian consumers panel**	Chocolate	76	1.31	1.45	1.51	1.50
3	**Canadian consumers panel**	Flowers	76	1.22	1.55	1.58	1.26
3	**Canadian consumers panel**	Rice	77	1.08	1.43	1.60	1.38
3	**Canadian consumers panel**	Sugar	77	1.26	1.60	1.68	1.42
3	**Canadian consumers panel**	Total St3	306	1.22	1.50	1.59	1.39
4	**U.S. consumers panel**	Rice	58	1.01	1.36	1.72	1.69
4	**U.S. consumers panel**	Chocolate	58	1.13	1.55	1.70	1.77
4	**U.S. consumers panel**	Total St4	116	1.07	1.46	1.71	1.72

2.3. Research Methodology – Study 2

Study 2 followed the same approach as Study 1, with the exception of the fact that two Fairtrade products were examined: rice and chocolate. Each respondent evaluated either Fairtrade rice or Fairtrade chocolate. The study included fifty-two Canadian university students (31 females, 21 males, average age 21 years old).

2.4. Results – Study 2

A linear mixed-effects regression model was conducted with the Fairtrade premium as the within-subjects factor, product type as the between-subjects factor, and WTP as the dependent variable. Similar to Study 1, the results supported the Hypothesis, indicating a significant effect of the price premium: as the premium increased from 0% to 2%, 10% and 25%, consumers' willingness to buy the Fairtrade product decreased significantly ($\beta = -0.10$, $t = 4.98$, $p < .0001$), from 6.15 ($M_{WTPat0\%premium}$) to 5.37 ($M_{WTPat2\%premium}$) to 4.08 ($M_{WTPat10\%premium}$) to 2.98 ($M_{WTPat25\%premium}$). There was no significant main effect or interaction of the product type. The WTP means and standard deviations for each premium level and product are listed in ***Table 1*** and ***Table 2***.

2.5. Research Methodology – Study 3

The third study was similar in procedures to the previous two, with the following notable differences: instead of university students, this study involved a cross-panel of Canadian consumers from an online consumer research panel; four Fairtrade products were examined (rice, chocolate, sugar, fresh-cut flowers); one hundred and fifty-three consumers participated and each respondent completed the WTP questions for two product categories instead of one (for a total number of 1224 observations of WTP).

2.6. Results – Study 3

A linear mixed effects model with the Fairtrade premium and product category as the within-subjects factors, revealed a significant main effect of the price premium level on WTP. Similar to Study 1 and Study 2, this main effect supports the Hypothesis and shows that as the premium for Fairtrade increases, consumers' willingness to buy the Fairtrade product decreases significantly ($\beta = -0.15$, $t = 49.7$, $p < .0001$), from 6.16 ($M_{WTPat0\%premium}$) to 5.34 ($M_{WTPat2\%premium}$) to 3.89 ($M_{WTPat10\%premium}$) to 2.27 ($M_{WTPat25\%premium}$).

The interaction effect between product category and premium level was not significant, suggesting that the negative WTP response to premium increases is similar across the products examined. There was however a significant main effect of the product category ($\beta = 0.13$, $t = 3.13$, $p < .01$); this effect was driven primarily by the newly examined products of sugar and flowers (see the WTP means from ***Table 1***), suggesting that in general consumers are less ready to select the Fairtrade option in these categories compared to the categories of rice or chocolate.

2.7. Research Methodology – Study 4

Study 4 replicated Study 2 in terms of measures and product categories, but it involved a sample of United States consumers from an online U.S. research panel. One hundred and sixteen consumers (88 females, 26 males, 2 undeclared) answered the WTP questions for either Fairtrade rice or Fairtrade chocolate.

2.8. Results – Study 4

A linear mixed effects model with the Fairtrade premium as the within-subjects factor, product as the between-subjects factor, and WTP as the dependent variable, produced a significant negative effect of the price premium, similar to the first three studies' results. In

line with the Hypothesis, when the premium for Fairtrade increased from 0% to 2%, 10% and 25%, consumers' willingness to pay the premium decreased significantly ($\beta = -0.14$, $t = 8.48$, $p < .0001$), from 6.39 ($M_{WTPat0\%premium}$) to 5.62 ($M_{WTPat2\%premium}$) to 4.45 ($M_{WTPat10\%premium}$) to 3.22 ($M_{WTPat25\%premium}$). There was no significant main effect or interaction of the product factor. The WTP means and standard deviations for each premium level and product are shown in ***Table 1*** and ***Table 2***.

Consumers' average WTP in all four studies is illustrated in ***Figure 1***.

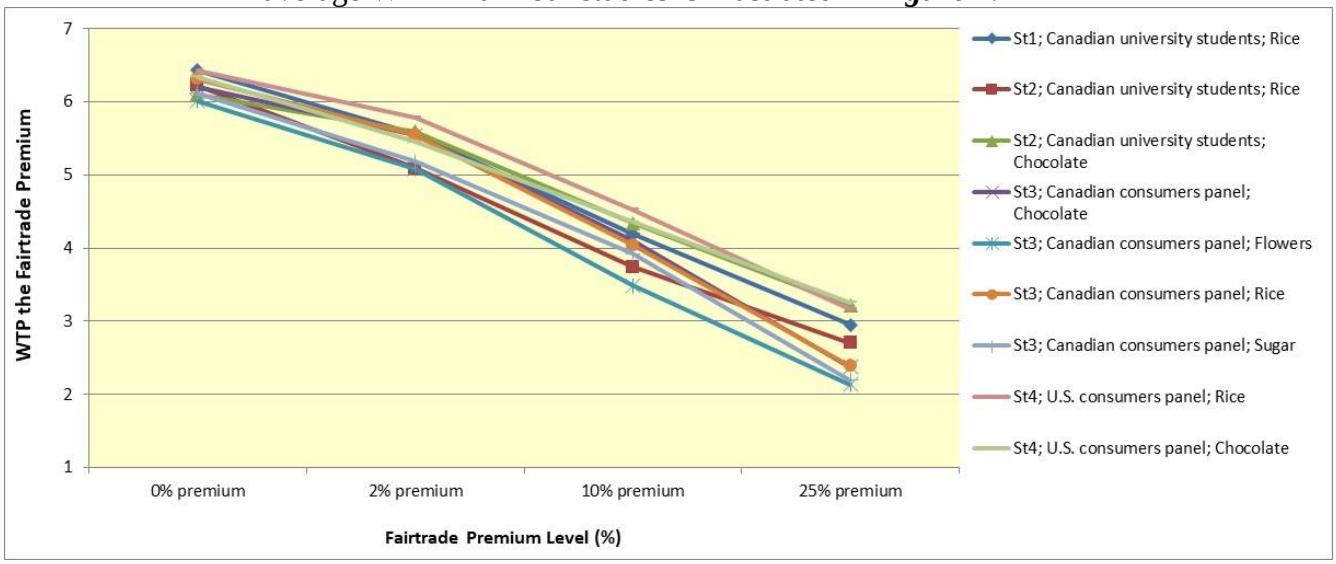

Figure 1. Studies 1-4. Canadian and United States Consumers' Willingness to Pay the Fairtrade Premium at Different Premium Levels for Various Product Categories. WTP Scale from 1 ("very unlikely to choose the Fairtrade product") to 7("very likely to choose the Fairtrade product") at the specified premium level.

3. Discussion

In four empirical studies we provided consistent support for the hypothesis that an increase in the Fairtrade premium level will bring a corresponding decrease in consumers' willingness-to-pay, with certain premium levels being more effective than others (as further elaborated below). The willingness-to-pay results were very similar across samples of U.S. and Canadian consumers for different product categories, suggesting the robustness of observed effects. While the support for our proposition is consistent with economic utility theory, it is not aligned with the contributions/donations models that characterize socially-minded contributions or purchases of cause-related products. Thus, even though the Fairtrade system purportedly has social underpinnings and aims to help producers from developing countries through contributions embedded in the price premium, consumers' willingness to buy Fairtrade items is still better described by marketplace models than by contributions models. Also, even though Fairtrade could be considered a special case of cause-related marketing (where the cause for which the premium is paid in this case would be helping disadvantaged producers obtain fair compensation for their work), our results indicate that Fairtrade and CRM should be treated as conceptually distinct fields when it comes to the role of the price premium in WTP.

Our studies offer much needed data and insights to help the policy decisions of setting price premium levels for Fairtrade. The few studies published more than fifteen years ago suggested that an adequate price level of the Fairtrade premium might be around 10% over the market price. Maietta (2003) found that Italian consumers were willing to pay a price premium of 9% for Fairtrade coffee. Belgian consumers were willing to pay on average 10% more for Fairtrade-labeled products (De Pelsmacker, Driesen and Rayp, 2005); at the time of the study

the price premium in Belgium was 27%, and only ten percent of the surveyed sample was prepared to pay that price.

Recent calls to action point to the need of raising the Fairtrade premium to more than 100% over the market price (e.g., the perspective published by Fairtrade Canada – see Vanbrenda, 2020), given the current situation and the impoverished conditions of Fairtrade producers. Such recommendations may not be feasible in light of our studies' findings. While a very narrow segment of Canadian and U.S. consumers might be prepared to pay steep premiums, our results suggest that on average across consumers the most appealing premium level would still be around 10%. Depending on strategic objectives, premium levels of 25% can be occasionally considered, with the knowledge that these levels will still deter a substantial segment of consumers.

A limitation of our studies is the use of discrete premium levels in the questionnaires and analyses (i.e., 0%, 2%, 10%, and 25% price premiums). Future research can examine more continuous and unlimited Fairtrade premium options, perhaps self-generated by consumers, and complemented with observations of actual behavior. The data from our studies was collected pre-pandemic. It will be interesting to monitor and compare the evolution of consumers' willingness to pay the Fairtrade premiums in the post-pandemic landscape.

Our focus was on one element of the marketing mix, specifically the price component. Future research could provide the beneficial addition of other marketing mix variables in order to understand at a deeper level the strategic effectiveness of Fairtrade options in terms of consumers' WTP. Finally, future work can explore marketing mix variables in conjunction with psychographic and demographic characteristics of the consumer, as many features of the buyer could influence intentions to purchase Fairtrade products and the overall Fairtrade behavior in the modern marketplace.

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Marketing Campaign for Sports Clubs. Case study: Archery Club Saga

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Abstract
Over the years, along with the technological development and the migration of numerous activities from the offline to the online, we have come to live in a world where sedentarism prevails. In this context, now more than ever, sport has an essential role in the harmonious development of the young generations, as well as in maintaining the physical health of each individual. In Romania, since our first participation at the Olympic Games in 1900, sport has occupied a place of honor and athletes have been continuously supported to reach performance, while aiming to popularize and normalize an active lifestyle among the general population. However, coming out of the communist era (early 90's) meant also the end of coherent strategies for sport and, thus, no more results in European and international competitions. When looking at a local level, this responsibility falls in the hands of local sports clubs so that every citizen can be given the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of doing sports, while sport passionate shall have, through appropriate coaching and guidance, the chance to reach performance. As such, this paper aims to emphasize the key role that marketing has in the sport industry and the importance of the promotional activities for the growth of local sports clubs. More specific, this paper comprises a description of the sports market, and at a local level, the situation of archery in Bacau city through an analysis of SAGA, the only archery club in town. The paper presents the results of a quantitative research aiming to uncover the attitudes, perceptions and behavior of Bacau citizens regarding sports in general, and in particular, archery. Based on these results, and on the current situation of SAGA sports club, in the last part of the paper we propose a promotional campaign for this club.

Keywords: Sports clubs, Sports marketing, Marketing research, Promotional campaign.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

Now more than ever, sport has an essential role in the harmonious development of the young generations, as well as in maintaining the physical health of each individual. In Romania, since our first participation at the Olympic Games in 1900, sport has occupied a place of honor and athletes have been continuously supported to reach performance, while aiming to popularize and normalize an active lifestyle among the general population. However, coming out of the communist era (early 90's) meant also the end of coherent strategies for sport and, thus, no more results in European and international competitions.

Having such a huge gap in terms of sport enthusiasm, practice and overall involvement, we see the urgent need of a shift in national and regional strategies that aim to bring sports and people back together. As such, this paper aims to emphasize the key role that marketing has in the sport industry and the importance of the promotional activities for the growth of local sports

clubs. More specific, this paper comprises a description of the sports market, and at a local level, the situation of archery in Bacau city through an analysis of SAGA, the only archery club in town.

Conducting quantitative research aiming to uncover the attitudes, perceptions and behavior of Bacau citizens regarding sports in general, and in particular, archery, we have gathered insights on sports consumer behavior that will allow us to take more efficient decisions when it comes to the communication strategy proposal. Thus, based on these results, and on the current situation of SAGA sports club, in the last part of the paper we propose a promotional campaign for this club.

2. Consumer behavior in sports marketing

2.1. Understanding the sports market and its consumers

Over the years, the sports industry has proven to be one of the most dynamic and diversified areas in terms of its audience, environment, and to what concerns the activity in itself. By crossing the borders of the traditional, the implications of sports migrated to a world of a constantly-changing and growing multimedia industry, a fact which visibly reflects in its marketing. Thus, the players are now making increased efforts to remain cognizant of the emerging trends and marketing opportunities in order to stay ahead of the game. For this, stakeholders from all sectors of the sport industry are displaying increased attention to understanding the changes of the market and, most of all, the behavior of the sports consumers. While the past three years have brought great changes in terms of consumers' behavioral patterns, the sport industry has in particular changed its operating strategies, adapting to a world with limited physical interaction.

When it comes to the sports consumer, according to Schwarz and Hunter (2008, p. 105), we can distinguish two categories: the spectators – those who only observe the sport activities and attend sport events, and the participants – those who actually take part in sport activities. For a better understanding, each shall be further classified in narrower categories: fitness, competitive and nature sports, and the spectators, in turn, differentiated according to whether they attend sport events, watch them from home, or read sports magazines (Kahle and Riley, 2004, p. 5). In all these cases, the consumers are characterized by a variety of attitudes and values (Westerbeek and Smith, 2003) so that over the years many researchers have developed many different theories referring to sports consumers' behavioral patterns and the factors which influence them.

When referring to the notion itself, Shilbury et al. (2009, p. 43) define the sport consumer behavior as "a process involved through which individuals select, purchase, use, and dispose of sport-related products and services." Here, we can either talk about the personal use of these products or services, such as buying tickets to a football game, or about the use in an organizational context (for example, buying equipment for a football team). As such, the sport consumers can be classified as organizational consumers or personal consumers (Schwarz and Hunter, 2008, p. 90). Considering the purpose of this paper, the latter (the individual consumer) shall be the primary focus in the following pages.

In this regard, many authors have written about different factors which determine one's engagement in sports activities, factors which can be either external or internal. If we look at the environmental determinants, as Mitrea and Boboc (2011, pp. 82-90) stated, the social factor is extremely influential in the consumers' decision to take part, in one form or another, to sports activities (specifically the family, friends, colleagues or teachers), as well as the culture, subculture, the social class, or geographical and climate factors. On the other hand, when referring to the internal factors, the self-perception or the stage of the consumers' life-cycle play an important role.

Cottingham et al. (2014), through the research of why do people consume sport, concluded that there are variety of internal psychological reasons to be uncovered, as no individual is the same to another. Among these reasons, Trail and James (2001, cited in Stander and Van Zyl, 2016, p. 3) mentioned the following:

- the feeling of empowerment people get from watching their favorite team
- the desire to learn new things by watching sport
- spectators' admiration of a certain sport's elegance, artistry or beauty
- the excitement which comes from the tense anticipation of the result
- the opportunity to escape the humbling reality to a world of adventure
- the sex appeals some athletes have
- players' athletic ability and talent
- the favorable circumstances for spectators to engage in conversation.

All these elements represent the ground of sport consumers' motivation and, as such, are closely related to their behavior so that increased attention must be paid to them, especially in a context of a constantly-changing environment of consumption.

To continue with, several researchers have discovered that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the motivations of the consumers have in fact remained the same, but they manifested by undertaking different endeavors in order to fulfill their needs and wants; the expectations changed, while new experiences and trends arose, shaping in turn new preferences. For example, people who previously engaged only in contact sports, or frequently participated in public to live events, shifted their preferences to non-contact sports during the pandemic or, respectively, replaced the physical events with the online broadcasts (Teare and Taks, 2021).

Thus, it is essential to remain cognizant of consumers' motivations and adapt the sports marketing strategy according to the environmental changes.

2.2. Communication in sport marketing

An essential factor in the growth of the global sports industry, especially during COVID-19, is the communication. While most sport events were moved online, a well-established strategic communication played an important role in keeping in touch with the public, as well as facilitating the administration of sport activities.

To define sport communication, we shall refer to it as "a process by which people in sport, in a sport setting, or through a sport endeavor, share symbols as they create meaning through interaction" (Pedersen et al., 2007, p. 196). In this context, the best way through which sport marketers interact with the consumers is promotion. In order to create and maintain favorable relationships, the public needs constant stimulation, which is achieved through a set of different promotional activities, often combined: advertising, public relations, sales promotions and personal selling.

Advertising refers to "any paid form of nonpersonal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor" (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014, p. 429), having the ability to reach a large number of people. Still, it is important to consider that the communication in this case takes place one-way only (from the organization to the consumers), and more, not many have access to it as it is usually expensive.

As opposed to advertising, personal selling involves direct communication between the organizations' representatives and the consumers, "with the aim to convince them to accept a point of view about the brand or product in question, and ultimately to convince them to take some action and try the product" (Smith, 2008, p.172). Here, sponsorships and endorsements are frequently used in the sports industry; as sport fans often are emotionally and

psychologically attached to sports celebrities, endorsements have proven to be highly effective in giving reliability to a product (Smith, 2008, pp. 173-174).

For a faster response in terms of sales, great incentives and value can be offered to the consumers through sales promotions (Key and Czaplewski, 2017, pp. 327-329). Talking either about contests, price-off deals, premiums or sweepstakes, sales promotions are characterized by increased participation from the consumers and are advantageous in terms of drawing attention and providing exposure (Smith, 2008, p.174).

Public relations is in charge with establishing favorable relationships with the different groups in the sport industry, such as the fan clubs, the media, the government and other local entities, while managing unfavorable stories (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014, p. 429). As opposed to the other promotional tools, PR is free and the most frequent use is that of publishing new information to different media channels, which makes it highly accessible even to small sports clubs (Smith, 2008, p.175).

According to the target market of the promotional efforts - either the final consumer or an intermediary - one of the following strategies of communication can be applied: a push strategy, where you try to move your product down the distribution line to the final consumer (here a well-developed personal selling strategy is needed) or a pull strategy, where you promote directly to the end consumer, meaning that the demand will be created by using tools such as advertising or sales promotions. Still, to what exclusively concerns sports marketing communication, it is common for a mix of these two strategies to be used (Smith, 2008, p.181).

Considering all available promotional tools, it is important to adapt to the environment and use only the appropriate ones, in the appropriate places. As such, the increase use of social media must be taken into account when considering the best channels to communicate. In 2022, it became a necessity for all sports organizations to be present online, as well as for sports teams and athletes to direct their efforts to communicate with their audiences through social media. A constant interaction with the social media users, as the literature revealed, considerately contributes to increasing awareness and fan identification, as well as it offers the opportunity of commercial gain (Sharpe, Mountifield and Filo, 2020).

3. SAGA club and its market

3.1. The Romanian archery market

The practice of archery in our country began around the year 1930, bringing over time numerous achievements at both national and international levels (agerpres.ro). With 2 participations in the Olympic Games (2008, in Beijing and 2020, in Tokyo) (Romanian Olympic and Sports Committee, 2022), Romania has transformed archery into a very popular sport among young people, leading to the establishment of many sports clubs, to the organization of competitions, but also of activities for amateurs.

The Romanian Archery Federation (FRTA), is the sports institution that deals with the organization, administration and coordination of the archery activity in our country, at all levels, as well as with the development and promotion of archery in all its forms. Established in 1990, FRTA currently has a number of 46 affiliated clubs and about 700 athletes (frta.ro), being in a continuous process of development. At an organizational level, according to the Romanian Archery Federation (2021), its main objective is the active development and constant increase in the contributions that the Romanian athletes bring to our country on the global stage, thus increasing the international prestige of Romania. In this context, until 2024, the focus of the Federation shall fall on the improvement of the selection, training and promoting process of those athletes able to gracefully represent Romania in international archery competitions.

In terms of the competitive environment, we have discovered the following three archery clubs to be the most visible organizations in terms of top scores and presence on the market.

a. Redpoint Club

Established in 2008 in Oradea, Redpoint is one of the most active archery clubs in Romania at both amateur and professional levels. They offer courses for children, young people and adults, while training a successful archery team for performance. They classify in the top 3 archery clubs in our country, managing to obtain numerous medals at national competitions over the years. In 2022, they were awarded 7 medals at the National Indoor Archery Championship, being the club with the greatest number of participants. While having an outstanding presence in the professional environment, from a marketing perspective, there are great improvements to be made. All information about the club's activity can be found on its website, but presented briefly and with little relevance to the needs of the consumers. The website is not well optimized and information such as history of the club, functioning program, prices, coaches are difficult to find, if not absent. The club is also present on Facebook, periodically posting about the club's results in competitions.

b. Aktiv Club

Established in 2002 in Bucharest, Aktiv Club is one of the affiliated members of FRTA and of the Archery School, being in the national top clubs when it comes to their results in competitions. Having an active involvement in organizing national competitions and being permanently present in all national championships, Aktiv Club promotes the development of the national sport and focuses on attracting a large number of sport practicians with the purpose of obtaining outstanding performance results. While actively taking part in organizing archery courses and competitions, thus having an active offline presence, the awareness of the club is rather limited, having little to no presence in the online environment. Their website is characterized by little information of their activity, as well as their social media pages. As such, without directly getting in contact with the club management, there is no way for the public to be kept up-to-date with current information about the club's activity.

c. Domeniul Arcasilor Sports Club

Based in Cluj-Napoca, Domeniul Arcasilor Sports Club is one of the biggest archery cubs in the region, being mainly focused on transforming archery into a sport which brings people together, forming a community of passionate people. As opposed to the previous clubs, Domeniul Arcasilor is not aiming for results in a professional context, but the objective of the club is to offer guidance to those who want to learn archery, as well as offer a safe environment for amateurs to practice. From a marketing perspective, as compared to Aktiv Club and Redpoint Club, Domeniul Arcasilor has a better-established image in terms of branding and presence in the online environment. Their website offers details about the club and its objectives, training sessions and competitions, and their Facebook page is kept relatively up-to-date, with an average of 2-3 posts per month.

3.2. SAGA archery club

Established in 2011 in Bacau, by the artist Geanina Ivu Vlad and her husband, out of their passion for archery, SAGA sports club became over the years a place where people of all ages can learn archery in a safe environment, guided by expert trainers, and have the opportunity to reach performance.

SAGA is the only local sports club which offers archery courses, providing all the necessary training, facilities and equipment for both beginners and professionals.

According to the document describing the status of SAGA sports club (2011), the scope of the club is to select, train and participate in local, national and international level competitions, in order to obtain the victory of the athletes in the archery discipline.

While striving for performance, SAGA sports club aims to put Bacau city on the national archery stage through its active participation in national competitions with top results. In 2022 alone, the club members have managed to obtain:

- a national record in Junior Compound
- Rank 6, 7 and 9 in Compound at the European Grand Prix in Plovdiv/ Bulgaria
- 2nd place in Compound Under 21 Women at Veronica's Cup World Ranking in Kamnik/Slovenia
- 2nd place at the National Indoor Championship

In order to fully understand the present situation of the club, the following paragraphs shall discuss the segmentation and targeting approach, positioning, marketing mix, as well as provide an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the club.

To begin with, considering the sport industry is a diversified one, SAGA sports club chose to segment its market from a demographic, geographic and behavioral perspective. More specific, the club addresses its services to the people between 16 and 45 years old who live in Bacau city, in the urban or rural area, and perform a minimum of sport activity (at least once or twice a month).

The targeting strategy is rather broad, being undifferentiated, so the club addresses people with the above-mentioned characteristics altogether, in the same manner.

In terms of positioning, SAGA sports club has no defined strategy at the present. While it is the only archery club in Bacau, no previous efforts were made for the development of a USP or a positioning strategy.

To continue with the marketing mix, the club's offer consists of archery classes for both amateurs and professionals, taught by certified trainers (Geanina Ivu, the founder, president and head coach, and Marius Vlad, secondary coach).

The promotional activities, so the means through which SAGA communicates with its target market, are limited, and advertising, sales promotions, public relations, personal selling, direct or digital marketing are not used at their full potential. The only constant communicational effort of the club consists of social media posting (Facebook) of the results obtained in competitions, along with photos from championships. There are no particular people assigned to ensure the marketing activity, the founder of the club taking charge of all communication on behalf of the club.

Considering the above-mentioned factors, we can conclude that no specific marketing efforts were made in order to aid the growth of the organization. In this context, for a truthful understanding of the position that SAGA sports club hold on the market, a SWOT analysis shall emphasize the most important factors which need to be considered in the development of the future communication campaign (as presented in Table 1).

Table 1. The SWOT analysis of SAGA archery club

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
- good outdoor and indoor training facilities - national champions in archery - certified trainers - active presence in competitions	- weak online presence - hard to obtain information about the club's activity - low number of coaches - unexperienced management - the lack of a clear development direction
Opportunities	**Threats**
- extracurricular sport activities organized by schools - local sport events and competitions organized annually - the popularity of archery in awarded movies and video games (The Hunger Games, Assassin's Creed, Far Cry)	- increased costs in all sectors - sport consumer's changing behavior because of the pandemic - excessive bureaucracy - little interest from the public for archery - lack of governmental support for this sport

4. Quantitative research on consumers' attitudes and behavior towards archery

Being one of the oldest sports in history, over the years, several studies have shown the benefits of archery for people of all ages. But even though it is a commonly practiced sport all over the globe, apart from the activity at the Olympic Games, and implicitly that of the Romanian Federation, there is little to no data regarding our country. No information is available to describe the general attitudes, perceptions or behavioral patterns of the general public regarding archery, so in turn, local archery clubs are in the difficulty of trying to meet unknown needs, wants and desires. That being said, through marketing research, this section addresses the situation of archery in Bacau, constituting the base of the future promotional campaign for SAGA archery club.

4.1. Research methodology

By conducting this research, the scope is to understand the behavior of the local consumers regarding sports, gain perspective of the awareness level of archery-related activities and measure their willingness to involve in this sport either as spectators or participants in order to correctly position and promote SAGA sports club. Prior to this research, no other efforts were made with the purpose of gaining insights on the topic, and as such, the obtained results will be of great use for both SAGA club and the future endeavors of other local organizations in the industry.

The research had the following main objectives:

O1. Determining the respondents' level of involvement in sport activities

O2. Identifying consumers' level of awareness regarding the local sport clubs

O3. Discover where the respondents search for information about sports clubs

O4. Discover what type of information consumers' find important in their decision to join a sports club

O5. Research consumers' attitudes towards archery

O6. Determine respondents' willingness to practice archery

O7. Measuring the awareness level of SAGA sports club and its activity

O8. Identifying consumers' satisfaction level regarding the communicational efforts of local sports clubs

In order to collect the required data in the most effective way, we have chosen to conduct an online survey. In addition to being the fastest and most accessible method, it allows us to reach a larger number of people, which can respond to the survey at any convenient time for them. The potential respondents were approached on social media, and more specific, on Facebook, as it allows the reach of a diverse audience. The questionnaire was shared on groups gathering people with sport interests, data being collected in May 2022.

In order to obtain relevant information, which can portray an accurate image of the attitudes and behavior of the local market, the information was collected exclusively from the citizens of Bacau city. As such, the interest falls on the individual consumers living in Bacau, age between 16 and 45 years.

In the context of this research, the geographical factor must be considered in the sample size establishment. Even though the calculated size of our sample was 385, considering that this research is an exploratory one and is conducted in an academic context, the sample size was limited to 100. In terms of sample structure, we have chosen the stratified random sampling method, and for an accurate representation of each category of respondents, the sample was build based on gender and age, as follows:

- gender: 50% men and 50% women

- age groups: 30% for 16-18 years old, 40% for 19-24 years old, 20% 25-35 years old, 10% for 36-45 years old.

4.2. Research results

When asked to mention the first sport club in Bacau that comes to mind and to recall other sport clubs they know, the respondents frequently mentioned 3 clubs: CSM Bacau (52%), World Class (44%) and TNT (35%); in this context, Bronx club was also mentioned by 19% of the respondents, SAGA club by 18% and Interfast by 17% of the respondents. Other clubs mentioned were: Fiesta, Doina Melinte, Xtreme Academy and NOVA Bjj.

Further on, from a given list of sport clubs, the respondents were asked to check the ones they know about. Here, almost all respondents recognized CSM Bacau, and almost a half of the respondents were aware of the Bronx sport club. SAGA archery club also checked by a quarter of the respondents.

As shown in Figure 1, in order to determine respondents' interest in joining a sports club, a dichotomous question was given, and the results showed that more than a half of the respondents were interested in being part of a sports club.

From those with a positive answer, most respondents are between 16 and 24 years old. To continue with, in order to determine whether age is an influential factor in the decision to join a sports club, a correlation was made between the two variables. Here, the Pearson Chi-Square test had a value of 0,001, resulting in a statistically significant connection between the two. With a contingency coefficient of 0,38, we can therefore conclude that there is an average relationship between age and the decision to join a sports club.

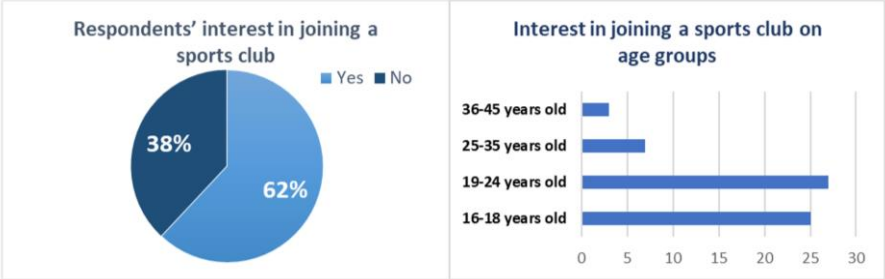

Figure 1. Interest in joining a sports club, in correlation with age group (%)

When it comes to sources of information, in order to find information about a particular sports club, almost half of the respondents search for the club's website, 29% search on Google for information from different sources, while 24% look on social media channels. Here, mostly people between 16 and 18 years old search on social media, while all other age groups do not use social media as much in this regard.

To determine which factor is most influential in the decision to join a sports club, respondents were asked to order the following factors from the most important to the least important: prices, club's coaches/team, club's results, facilities, and the health benefits of that particular sport. As a result, 88% of the respondents rated the club's prices to be either the most important or the second most important factor. Club's facilities were also a decisional factor, being classified as the second most important by 34% of the respondents, while information about the club's coaches or team was considered the third most important by 39% of the respondents.

To continue with, respondents were asked about the level of information they have on archery. On a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 means very much information, the average grade was 4. 84% of the respondents answered their knowledge of this subject is moderate or less, while only 16% ranked their knowledge on level 6 and 7.

Moreover, by using a Likert scale, the questionnaire further on aimed to discover the attitudes of the respondents towards archery based on several attributes. As such, 75% of the

respondents agreed or totally agreed that archery has great health benefits. While only 19% believe it is not a dangerous sport, almost half of the respondents have a neutral attitude regarding the danger level archery implies, and 34% believe this sport is dangerous. Regarding the costs to practice this sport, 54% do not know that to think about how expensive it is, while 26% believe it is not an expensive sport. 43% of respondents consider archery to be a sport not only for teenagers, while 40% of the respondents have a neutral opinion towards which age group this sport particularly addresses to. In this context, when asked about the likelihood of practicing archery in the future, 40% of the respondents have shown a positive attitude towards this sport, being likely to practice it in the future, 26% are rather unlikely to try archery, while 34% have a neutral stand.

Another relevant piece of information in this research is how much do people know about SAGA sports club. The results revealed that more than half of the respondents have never heard of SAGA sports club, 37% have only heard about it and do not have any particular information, while only 5% of the respondents have some information about the club's activity.

Finally, to assess respondents' satisfaction regarding the communicational efforts of the sport clubs in Bacau, 5 statements related to the received messages were given. The attitudes were mostly negative in all cases: 86% of the respondents believe that sport clubs in Bacau do not communicate enough, 65% agree that the information transmitted is not interesting, nor useful (61%). What is more, 83% find it hard to obtain the information, and 76% of the respondents stated that the information transmitted does not fully answer their questions. With most responses being negative (Strongly disagree or Disagree), it can be said that there is a general dissatisfaction regarding the communicational efforts of the sports clubs in Bacau.

5. Proposal of a marketing communication campaign for SAGA sports club

Being the only archery club in Bacau, since 2011, SAGA became a place where competition, fellowship and the free spirit intertwine. Established in the heart of Vlad family, the founding members, Geanina and Marius Vlad, managed to bring together passionate young people, striving for performance, and obtain remarkable results at both national and international levels. As such, in this section, our aim is to develop a promotional campaign through which SAGA club will be able to increase its awareness in Bacau city and promote archery practice for amateurs and professionals.

5.1. SAGA sports club situation and positioning on the market

As disclosed by the Statistical Direction of Bacau County in the Annual Statistics Report (2022, p. 222), at the end of 2020 were reported a number of 173 local sports organizations, representing 18% of the total organizations in the industry present in the North-Eastern region of Romania. Moreover, a number of 4631 legitimate athletes were reported (15% out of all athletes in the North-Eastern region), therefore showing great development potential in the local sports sector.

In this context, SAGA sports club was founded in 2011 under the Law on physical education and sports no. 69/2000 and of the Government Ordinance no. 26/2000 on associations and foundations, having at the moment a number of 7 athletes actively participating in national competitions, as well as members practicing archery at an amateur level. Located at 20 minutes walking distance from the city center, in a easily accessible area, the premises of SAGA sports club provide a corner of nature and a spot of relaxation right in the heart of Bacau city.

From a marketing perspective, the club does not have nor has had a well-established strategy, having made no efforts with the purpose of promotion. Even though, over the years, the club has managed to obtain remarkable results in the national archery setting, its athletes

being awarded with numerous medals, these results have failed to be locally recognized on the basis of not reaching the public through appropriate communication channels and methods.

As such, in order to build a successful campaign, the first step is to have a well-established position on the market. In this case, we am opting for a positioning strategy based on product features. As SAGA sports club is the only archery club in Bacau, with complex facilities and certified coaches, and there are no direct competitors in this field, it is the most suited choice to enhance these unique characteristics. What is more, the positioning of the brand shall be completed by the points of parity enhancing the specific of archery: patience and focus improvement, physical development and the sense of adventure. Alongside, every brand must tell a story and stand out through its particular features, so the points of differentiation that make up the story of SAGA are: passion, courage and performance.

Furthermore, it is important to mention there is no logo or slogan to complete the brand image, and a promotional campaign would be hard to implement without these elements at least. Considering the meaning of the word "saga", as well as the history of archery, my proposal is: "SAGA: Be the hero of your story!". Bringing all these elements together in a world of art, Figure 2 presents our vision for SAGA brand logo.

Figure 2. Proposal for SAGA logo

5.2. Communication objectives and target market

When setting the campaign objectives, it is a necessity to consider the club's situation on the market. Looking at the research results, which have shown that most respondents have never heard of SAGA archery club, or they have heard about it but have no specific information, the campaign objectives will be at a cognitive and conative level. As such, this campaign proposes to:

- Educate the target market regarding the benefits of practicing archery
- Increase awareness of SAGA archery club with 50% among the target market
- Increase the online presence and engagement rate of the brand with 20%
- Attract at least 10 new members of the club.

In order to do so, the campaign will only focus on the 16-24 age segment. Being the most active, as shown by the conducted research, and also more interested in joining a sports club, as well as in practicing archery in the future, we consider the communicational efforts of this campaign most suited to be directed towards this age category. To continue with, according to the demographic criteria, both men and women will be targeted, with a low-medium income, from the middle class and a high school degree or/and university degree, as well as students in the terminal years of high school. From a geographic perspective, the campaign will only target people from Bacau city and the rural area near Bacau, while the psychographic characteristics shall include an interest for sport activities and a positive attitude towards new experiences. The campaign targets consumers that have an active lifestyle, do sports at least once a week and are already members or have an interest in joining a sports club, so people that value their physical health.

5.3. Campaign design

The marketing communication mix for this campaign will integrate advertising, sales promotions and public relations. Considering the specifics of the sports industry, we have chosen the best tools which we believe will best help SAGA archery club to successfully reach its target audience, and the following paragraphs will offer a detailed description of how each tool will be implemented.

Firstly, the campaign will take place between 4.07.2022 and 31.07.2022, with the 4 main events taking place on 9, 16, 23 and 30 of July (each Saturday during the 4 weeks).

Starting with the social media marketing, the main focus will be on improving the brand's presence.

One week prior to the campaign launch, an Instagram account will be created, for which there will be 3 posts per week before, during and after the campaign as well, as part of the long-term social media strategy (Monday, Wednesday and Friday). The posts will include photos from the training sessions/behind the scenes at competitions, an educational video each week, graphics with the results obtained in national and international competitions, as well as myths about archery (and why they are not in fact real) and presentations of club members.

During the campaign month, Tuesday and Thursday, Instagram stories will be posted (with the latest news and upcoming events). At the same time, all posts and stories from Instagram will be redirected towards Facebook as well.

To continue with, Facebook and Instagram ads will run, promoting the 4 archery events which will be held as part of the campaign. Here, on Facebook we will use carousel ads, while for Instagram we will go for the classic format, both containing photos with groups of people having fun at archery courses and photos from competitions (with a simple graphic design overlay).

Moving on to public relations, and more specific to events, the campaign shall seize the opportunity of the local traffic restriction during summer. Each Saturday and Sunday, from 1 PM until 12 AM, the main street in the center of Bacau city is opened for pedestrians only, so that every weekend many different manifestations take place. In this context, by concluding a partnership with the city hall, SAGA archery club will organize 4 archery events in July, with demonstrations and trial classes, for which the aim is to attract young people towards joining the local archery community and become members of the club. The events shall be promoted on social media through daily promotional videos and graphics starting with 5 days before each event, and 2 days with follow-up photos from the event.

Also, in this regard, sales promotions will complete the events by offering 50% discounts for the first month membership to the 4 people with the best scores at the trial classes. This way, both cognitive and conative objectives will be reached.

During and after the campaign implementation, monitoring and controlling actions will be needed. To go in-depth, the results of the social media ads will be actively monitored in terms of number of impressions and clicks, and naturally translated to the number of people attending the events and joining SAGA sports club. For the social media presence of the brand, indicators such as the number of impressions, followers and engagement rate will tell how well suited the content is, so that adjustments will be made accordingly. At the end of the campaign, the success will in fact be measured by the above social media indicators and the number of new memberships of SAGA sports club, along with a survey which will test the degree to which the established objectives were met.

6. Conclusions and discussions

Throughout this paper, under the umbrella of the sport industry, our purpose was to enhance the importance of marketing in the strategy of any organization and obtain relevant

information that can contribute to the growth of local sport clubs. By forming an in-depth image of the sports market at both national and local levels, we managed to develop a promotional campaign for SAGA archery club, thus enriching the sport activity in Bacau city. For doing so, in this paper we included theoretical aspects, statistical data and promotional actions from which a number of indispensable key ideas shall be further brought to light.

In a complex and well-structured industry, constructed on the basis of a long chain of supplies, production factors, infrastructure and support services, delivery, media, marketing and after sales, in order to create a successful strategy, the first step is to understand the consumers.

Further on, in order to deliver value to the sport consumers and satisfy their needs, wants and desires, sport organizations make use of eight elements that make up the marketing mix: product, price, promotion, process, physical evidence, people, performance and program. Being different from the classical 4 P's, this mix of elements altogether approaches each side of the sport sector, from the sport product itself, to the people involved in the creation process, the management of marketing activities, the quality of the performance (facilities, performance accuracy, responsiveness, security, empathy) and the planning of all activities that will attract the target market towards a sports event.

An essential factor is also the active use of sport marketing communication, the most frequently applied being advertising, public relations, sales promotions and personal selling.

Nonetheless, any promotional strategy is based on a number of stages. After a situation analysis and positioning the organization on the market, objectives must be clearly set in accordance to the needs of each company (either cognitive, affective or conative). Further on, the market should be segmented and the target customers selected and described with all their relevant characteristics. Only then a budget can be set, and the strategy can be design while taking into account all the above-mentioned elements. What is more, as a method of better understanding the situation of the market, sports marketers use research to gain insights and go in-depth of the aspects that are unknown.

As such, the practical part of this paper consisted in quantitative research addressing the situation of archery in Bacau, as well as the attitudes and behavior of local sport consumers. The results showed that respondents practice sport between 1 and 4 times a week, the most active having between 19 and 24 years old. The most recalled sport clubs in Bacau were CSM Bacau, World Class and TNT, while more than half of the respondents have never heard of SAGA sports club. Surprisingly, more than half of the respondents were interested in being part of a sports club, out of which most were between 16 and 24 years old. To find information about a sports club, the majority searches either on Google, from various sources, or the club's website, and the most influential factors in the decision to join a sports club are the club's tariffs and facilities.

Regarding archery, most respondents have limited information on the subject, but are still willing to try this sport in the future. Finally, the research uncovered a general level of dissatisfaction regarding the communicational efforts of the sports clubs in Bacau city.

In this context, we have developed a communicational campaign for SAGA archery club, addressing both the negative aspects resulted from the research and the current needs of SAGA. Aiming to inform the target market regarding the benefits of archery, increase the awareness and the online presence of the club, as well as to attract new members, the campaign targets people between 16 and 24 years old living in Bacau city, with an active lifestyle, an interest for sport activities and a positive attitude towards new experiences. Integrating advertising, sales promotions, public relations and social media marketing, the campaign will take place between 4.07.2022 and 31.07.2022 and shall focus on 4 main archery events taking place in the city center. Ads will run on social media channels, and discounts will be given to the event

participants, thus making use of a mix of communicational tools with the purpose of reaching the established objectives.

To end with, we find it important to mention the research limitations; considering it was conducted at a local level, in an academic context, the research only offers limited data from the market, and as such, the promotional campaign was developed on the basis of narrow information regarding the situation of the sport market in Romania, with no recent nor abundant statistical data from secondary sources either.

Thus, we believe the information in this paper should be considered the starting point of further investigations in the sports industry, contributing as a guideline for future debate.

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Using Marketing Research in Identifying the Best Marketing Consulting Services for Young Entrepreneurs

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Abstract
Young entrepreneurs need guidance because they come with a lot of energy and desire to do something, but if this energy is not properly directed and concentrated with the help of specialists, it will not materialize in anything constructive. This is where the role of the marketing consultant comes in, to help the entrepreneur understand what the clients' needs are, what the company can offer and how the two can be correlated so that in the end there is a mutually beneficial relationship. This paper presents the results of two researches, a qualitative one (using in-depth interview) among experienced entrepreneurs and a quantitative one (using survey) among young entrepreneurs at the beginning of the road. The aim of the qualitative research was to identify the marketing consulting services that entrepreneurs need in order to optimize the businesses they own and increase customer satisfaction. The objectives of this research include highlighting the importance of marketing for business growth, the perception of the need for marketing consulting and identifying the types of services needed in marketing consulting. The quantitative research aimed at identifying marketing consulting services for which entrepreneurs at the beginning of the road show interest, having as a basis for comparison the perception of entrepreneurs with more experience, so as to correlate them in order to obtain the optimal mix of services. Following the process of comparative analysis between the way experienced entrepreneurs see consulting and marketing services and the way entrepreneurs perceive them at the beginning of the road, we have built a proposition for implementing a service offer to help young entrepreneurs in terms of activity marketing.

Keywords: Marketing consulting services, marketing research, marketing services for entrepreneurs.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

No matter the education, age or social status, people inevitably come into contact with service providers on a daily basis, and they are part of the economic exchanges in the market. Thus, we can say that services are present everywhere and their quality has a strong impact on everyday life, be it in the business to consumer or business to business market.

When it comes to the B2B service sector, there is the need for a more specialized construction, as the clients are interested in building their own offer, thus the services they require are put to a more thorough evaluation. This is also the case of marketing services, where the company turn to them to build a more sustainable business, moreover if it is a newly started one.

All being said, we have identified the need for a detailed analysis of the entrepreneurs' world, so we can afterwards provide a dedicated offer of marketing consultancy services, which is even more necessary when the business in just starting. As it will be presented in the next sections, we have conducted two direct researches that helped us understand what the experience entrepreneurs had gone through when in need on marketing and also what the new entrepreneurs need now, when they are just starting their journey and the focus can be lost very quickly if strategies aren't in place.

2. Literature review of the services sector and marketing consulting

2.1. The services sector and their influence on the marketing activity

In Kotler's opinion (2008, p. 583) service is defined as "any activity or benefit that one party can provide to another, which is generally intangible and the result of which does not imply ownership of a material good". With regard to the definition of the concept of service, it is important to note the opinion of Grönroos (2004, p. 46), who describes service as "an activity or group of activities, more or less tangible, which usually takes place at the moment of interaction between the buyer and the provider". Services by their specificity are defined by four main attributes, which determine the specificity and uniqueness of service marketing. Kotler (1998, pp. 699-703) outlines these four traits as "intangibility, inseparability, variability, perishability". A direct, clear and complete separation between services and goods is almost impossible to achieve because the purchase of a good often comes with a service, and the statement is also mutually valid (Palmer, 1994, p. 2). Services by definition cannot be seen, felt, tasted or touched as can tangible goods, and as a result a service cannot be returned. Strategies have been developed to simulate the outcome of the service, but this will not always be perfectly in line with the original situation. Today, marketing activity is no longer strictly transactional, the focus is more towards relationship marketing, on creating constant communication that supports the recipient to return to the services originally received (Edwards et al, 2020, p. 265). Socio-economic dynamism plays a very important role in the volatility of service choice, as the potential customer has many options to choose from.

In terms of the marketing mix concept, in a general approach, McCarty (1960, p. 253) defines marketing activity through four central elements: "product", "price", "placement" and "promotion". We can understand that through the marketing mix the organisation ensures that it achieves its objectives using specific tools. Due to the particularities of the services, it was found that the marketing mix needed to be adjusted and new elements were added. Cowell (1994, p. 672) is the one who defined six elements in the marketing mix, adding "people" and "processes". Following an even greater degree of specificity, Magrath (1986, p. 48) introduces another seventh element into the marketing mix, called "public relations".

In the services sector, there is an increased interest in promise management, because the promises made determine individual expectations in customers and one can end up in a situation where the expectations created are much higher than what is offered (Grönroos, 2020, p. 294). A particular feature of the service product is the involvement of the customer in the process of provision, referred to in the literature as "servuction" (Arsmstrong, 2001, pp. 32-33). According to Cetină (2004, p. 217), the employees represents the service, represents the organization in the eyes of the customer, making it tangible, reducing risks and customer distrust, and making the offer more valuable. It is important in services to prioritize the market segments according to those that have the most need for the service offered, then to analyze how easily the customer can call on the service, subsequently to choose the market segment that delivers to the provider the desired profit margin, but at the same time the segment should be attractive enough in terms of size (Maurya, 2012, p. 75). For a service to be well received by the market it is recommended that the needs of customers in each target market are carefully

understood, and the services are designed so that the end customer feels the greatest added value. Leaders of successful service companies have promoted simple visions that they have built over time and have not given up on, working on the premise that if they have something they set out to achieve, surely at the right time it will happen (Schmidt, Adler and Weering, 2005, p. 68). Service positioning process is "the act of designing a firm's offer and image so that it occupies a distinct and valued place in the attention of targeted buyers" (Kotler, 1998, p. 39). It can thus be understood that the way in which service characteristics are interpreted determines the competitive advantage, and with the help of promotional techniques, service image differentiation can be achieved.

Regardless of the field in which services marketing is practiced, a correct application of methodology requires a clear understanding and separation of principles from tactics, thus principles guide actions and tactics are the tools with which they are carried out (Grönroos, 2020, p. 291). Balaure (2002, p. 254) argues that three main dimensions are included in strategic management: correctly defining the scope of the organization's work, formulating objectives and implementing the strategy. He defines strategy as the course of action that the organization has chosen to follow in order to achieve its objectives, and a correctly constructed objective is required to contain three elements: an attribute (by which the objective is expressed), a scale (an indicator by which the measurement of the attribute is achieved) and a goal (i.e. the point on the scale that the organization aims to reach).

Hillestad and Berkowitz (1991, p. 111) define the term added value in the service market as referring to location, reservation system, ambience, prestige or other elements that can differentiate the service, and by the concept of product line width they define the total number of services that can be called upon.

According to Biech (2003, pp. 132-134), it is necessary in the service market for the provider to remain in the mind of the customer even after the customer has received the service, even if this correlation can also be made through a physical good. Frontline employees should be allowed to have alternative ways of providing services and should not be obliged to treat all customers in the same way, but should be encouraged to adapt according to the customer.

Biech (2003, p. 108) argues that in service marketing there is a need for communication even after the service has been provided, the customer feeling that the provider is thinking about them and how they can add more value for them, with a commitment for the future. This perspective can be reinforced by the fact that it is more important what the customer thinks after they have received the service, than what they think before they receive it, because that is when the comparison between the benefits promised and those received takes place.

2.2. Marketing consulting

A good marketing strategy requires the provider to be consistent in what they say, but also in what they propose. Marketing consultancy is one that manifests a high degree of complexity as the results of the research carried out need to be linked to specific and repeatable actions that optimize the information obtained (Maurya, 2012, pp. 91-92). Creating plans that are almost impossible to achieve may cause the provider to try to provide the perfect service that is not perfect for the customer (Biech, 2003, pp. 140-141).

It is noted that there are many situations where the demand is unknown and the consultant needs to ensure that they recommend the right actions for the client so that all the proposed marketing actions help to achieve the company's objectives. An effective marketing consultant, Biech (2003, pp. 34-35) argues that there is a need to clarify what service the organization provides, what he is good at, what it doesn't do well, what the customers want, how the firm ensures that it supports the needs of the customers, how it predicts needs, what the competition

is, what the its competitive advantage is, what the vision of the organization is and what it does to get there.

Consulting services have a complex character as they take into account elements related to both the internal environment of the company, but also the external one. The consultant is motivated to help the client understand what the customers need, what the company can offer and how the two can be correlated so that in the end there is a mutually beneficial relationship. At the same time, the consultant needs to help the client to understand where he is in relation to the competition and subsequently what are the competitive advantages he has, so that he can differentiate himself.

Regardless of the type of client, there is the need for a clear definition of the objectives that the client wants when calling a consultant. Regarding the nature of the objectives that an enterprise can adopt, two categories are identified, economic objectives and social objectives. Granger (1964, pp. 63-64) states that through economic objectives it is desired to optimize the use of company resources, and through social objectives outlines the result of the relationship between the interests of the organization and those of the environment in which it operates. It is thus observed that this is not an approach of alternative type objectives, but it is necessary that the two types be harmonized, all in order to be able to finally obtain the desired result.

The market strategy synthetically clarifies the relationship between the organization and the environment in which it operates, the position that the organization has in the environment, in order to achieve optimal efficiency (Mâlcomete, Vorzsak and Vorzsak, 1976, p. 83). Analyzing the previous statement, it is understood that, for the marketing consultant, the establishment of the market strategy must be the most important element of the marketing activity.

Depending on the market in which the company operates, the marketing consultant is required to choose the market strategy based on how the demand manifests itself in the market. Kotler (1973, pp. 42-49) defines the fact that demand can manifest itself in the market in eight forms, and each form determines different strategies that the organization must adopt. In a situation of a negative demand, the marketing role is to demystify the demand, the strategy being called "conversion". If demand is absent, the role of marketing is to create it, and the market strategy is "stimulating". In the case of latent demand, marketing aims at demand development, using a "development" strategy. The fourth stage of demand is that of declining demand, with marketing having the role of revitalizing, through a "remarketing" strategy. The fifth stage of demand is a fluctuating one, where the role of marketing is regularization, with the help of a "synchro marketing" strategy. The sixth stage of demand is the situation of a complete demand, where marketing has only the role of maintenance, thus applying a "maintenance strategy". The seventh stage of demand is that of excessive demand, in which case marketing must reduce demand, the strategy being "demarketing". The last stage of demand is that of undesirable demand, here marketing having the role of destroying the demand, with the help of an "antimarketing strategy".

We notice that there are many situations in which the demand can be found, and the consultant needs to make sure that he recommends the right actions for the client, so that all the proposed marketing actions meet the company's objectives.

In the following sections we will present the results of two researches meant to identify how the offer of marketing consulting services can adapt to the needs of entrepreneurs, be they newcomers or experienced ones.

3. Qualitative research to identify marketing service needs

3.1. Research methodology

The aim of the research is to identify the marketing consultancy services that entrepreneurs need in order to optimize their businesses and increase customer satisfaction.

The research objectives in this study are to:

1) Identify perceptions about start-up entrepreneurs;
2) Highlighting the importance of marketing for new businesses;
3) Perceptions of the need for marketing advice;
4) Highlighting opinion on the quality of marketing consultancy services;
5) Identify the types of services needed in marketing consultancy.

The present research was carried out by means of individual in-depth interviews and then the information stored in the form of audio files to be analyzed. To carry out this research, interviews was held with 10 experienced entrepreneurs, who have been in business for more than three years. Participants have used marketing consultancy services in the past.

In order to conduct in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs, an interview guide was used as a support to identify and outline relevant aspects of the research. As in-depth interviews are highly complex, the use of a research tool for the conversation guide is imperative, all-in order to eliminate as much as possible the chances of the interviewer to influence the research results. Data was collected in the spring of 2022, on the Romanian market.

3.2 Research results

The first question related to the three most common marketing problems faced by young entrepreneurs had, among the most common answers, "not defining the target audience correctly", "lack of recurrent communication" and "not defining a clear marketing strategy". The majority of subjects mentioned among the advantages of young entrepreneurs the desire to have innovative products/services, concern for "online communication" and "appetite for development in more product/service categories". A considerable proportion of respondents mentioned that the first thing they would change in young entrepreneurs is "the lack of patience", stating that they want things to move very quickly and results to appear in a very short time, which is not always possible.

Many of the entrepreneurs pointed out that success is not just about completing a sales process, success can also mean not selling. This view outlines the desire of entrepreneurs to have businesses that make an impact and know that through transparency and customer focus, they will benefit in the long run. Many entrepreneurs have made it clear that marketing is what makes the difference between a successful business and one that is trying to survive. At the same time, the same majority said that marketing is much more interactive and attractive to do, as the tools available have changed, as well as the purchasing process and consumption behavior.

A large proportion of respondents mentioned that since they chose to work with marketers or agencies, things have changed for the better as they have been able to focus on creating the product and service as expected following a coherent and achievable marketing strategy. A large proportion of participants indicated that for them effective marketing is when people think about their product as soon as they hear certain words, then they have managed to be in the mind of the consumer for a good period of time. In terms of the reasons why experienced entrepreneurs turned to marketing consultancy, here participants mentioned the desire to hand over this responsibility to experts, the desire to have a coordinated strategy and the lack of internal capacity to manage marketing activity. A good proportion of entrepreneurs mentioned that despite the fact that they are very confident in their product/service, there is a need to know how to pass this on to potential customers.

The question on the balance between investing less time and more money or more time and less money was one that separated the participants somewhat as those with one business they were involved in chose the option of investing more time and less money compared to the situation where those involved in multiple businesses chose to invest more money and less time.

The majority of entrepreneurs found marketing to be more complex than they initially thought, because they realized that the most important thing is to communicate recurrently and in the customer's understanding. In terms of the list of criteria by which entrepreneurs choose their consultancy firms, among the most common are the reputation of the consultant, the firms they have worked with before and the price. It is thus observed that price is not the most important criteria, since if there is a sufficient number of conversions, the price of the consultant is no longer a critical issue, as the purchase of services is shown to be a wise one and made on economic grounds.

In relation to the areas in which entrepreneurs feel there is a need for knowledge on the part of marketing consultants, most responses related to the concepts of marketing strategy, branding, consumer behavior and communication.

The marketing services that entrepreneurs called upon were varied, the most common of which were marketing strategy consultancy, data analysis, branding and content marketing. Many of the entrepreneurs indicated that the strategy behind any approach is very important, so marketing strategy consultancy is one of the most common services used.

Now, having already the perspective of experienced entrepreneurs, we turned to the new comers, as they have a very different approach of things, mostly due to their lack of experience, thus is important to get to know also their opinion on the need of marketing services.

4. Quantitative research on the marketing services needs by young entrepreneurs

4.1 Research methodology

As mentioned before, the purpose of this quantitative research is focused on identifying the marketing consulting services for which entrepreneurs at the beginning of the road show interest, having as a basis for comparison the experience of entrepreneurs with more experience, so as to make a correlation to obtain the optimal mix of services. The marketing services highlighted by experienced entrepreneurs are tested on entrepreneurs with less than three years of experience, to see to what extent they need to be guided.

The objectives of our quantitative research were:

1) To identify the preference of early stage entrepreneurs regarding the conduct of marketing activity;

2) To highlight the areas of expertise for a marketing consultant needed from the perspective of entrepreneurs;

3) Identify the most common marketing services that are developed and performed in-house by entrepreneurs;

4) Highlighting the most common services that marketing consultancy has been used for;

5) Outlining the services for which entrepreneurs would use marketing consultancy in the future.

The hypotheses of the quantitative research can be found in the following list:

1) Just starting out entrepreneurs prefer to carry out marketing activity using in-house means;

2) The four most common areas of expertise from the perspective of entrepreneurs are marketing strategy, branding, content marketing and market research;

3) Start-up entrepreneurs perform the following three marketing services in-house: branding, marketing strategy and social media;

4) In the top three marketing services that entrepreneurs turned to for advice were marketing strategy, branding and copywriting;

5) In the future, just starting out entrepreneurs will turn to marketing consultancy for the following services: growth hacking marketing, content marketing and data analytics.

Data collection was carried out through an online survey. The questionnaire was distributed in a random way with the help of social platforms, thus being able to be completed exclusively online. At the same time, the questionnaire was distributed also in groups and communities of entrepreneurs, in order to ensure a completion from different areas of specialization.

Data was collected with the help of the platform www.typeform.com, this being a versatile platform that offered the possibility to design and complete in an accessible and easy to view way. After the completion of the questionnaire, followed the stage of data processing and information analysis using the SPSS program, but also the Microsoft Power BI program. The interpretation and visualization of the information was possible with the Excel spreadsheet tool, completed by Microsoft Power BI, all in order to be able to draw a relevant and intuitive graphical image.

4.2. Research results

The results will be presented following a structure adapted to the research objectives, with insight both from the univariate and bivariate analysis.

In terms of respondents' experience in entrepreneurship, 50% have less than 1 year, 31% have between 1 and 2 years and 19% have 2-3 years' experience, thus it is clear that from an age perspective, the questionnaire was completed by the original target group. The level of education is as representative as possible, as approximately 87% of respondents have a university degree. Also, 72% of the entrepreneurs mentioned that they had taken at least one marketing course, thus giving the first indication of the entrepreneurs' desire to understand what is going on in marketing.

In terms of the areas of expertise of a marketing consultant, the respondents' answers revealed four main needed specializations: 89% considered expertise in marketing strategy to be necessary, 84% chose the ability to set objectives and performance indicators, 70% chose knowledge of market analysis and 68% expertise in understanding customer consumption and purchasing behavior. These four sub-areas of expertise highlight the entrepreneurs' concern for the customer, the company and the competition, in order to achieve an optimal package in their work. Table 1 presents the importance of criteria taken into consideration when choosing a marketing consultant.

Table 1. Importance of criteria for choosing marketing consulting services (on a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 means very important)

CRITERIA	VALUE					AVERAGE
	1	2	3	4	5	
Price	0,00%	4,63%	**52,66%**	23,48%	19,23%	4
Reputation	0,00%	9,48%	12,00%	**45,31%**	34,34%	4
Experience	6,86%	5,71%	16,43%	**42,43%**	29,43%	4
Domain	4,05%	7,19%	7,48%	**54,03%**	27,25%	4
Company size	12,28%	5,13%	11,25%	**47,42%**	25,46%	4

The perspective of early-stage entrepreneurs on the importance of the marketing activities is presented in Table 2, where we can see that the higher focus that these types of respondents put on copywriting and web analyze.

Table 2. The importance of marketing activities

CRITERIA	VALUE				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Communication strategy	0,00%	8,36%	19,44%	38,58%	33,62%
Data analysis	0,00%	2,09%	18,37%	45,49%	35,32%
Marketing strategy	0,00%	9,22%	14,93%	46,85%	29,37%
Clients identifying	3,36%	11,39%	13,41%	53,46%	20,27%
KPI s	0,00%	3,49%	31,38%	39,26%	27,25%
Growth hacking marketing	3,56%	19,23%	44,89%	21,58%	11,30%
Social media	0,00%	8,03%	30,49%	34,57%	26,91%
Content marketing	1,98%	10,09%	23,52%	28,68%	35,73%
Branding	4,11%	7,96%	26,25%	31,83%	29,85%
Web design	1,98%	5,65%	11,86%	48,02%	32,49%
Copywriting	0,00%	0,86%	13,24%	38,95%	**46,95%**
Web analyze	0,00%	0,00%	23,75%	33,86%	**42,39%**

Another research objective looked at the services for which young entrepreneurs would seek marketing advice. The results here are surprising as the most common choices are no longer online related, but entrepreneurs are more oriented towards marketing strategy (76%), setting goals and performance indicators (78%) and data analysis (74%).

5. Creating a marketing consultancy service offer for young entrepreneurs using AI

As a result of the benchmarking process between how experienced entrepreneurs see consultancy and marketing services and how they perceive start-up entrepreneurs, it is proposed to implement a service to help young entrepreneurs with their marketing activity. The aim of this marketing consultancy service is to support, guide and develop young entrepreneurs in the marketing needs for their companies, following the identification of their areas of weakness. The mission of this marketing consultancy company is to help start-up entrepreneurs by providing marketing consultancy services, using a dedicated online platform created as a result of analyzing their needs and wishes.

The vision of this service is to achieve full automation of marketing consultancy services through Artificial Intelligence. Everything is oriented towards the concept of SMART work, here we am not referring to having a more complex activity, but to having a more efficient activity, to teamwork, to paying close attention to sales channels and to adapting to the existing context.

The strategy of launching a marketing consultancy service for young entrepreneurs aims to raise awareness of the need for expertise and analysis when setting up marketing activity. Given the Ansoff matrix, as the service offered is a new one and addresses a new market, the strategy used is diversification. Moreover, given the basis for reporting the state of demand, since this is fluctuating, a synchro marketing strategy will be used, the role of marketing activity being to regulate demand. Last but not least, taking into account the size and characteristics of the market, a strategy of increasing turnover in terms of market dynamics, a differentiated strategy in terms of market structure, an active strategy in terms of market changes, based on the strategy of average requirements/expectations and an offensive strategy to increase market share will be used.

The target audience of this service is represented by young entrepreneurs in Romania, eager to develop their businesses, regardless of the field of activity they have. In other words,

the target audience is made up of people aged 19-35 from Romania who have a university degree, have less than one year in entrepreneurship and who are interested in marketing.

The service program is called BusinessUP. The online platform has a descriptive name, so the field of activity is indicated illustrating that it helps to develop existing businesses. The application process for these marketing consultancy services will be done through the platform. This registration consists of mentioning some aspects related to the entrepreneur and the business he owns, such as the experience he has, his specialization, what is the stage of his business, the main problems he has and his long-term vision. A specialist will then analyze the data and a 2-hours virtual meeting will be held for a detailed discussion. This process of getting to know each other is done to see what stage the young entrepreneur is at and to be able to identify how and what advice can be offered.

After getting to know the business, the next two stages will take place. The first stage looks at the entrepreneur's interaction with the entrepreneur's employees and how the interaction is carried out. In this step the aim is to identify how the employees feel, how they know what they have to do and how satisfied they are with the work they are doing. The second step looks at external and interactive marketing. The time allocation structure is the same and the two types of marketing are analyzed together as they reach the end customer directly. The role of this stage is to understand and simulate the customer journey with the services/products offered by the contractor. Because entrepreneurs need support and guidance in their marketing activity, according to the results of the research, they will benefit from a mentor entrepreneur who will help them with the expertise he/she has in the consultancy services. This is because entrepreneurship requires commitment, determination and vision, as well as accepting help from those with expertise.

The BusinessUP branded marketing consultancy service aims to become the promoter of young entrepreneurs in Romania, becoming the way for them to access highly specialized marketing consultancy services that they would not normally have access to so easily or cheaply. The program regardless of the period they opt for is tailored to the three levels of marketing within the services, external marketing, internal marketing and interactive marketing. Because the research identified that entrepreneurs carry out marketing work not with specialist people, all in order to optimize costs, this concept needs to be changed as it is not beneficial to the future of the business. Recurrent and integrated communication manages to generate results over time.

On the consultancy platform there will be recordings and interviews with specialists in the field trying to pass on their experience. Access is free for the first 14 days, and thereafter the service is charged. This free period arises because of the need to demonstrate that the services offered are qualitative and useful for entrepreneurs. The aim of both is to support initiatives across financial barriers.

6. Conclusions and discussions

From the qualitative research conducted we identified that new business marketing is much more competitive to do, involves more experience and effort, but if things are done well, the results are amazing. The qualitative research revealed that marketing consultancy services exist in Romania and are diversified, but they are not perfectly accessible for young entrepreneurs, sometimes they do not even have the opportunity to talk to consultancy firms as they are preoccupied with bigger companies. The results of the two researches showed that there is a demand for marketing consultancy services, but that these services need to be provided in a way that is adapted to the level of each company. The BusinessUP platform is precisely optimized to the level of each client, with services perfectly optimized and tailored to the specifics of the business. The concept behind the platform is to link the community of

entrepreneurs at national level, this conceptualization is in order to transmit in the most dynamic and fast way the new trends and results on the market.

As a result of the trend towards a digitized and automated experience, the idea of the BusinessUP platform is perfectly adapted to the economic and technological context, thus removing many existing barriers. Young entrepreneurs need support in their marketing activities and the research conducted revealed a concern for marketing strategy, data analysis and optimizing the way their companies communicate with the market.

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Understanding the Consumer of Books in the Digital Era

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Abstract
Books have the power to transform people's lives. It is not an understatement to claim that the world we know today would not have developed as it has if books had not existed. Books have long been a staple of education and entertainment, and they remain an important tool for the investigation and dissemination of ideas. Over the years, the book industry has become larger and larger and, like many other industries undergoing transformation, new technologies are facilitating a shift in who determines the industry's value. The Internet paved the way for new technologies to emerge, allowing for changes in sales/distribution, publication, and where material might be accessed. With the rise in popularity of the e-book in the twenty-first century, for businesses and marketers, the process of understanding, analyzing and tracking consumer behavior is crucial for leading to a better understanding of the consumer and consequently, to a successful approach. Therefore, the study of consumer behavior represents the incipient stage of the journey to meeting consumer's expectations and needs. This paper presents the results of a quantitative research with the main purpose of describing a clear perspective on book consumer behavior, what factors influence their book purchasing decisions, reading habits and preferences and some of the individuals' favorite things about reading and books. One of the most conclusive questions for this research focused on the book format the participants use, obtaining a very big and unexpected proportion of respondents claiming that they still read printed book, which proves that books still hold their magic, despites different digital means of reading such as e-books.

Keywords: Book consumer, Marketing research, Consumer behavior.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

In today's modern society, for businesses and marketers, the process of understanding, analyzing and tracking consumer behavior is crucial for leading to a better understanding of the consumer and consequently, to a successful approach. Therefore, the study of consumer behavior represents the incipient stage of the journey to meeting consumer's expectations and needs.

With the rise in popularity of the e-book in the twenty-first century, for businesses and marketers, the process of understanding, analyzing and tracking consumer behavior is crucial for leading to a better understanding of the consumer and consequently, to a successful approach. Therefore, the study of consumer behavior represents the incipient stage of the journey to meeting consumer's expectations and needs.

This paper presents the results of a quantitative research with the main purpose of describing a clear perspective on book consumer behavior, what factors influence their book purchasing decisions, reading habits and preferences and some of the individuals' favorite things about reading and books. One of the most conclusive questions for this research focused on the book format the participants use, obtaining a very big and unexpected proportion of respondents claiming that they still read printed book, which proves that books still hold their magic, despites different digital means of reading such as e-books.

2. Consumer behavior in the books market

2.1. The importance of studying consumer behavior

It can be considered that consumer behavior represents the totality of decisions (in terms of what, why, how, when, whether, where, how much/how often/how long) about the consumption (purchase, utilization, disposition) of an offering (goods, services, people, activities, ideas, actions) by decision making units (decider, influencer, information connoisseur, buyer, user) over time (from hours and days to months and years) (Hoyer, Maclnnis & Pieters, 2012).

When discussing consumer behavior, one big, crucial detail should be emphasized: the relevant distinction operated by marketing between the term's "consumer" and "customer". It is indeed true that in some cases the two terms can be used interchangeably and indicate the same section of people, however the key differences between the two of them should be very clearly expressed.

Customers – that can also be referred to as buyers or clients – could be described as the people that purchase products and services after they pay a particular specified price. In other words, any person, or company or business that buys any sort of products or services from sellers is called a customer. In the specific literature we find the following classification of customers: loyal customers (their needs were satisfied, therefore there are big chances for them to return and buy again), trade customer (people or businesses that buy products and resell them for profit, such as wholesalers, retailers and manufacturers), final customers (anyone that purchase products for themselves), discount customers (only buying goods or services if there are discounts), impulsive customers (people that do not necessarily want to buy something specifically, but anything that catches their eye in that moment), need-based customers (this type of customers have very strict limits of buying just as much as they need, not what they might "treat" themselves with) and lastly, wandering customers (very hesitant of what they really want to buy) (Hoyer, Maclnnis & Pieters, 2012).

Consumer behavior is a field usually studied for various reasons by various people in various contexts, from university students learning it and professors teaching it, to advertising and marketing employees. Briefly, it is an important field because it helps people improve their business performances and be successful by understanding the expectations of consumers and what makes them buy a product. Once the likes and dislikes of consumers are being acknowledged, the products and services of a company can be designed based on the results discovered.

Furthermore, consumer behavior is a powerful tool to educate consumers and encourage them to make better decision in the purchasing process. Having consumers understand and act responsibly when it comes to buying is benefic for both businesses and consumers themselves. Educating the consumers refers to showing them how to choose the right products that suit their needs and not waste money or the actual product. This kind of behavior is often known as "the dark side of consumer behavior" and more precisely makes references to actions that could jeopardize people such as destructive compulsive purchasing, products overusing or tampering, shoplifting and any other negative demeanors (Belk, 1985). In order to avoid these

circumstances, an accurate study of consumer behavior can result in strategic promotion of products or help in combating harmful behavior or habits.

Last, but not least, studying consumer behavior contributes in understanding the competitive market. Marketers can learn about how to position the products and services to gain competitive advantages by addressing questions like: Is the customer already familiar with a competitor's products? What motivates a customer to purchase from a competitor? Are potential buyers satisfied with the brands of competitors? What are the similarities and differences between your products and those of your competitors? (Tan, 2022).

2.2. The book industry and the marketing within

Books have played a key part in enabling the world to evolve from the dark ages to the hyper-connected telecommunication world, despite being simple products consisting of inked words on pieces of paper. Over the years, the book industry has become larger and larger, today being divided in multiple subcategories. Some of the most important subsectors would be trade books, educational books, religious books, scientific/professional books, biography books, children's books, art/coffee table books. All of these categories are undergoing significant transformations. As with many other industries undergoing transformation, new technologies are facilitating a shift in who owns the industry's value. The Internet paved the way for new technologies to emerge, allowing for changes in sales/distribution, publication, and where material might be viewed.

The book is a cultural asset that, in addition to its educational and cultural functions, is subject to the same research and marketing requirements as any other commodity, cultural or not. Reading is a habit that is always placing and repositioning itself in people's consuming agendas (Laing, 2008) The sale and marketing of a book as a commodity is determined by trading norms and, more importantly, by people's free time resources and desire to make room for book purchases in an otherwise restricted household budget, which must meet a variety of other consumer needs. This means that, in addition to its social and cultural functions, the book, as a cultural object, is subject to the same market norms in terms of consumption and acquisition.

The book industry is heavily reliant on market demand, supply, and competition. A carefully devised marketing strategy is critical to achieving rewarding material and professional results in this industry, and this study is important because it provides information that can serve as useful tools for publishers as well as decision-makers who are directly interested and involved in the book industry or related industries.

There have been studies and authors who look at the book industry as an “ecosystem”, a word derived from biology and ecology (Ceobanu, Dinu, Cristea, 2016). The metaphor alludes to the participants, resources, and environment in which publishing houses, technologies, funding, reading preferences, and readers all coexist. The diagram below depicts the phases that the book publishing industry has gone through throughout history, as well as changes in the interactions between the major stakeholders in the book ecosystem.

Nonetheless, it should not be neglected the sight of the reality that the five essential actors (author, publisher, producer, distributor, and consumer) described below are not wholly independent or isolated in their responsibilities in the market. The most significant point to note here is that, from the consumer's perspective, the last link in this chain has altered the most. The third wave is the one that has pushed things in this business to where they are now. Seeing that the customer has become a manufacturer, the connection among industry actors has not stayed linear, and this is all thanks to self-publishing technologies Anderson (2002).

In terms of trends and changes, the book industry has seen some significant shifts during the last decade (for example, the emergence of e-books, audiobooks, and digital technology).

To take advantage of the altering terrain within publishing, creative sectors have had to be flexible in their marketing tactics due to new difficulties, changes in taste, and technological improvements. From social media influencers to artificial intelligence, there are a number of market research trends to watch in the coming months.

By 2028, the worldwide book market is expected to reach USD 159.3 billion. According to Schultz (2021), from 2021 to 2028, the market is estimated to grow at a CAGR of 2.4 percent. Increasing consumer expenditure on books, fueled by rising incomes and interest, as well as ongoing format improvements that have improved the whole reading experience, are among the primary reasons driving the market forward. Over the previous decade, the market has changed dramatically and is now moving in new directions. The advancement of the commissioning process, aided by a new generation of astute editors.

With the advent of digital technology in the publishing industry, different mediums of marketing products and services in the market have opened the way for better product acceptance among consumers. In the current situation, book royalties come from a variety of places, including retail, subscription services, digital library providers, and regional retailers (Schultz, 2021).

With the normal one-copy purchase business model established by firms like Amazon, Apple Books, Barnes & Noble, Google Play Books, and Kobo, the retail format has a greater reach among global readers. Subscription services, such as Scribd, Bookmate, or Dreame, operate as apps or stores that allow unrestricted access to books in exchange for a monthly charge. OverDrive, Bibliotheca, and Odilo are examples of digital library providers that not only allow individuals to borrow books but also assist organizations such as public libraries, schools, universities, and corporate libraries (McCarthy, 2022).

Publishers are tailoring their books for the customer path to buy by using reader data to work smarter, not harder. According to Howarth (2022), understanding customer behavior and whether the sales plan corresponds with it can be done if the publishers have more aggregated data on rivals, search engine result pages, market trends, and reading habits. Large data sets enable publishers to gain a deeper understanding of their audience - speak their language to improve descriptions, reach out to readers directly - go where your customers are and make sure your products are noticed, being genuine and adding value is a great strategy to increase customer loyalty.

2.3. The Romanian book industry

"In Romania, there are two editorial policies: the "boom" policy and the multi-purpose publishing policy that covers as many segments of the market as feasible," claimed Eliza Maier, a Romanian author. Both methods are paying off, but the Ministry of Culture has adopted a non-involvement strategy with reference to market demand in order to maintain the balance among rivals. Only cultural productions that are representative of Romania's creative potential are supported by the Ministry of Culture. As a result, the Ministry has delegated responsibility for book funding to the National Cultural Fund Administration. This way, books will be funded only when a project is ready, with Ministry of Culture's responsibilities limited to the national library book acquisition program and the expansion of public library services. The Ministry of Culture has maintained its function as a book fair financier, although it has decided to outsource items to organizations that represent authors (Ceobanu et al., 2016).

The Ministry of Culture's key strategic objectives in the book industry are to expand the number of fields and titles to be published, as well as to support alternative publishing forms such as e-books and books published via the Internet. The following is a list of the most important strategic goals in the book business and industry, as believed by Stănciulescu et al. (2020):

a. Diversify the publisher's offering: published fields and titles;
b. A more efficient book distribution by diversifying sale techniques (books by mail, book clubs, sale fairs, e-commerce, e-books, etc.) – matching market supply with the interests, tastes, and demands of readers as discovered by market research;
c. Diversify the addressability of publishing production by designating activities such as the translation of printed books into widely circulated languages or the translation of minority literature as key priority areas for state aid; 4. Supporting alternative forms of book and publication publishing, particularly digital publishing via the Internet.

The book industry market could not survive these days without marketing and all its strategies. On the current changing market, designing a publishing house's offer is not an easy process. If literary tastes and ideals of editors and publishers were relevant points of reference a few decades ago, today a commercial viewpoint demands that the reader be placed at the center of the process. The public and market dynamics dictated new business structures, new sorts of alliances, and multimedia formats, among other things. We assist in the diversification of a book's functional use (Zbuchea, Hrib, 2016).

Having strong bonds between publishing houses, authors, and readers is essential for success. The last two sorts of players are becoming more influential, and they may play distinct roles in the book industry, leading to new business models (Ceobanu et al., 2016). The advancement of digital printing has allowed anyone who is interested in printing to do it at a reasonable cost and with high-quality materials. Reading and writing have both been democratized and made more accessible to a wider audience.

3. Quantitative research on Romanian books consumer behavior

3.1. Research methodology

The scope of the present study is to analyze books consumer behavior among Romanian female population age 18 and over, with the following main objectives:

- Preference in terms of means of reading (e-books, printed books, audio books, full books/short summary)
- Buying habits (when, where, how do consumers get their books)
- Factors that influence the decision of choosing a specific book store (prices, large variety of books from which they choose, store/website design etc.)
- Factors that influence the decision of choosing a specific book (author, title, genre, publishing house)
- Sources of information about books
- The book genres the respondents prefer
- Reading habits (how often, where, when they read)
- Consumer’s profile (age, education, income, profession).

The research method chosen for this study was the survey, precisely the online survey, as the research population is represented by book lovers and reading enthusiasts within the Romanian population, age 18 and over.

In terms of sampling, although the calculated sample size necessary for a representative research was 385, we have conducted an exploratory research, thus the number of respondents was reduced from 385 to 100.

For this research, stratified random sampling was used, a method in which a population is divided into smaller sub-groups called strata. Strata are produced in stratified random sampling, or stratification, depending on shared features or characteristics among members, such as age. The quota for age segments was the following:

- 18-24 years – 20% - because younger people have access to much more technology and information, thus they can read on their phones, tablets, computers or Kindles; however, they

may not have enough time to read so much considering most of them attend universities or/and have jobs, so the percentage is only 20%.

- 25-34 years – 25% - because just like the previous category of younger people, they can access books in many ways and are more attentive and take advantage of book fests and bookshops/retailers' offers and sales.

- 35-49 years – 35% - this age group has the biggest percentage because people have more time than the younger ones and they may also read/buy books for their children; it is also a group that is familiar with both online means of reading and offline means of reading.

- 50-64 years – 15% - this group is composed of people that usually have enough time to read, but they are not necessarily very familiar with e-books or audio books and start to have eyesight problems.

- 65 years and over – 5% - because people in this age group tend to choose different things to do, just like the previous group, because they tend to have eyesight problems and cannot concentrate well.

3.2. Research results

In terms of book format, it can be easily stated that printed books represent the largest proportion, with almost 70%, while audio book is smallest proportion, with just 1%. E-books have the intermediate proportion, with 29.05%.

The next topic is about the reason why participants choose to read their books in this specific format and the proportions of them. The largest proportion is represented by the smell of books (43.8%), followed by accessibility with 22.9%. The third reason is represented by eyes health (16.2%) and the next two proportions are very close to each other (9.5% and 8.6%) and represent the feelings the participants have when having a book in their hands (the authenticity of the sensation) and habitude. The book collecting (6.7%) and reading the ending (5.7%) are the last smallest proportions.

A correlation between age and book format was conducted in order to see if the age influences the book format – online (e-book, audio book) vs. offline (printed books). For the demographic ages to be significant and influence the answers (more precisely, if younger participants chose e-books/audio books, while older ones choose printed books), the chi coefficient should not be over 0.05. The results displayed 0.044 which means that age do influence the decision when choosing from e-books/audio books and printed books. However, the contingency coefficient resulted was 0.362, which shows that the intensity level between age and book format is average.

When it comes to book length, the largest proportion is represented by full length books, with a very big percent of 97.1, while only a total of 2.09% of the participants chose summary books.

Figure 1 shows the results of a survey in which people were asked where they get the books from. It is clear that the majority prefer to buy book from online stores, while bookshops falls in the second place, with 28.06%. The least preferred options are libraries and antique shops, with only 2.34% difference between the two of them.

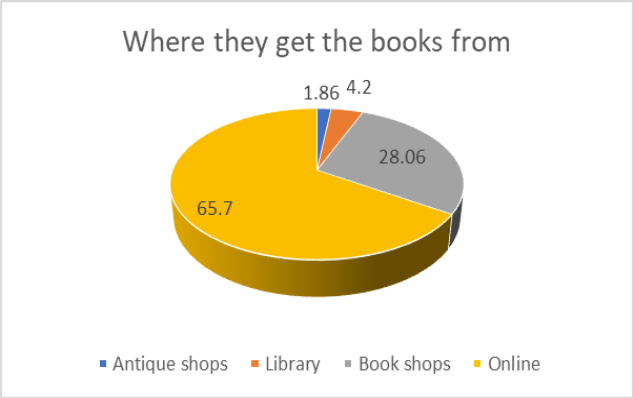

Figure 1. Place of purchase for books

In terms of occasions people usually buy books for, the majority of participants (47%) claimed that they do not need a special occasion to buy books, while the smallest proportion refers to people that buy books when they go on holidays (3,79%). The second most chosen option with 34% is represented by people that go shopping when they find out about a book they want. People that buy book because they finished all the books at home and people that want to offer gifts fall into the second and third places of the least preferred options, with a difference of 2,28% between the two of them.

Next, respondents had to talk about their sources of information when it comes to books. The largest proportion of people said that social media helps them (57.4%), while a very insignificant proportion of people said that they get inspired when they go to a book fest (1.16%). The second largest proportion is represented by family and friends (21%), followed by mass media influences (10.15%), bestseller lists (6.07%) and staff recommendations.

One of the most interesting topic is the one about the preferred book genre. The first most preferred genre is Romance with a total of 22.09%, followed right away by Thriller with only 3.08% difference between them. Action and adventure books fall into the third place with 16.74%, and very closely come the Classics with 15.02%. Fantasy and Sci-fi books and Mystery books occupy the middle of the graphic with 11.05% and 8.06%, while the last three preferred genres seem to be Personal development books (4.45%), Historical books (2.49%) and Biography/Autobiography books (1.09%).

Figure 2 shows the proportions of the reading frequency. The largest proportion is formed by people who read 3-4 times a week (44.8%), followed by people who read every day (almost 30%). People that read once a week take the third place with the percentage of 16.02%, while the smallest proportions are represented by people who read two times a month and everyday month, with a 1.29% difference between them.

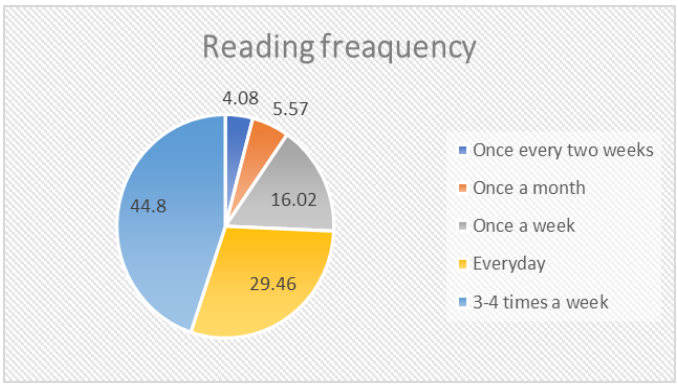

Figure 2. The frequency of book reading

When it comes to the place (*where*) the participants usually read. It can be seen that a very big percentage of the participant (81%) choose to read at home, while very few of them choose to read outside, in nature (2.09%). The second most preferred place in on the subway/train (7.66%), followed by the 5.08% of people that prefer to read while on holiday and people that read on their job break (3.08%).

In close connection to the above-mentioned topic comes the reading time (*when*) the participants choose to read. The biggest proportion (76.2%) belongs to people that read whenever they have the time, while the smallest proportion belongs to people that read while on holiday (2.11%). The second most preferred option is occupied by people that read before bed/in the afternoon (15.62%), followed by people that read when waiting for the subway/train (6.07%).

4. Conclusions and discussions

This study's main purpose was to present a clear perspective on book consumer behavior, from are the book consumers are, what factors influence their book purchasing decisions, reading habits and preferences and some of the individuals' favorite things about reading and books.

The theoretical approach aimed to provide information about all the concepts regarding consumer behavior that must be known in order to conduct an accurate (and later, useful) research. Concluding, studying consumer behavior represents a key element for a profitable business and a successful approach, by looking into the consumer buying psychology and taking notes of needs, desires and frustrations consumers have. Moreover, consumers have learned to adapt to new ways due to time flexibility but location rigidity because of the pandemic and embraced the idea that the store must travel to customer if the customer cannot visit the sore.

The second part of the theoretical approach explained the book market, describing the book introduction and evolution over the time, finishing off with trends in consumer book buying process. The information emphasized how the book industry has evolved, from ink on paper to e-readers, all the subcategories of books that have appeared, the book publishing ecosystem and the most successful ways of promoting books nowadays. Advertising is crucial in to raise awareness, make the offer known, and make it enticing. Digital innovations such as apps and social media platforms are linked to new kinds of communication, promotion and public interaction.

The research conducted in the present paper has provided answers from 100 female book consumers, thus giving the opportunity to have various opinions regarding their behavior, from people that belong to different age groups (18-24, 25-34 35-49, 50-64, 65 and over).

One of the most conclusive questions for this research regards the book format the participants use. A very big and unexpected proportion of respondents (almost 70%) claimed that they still read printed book, which prove that book still hold their magic to these days when there are different means to read such as e-books (which was the second largest proportion – 29.5 %) and audio books (an extremely contrary percent to the other two – 1%). As a recommendation, when debating translating or publishing new books, the book retailer, publishing house and the authors should consider primordial to go for printed books to reach the standards of the majority of readers and after that to launch e-books.

Living the in Internet Era, the research would not be completed without having an overview about what means the participants use when buying a book. Hence, the results have shown that a very eloquent percentage of 66% of the respondents choose to purchase their books online, while the other 28% still go to physical book shops. Consequently, it can be

deduced from a following up questions that places such as antique shops or libraries do not attract people anymore, only 1.86 % and 4.2% of participants still visiting these places.

The power that the Internet has over people can be easily seen in other questions' results as well. When asked what are the main mean of finding out about books, almost 58% of the participants has chosen to respond that social media and the pages specially dedicated to books are the major instrument helping them make a decision. In contrast with the big proportion the social media holds, the smallest proportion belongs to people that choose book fest as a way of finding about new books (1.16%).

More evidence sustaining the power held by the Internet can be deducted from the difference between the percentages of the answers to the question regarding online vs. offline shopping. 74% of the participants have claimed that they choose to do online shopping, while the rest of 26% said that they still go to physical stores.

Taking into consideration the previous three results, the general recommendation would be to focus more on the online environment, because this is the place most consumers are and this is what suits them best, especially in terms in time. Thus, websites and social media accounts and should come up with innovative ideas and offers to make the customers' buying experience easier and ideal, and leave them wanting to always come back for more.

In regards of book consumer purchasing decisions, it can be concluded that the participants choose to buy from a specific retailers based on price and a big variety of books from which they can choose whatever book they like and want to have. The best thing all book retailers should do is focus their power on having more and more books (from different genres) so that the customers can choose from and create good, irresistible offers and deals (for example buying 3 books and getting another one for free, buying one book and the second one for half its price, etc.).

To achieve a profile of the book consumer habits, it resulted that the majority of the participants (almost 45%) read 3-4 times a week, followed by the second biggest percent (almost 30%) that claim to read every day. Having asked them also they when they do their reading, a very meaningful percent of 76.2% responded that they read whenever they have the chance to do it. The second most significant percent of 15.62% belongs to people that choose to respond they read before bed.

Still under the consumer habits umbrella, the participants were asked what makes them choose a specific book, to which the most chosen response was the genre the book belongs to, followed by the title of the book and very closely by the author (if they have previously read book from that author). The more attractive the book title, the more chances for a customer to choose a book, so the publishing houses and authors should have fresh and interesting ideas to catch the eye so the customers will be tempted to buy that book.

The most predominant answers when participants were asked about their favorite book genre are romance book and thriller books, with a difference of 3.8% between them. Action and adventure books fall on the third place of the top, with 16.74%, and the lowest percentage belong to biography and autobiography. Even though nowadays there are many new and fresh authors that come up with unique ideas of book, there is still a portion of 15% that chooses to go for classic authors and books. These results should be a sign for authors to try and write romance and thriller books, and for publishing houses to promote, publish and commercialize more of these two genres.

After the statistics showed the age and the book format percentages, a correlation between the two of them was conducted in order to see if the age influences the book format choice. The results showed that there is relationship between the age group and the book format chosen by the participants - younger participants tend to choose e-books/audio books, while older ones choose printed books- but the influence is rather weak.

In conclusion, the results that this research revealed tend to be very positive, showing that there are still many people passionate about books and reading, especially an impressive majority of people doing it in the old traditional way with printed books and a solid desire to have a collection of their own. So many people claimed that nothing in this world compared to the sensation they get from reading, from the smell of books, the way the pages feel on their fingers and how flipping pages makes them not only understand the story better, but also makes them feel like they are living in the book, to even cracking a book's spine and making annotations.

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A Holistic Concept based on Modern Influential Techniques of Integrated Marketing Communication: A Country Image Model

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Abstract
The country image has an important role in present period of globalization. However, image modeling, as a holistic concept based on various marketing communications techniques, has been tangentially analyzed over time. This study aims to explore the influencing techniques used in marketing communication in a complex analysis from a traditional to a modern approach with respect to the country's image. The measuring of a multi-dimensional construct of modeling a home country's image was tested with the implication of image of city, corporation, product, and personal as well as digitalization process. This research outlined various marketing communication techniques at different levels. The impact of image of a city, corporation, product, and person image on the home county image was significant. This editorial adds a contribution to the scientific literature's body of knowledge. It can be concluded that marketing communication techniques that manage image of a place, corporation, product, and person imply a positive effect on the home country's image.

Keywords: Marketing, communication, techniques, personal image, corporate image, city image, county image.

JEL classification: M00, M30, M31, M39.

1. Introduction

Marketing communication is a comprehensive phenomenon and an ethical approach is required in order to contribute to the benefit of society. The research question of the paper is to present the evolution of marketing communication from a traditional to a modern approach due to globalization and digitalization with respect to the country's image. The research methodology was an empirical study and exploratory research. Its purpose was the classification of phenomena, mainly of influencing techniques used in marketing communication, in order to understand their essence, nature and effects. This paper aims to develop the role of marketing communication activity with respect to home country image as a result of influence of city, corporate, product, residents' personal image and digitalization process in the county. In this editorial, we were motivated to understand and describe marketing communication processes as a holistic concept.

The main contribution of this paper is to highlight the evolution of marketing communication techniques aimed towards customers and their significance for the image of the home country. The study adds a contribution to scientific literature while this is the first study that analyzes the home country's image as a holistic concept which is influenced by city, corporate, product and residents' personal image.

While this research is not without limitations, it brings an added value to the academic literature. It can be concluded that marketing communication techniques have shifted to modern trends. A complete summary of findings indicates that a home country's image is influenced by its place, corporate, product, and personal image.

2. Review of literature

Marketing is considered "a source of competitive advantage" in the international business field (Martinet al., 2020). It is characterized by an opposition and a connection between the company, as the main subject, and the market itself, as an object of context. Marketing offers companies tools to manage "the value of their offer" for their consumers and, at the same time, offer the value of their consumers to themselves (Ogden et al., 2011). The companies, as key players (Cieslik, 2020) through their marketing tools (Addis & Podesa, 2005) make it possible to maximize the potential of their offers and meet their consumers' needs.

2.1. Traditional techniques of marketing communication

Communication is defined as the information passing or the exchange of ideas (Coulter & Roggeveen, 2012). While marketing communication must highlight the "benefit of the associated product environment" and the "interest of the company" (Popescu et al., 2013) it mediates the relationship "between marketing capabilities and competitive strategy" (Martinet al., 2020). Popescu (2003) grouped the techniques integrated in the marketing communication process as follows: (1) promotional communication techniques, such as: (a) advertising; (b) sales promotion (brand-supported techniques; promotional premiums and gifts; promotional games and products; testing operations free of charge); (c) public relations; (d) communication through events (fairs; sponsorship and patronage); (e) use of sales force; (f) direct marketing (catalog; mail; telephone; press; television); as well as (2) continuous communication techniques, such as: (a) brand (product brand, range, umbrella or warranties) and (b) packaging. Also, Bunghez (2020) listed the following elements of marketing communication: advertising, direct sales, public relations, sales promotions, and interactive marketing.

2.2. The impact of digitalization and the evolution of marketing communication techniques

Interactivity has become an important element for marketing communications due to the fast pace of social media and social networking evolution. Most advertising platforms and marketers are using data to personalize their marketing communication regarding the profiles created for Internet users (Strycharz et al., 2019). Mobile, smart-phone, wearable, and Internet of Things devices such as voice assistants, activity trackers, and smart sensors are integrated into marketing communication (Lee et al., 2019). The Internet of Things is the network created from people, things, and data (Joao et al., 2019), and it uses data mining techniques such as clusters (Garcia et al., 2016).

A dynamic way of using Internet services was boosted by the increasing diffusion of mobile devices such as smartphones, tablets, and services related to them, such as Quick Response barcodes (Porcu et al., 2012). Today, the marketplace is interconnected while technological advancements are permitting consumers to have access to the communication channels. Visual and multimedia content have become integral components of marketers' communication toolkits. Visual media includes television (TV shows, movies), blogs, radio, websites, advertisements on the Internet, books, newspapers, brochures, social media and networking sites (including visual content such as images, videos, cartoons, info graphics, and memes that display images as part of the message). Verbal media includes word-of-mouth communications, platforms (online magazines, corporate websites, or platforms for third party marketing), advertising, and other promotional materials. It may be extended beyond sensory media to previous personal experiences of the customers (John and De'Villiers, 2020).

Social media has made it possible for consumers to transfer from "passive consumers to active contributors" by creating brand-related content (Schivinski et al., 2019), while becoming qualitative actors and main critics (Guede et al., 2019). Social media is playing a significant role in marketing communications. It is becoming integral to a company's marketing strategy with other organizations, communities, and individuals. This phenomenon requires modern communication and responsibility lines between organizational departments. Customers' loyalty to social network sites and media networks, as company Facebook page, is significantly related to social influence or enhancement values, compatibility, enjoyment, satisfaction with the company's page and usage behavior "associated with the company's offerings"(Valos et al., 2016).

The development of the majority of software affiliates is based on persuasion or other marketing communication skills. Social media, such as Facebook, Instagram (John and De'Villiers, 2020), Trip Advisor, MySpace, Meet Up, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, and other sites such as third-party reviews or private blogs, are a major opportunity and challenge for businesses. In a cyber environment, it is important for consumers to trust online reviews or social media information. Persuasion may take an important place in the context of Big Data Analytics while companies have opted for disintermediation. Online conversations on platforms are reasons for marketers "to change the way in which they listen to the voice of the customer" (Ruyter et al., 2018). Researchers suggested that both mixed neutral and rich electronic word of mouth content positively affect "online purchase intention" while web marketing, by e-commerce, has become attractive (Caiazza and Bigliardi, 2020). Based on these conclusions, marketers are encouraged to develop new online marketing communication techniques (Roy et al., 2018).

Social media integrates information and communication tools such as blogging, mobile connectivity, and photo or video sharing. Viral stealth marketing communications are using the electronic media platform. This marketing technique involves spreading messages through people or celebrities who, in most cases, do not disclose that they are promoting a product. At present time, it is seeming to shaping the digital marketing communication landscape to artificial intelligence services, augmented and virtual reality or multi-channel networks (Kim et al., n.d.). Cloud computing, the Internet of Things, smart cities, big data, advanced robotics, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, three-dimensional printing, biotechnology, broadband internet, and wireless mobility are among the digital technologies that are transforming our lives. The main areas of artificial intelligence implemented in marketing communication are: text, voice, image technologies, and autonomous robots and vehicles, as well as analytical decision-making systems. Also, it is considered a future trend in the development of intelligent artificial technologies to become independent machines and robots (Peyravi et al., 2020). Strategies focused on data-driven innovation have developed sophisticated technologies for "data management, predicting user behavior, or analyzing their actions" (Saura et al., n.d).

2.3. Integration of modern influence techniques in marketing communication

Digitalization, as part of the evolution towards customer experience management, customer journey management, and co-creation, has contributed to the implementation of integrated marketing communication. Customer integration in the process is also a result of innovation, combined with a targeted "marketing strategy" (Janos, 2021) due to globalization. Due to technological innovations' boom, this dynamic discipline and interactive process has increased its relevance (Porcu et al., 2012). Integrated marketing communication is the strategic consistency of all messages among different elements in order to ensure a positive image that will appeal to consumers. The idea of consistency of message among different communication techniques is important in developing customer trust. There is a need for "effective integration"

of social media into an integrated marketing communication strategy (Valos et al., 2016). When integrating interactive and traditional media, integrated campaigns are considered to be more effective (Navarro et al., 2009).

2.4. Complex phenomenon of marketing communication techniques of influence

The digital era has led to an exceptional transformation of the globalization process. Through the universal nature of macromarketing (Nason & White, 1981), it researches the "aggregate marketing system" and its impact on quality of life (Wilkie & Moore, 2009). Public diplomacy is included in macro-marketing communication (Rasmussen and Merkelsen, 2012), and the knowledge-based economy is changing governmental, intellectual, business, and personal mentalities around the world (Zaharia et al., 2011).

Global market communication

On an international level, the largest marketing communication industry is the United States. China is the second largest and fastest growing industry in the world. Ethnography, as a tool employed to understand nascent and emerging consumer issues (Malhotra and Peterson, 2001), may contribute to improving marketing communication at an international level. Internet marketing communication contributes to the modernization of the traditional one and has been implemented differently by countries worldwide in order to ensure their visibility in the global market. As example, Croatian internet saturation presents a challenge for both consumers and market experts (Odeljan & Gregurec, 2020) as well as for online marketing communication (Odeljan & Gregurec, 2020a). Broadband access technologies are at the basis of marketing communication in Japan (Oliveira et al., 2020). South Korea has an image as a digitalized country as well as an Internet of Things technology integrated into marketing communication.

Regional marketing communication

Place marketing is a complex process. In order to achieve a sustainable development of the region, it is necessary to develop, apply, and maintain various marketing communication techniques. Heritage (Balmer, 2013) can be successfully implemented in location marketing communication. Another efficient technique that can make a difference is innovation. The region's heritage can be considered an important marketing communication technique. In the French-speaking sphere, heritage refers to peoples and societies, while in Anglophone nations are focused on buildings and landscapes. For instance, Romania showed differences in terms of innovation compared to other EU member states. In this context, only 5% of Romania's small and medium-sized companies are engaged in innovation, while 33% of the same companies in other EU member countries have introduced product and process innovations (Stancu et al., 2020). It is important to underline that in an uncertain economic environment, market players tend to act cautiously.

The country's marketing communication

In this globalization process, it is crucial for countries to create and maintain national marketing communication as a competitive advantage on international marketing (Nason & White, 1981). The country's image doesn't have a standard definition, although it is considered that each country has its own image (Cotirlea, 2015). Brijs, Bloemer and Kasper (2011) investigated the concept of country image as all consumer perceptions that attach to a country and its residents. Buhmann (2016) defined country image as "subjective attitudes towards a country among foreign publics". Information technologies have contributed to the multiplication of communication channels. In order to create a positive country image, countries worldwide are integrating different techniques of marketing communication. As example for the Canadian country's image, it is integrated a communication with an emphasis on favoring caring for others and flexibility. Denmark's country image has been improved by

diplomats with a focus on the economic factors of "reputation and security" (Rasmussen and Merkelsen, 2012). Marketing communication with an impact on the Estonian country's image is based on values such as business ethics and hard work, while Mexico's culture is known worldwide as committed to society and for its indulgence.

The city marketing communication

Currently, in the process of globalization, competition between cities is intense. City marketing is the coordinated implementation of marketing techniques supported by a customer-oriented philosophy to create, communicate, and deliver urban offers in order to create value for the city's customers and community at large. It involves considering the city's main functions, such as administratively, spatially, socially, economically, politically, etc. (Braun, 2008). Many cities worldwide are integrating into their marketing communication various smart technologies (Araral, 2020). For example, Amsterdam, in marketing communication, inserts a holistic approach of various smart projects (Somayya and Ramaswamy, 2016), while in Osaka, it is even easy to access the most suitable metro wagon through the Google Maps application (Oliveira et al., 2020).

The company's with its brands' marketing communication

It is essential for the company to create a network with its consumers, and modern marketing contributes to this process. Most companies adopt the concept of integrated marketing communication. They may design techniques in order to generate a link by stimulating the sensorial and emotional levels of customers in order to achieve a higher perception of its products or services (David et al., 2021). For companies, it's become very important for the detection and processing of emotional information while emotional stimuli are always nearby and customers have a high adaptive value. Company reputation, culture, and values may also be communicated by employer branding. A company is like a social network that is able to increase its value through each employee's own network. The employee's involvement in the company's marketing communication becomes decisive while it implies developing trust and has strategic importance for the company's future (Garaa and Porteb, 2020). A positive impact on the global market could be achieved by multinational corporations indicating the importance of corporate responsibility reports (Balan, 2010). Also, it is considered that a company's making reference to social norms in marketing communication is a way to influence sustainable consumption (Balan, 2021). Consumers prefer to buy from companies dedicated to noble social causes (Anghel, Grigore and Rosca, 2011), while young and high-income consumers are interested in the products of companies that are involved in environmental problems (Ahmad, Ali, Grigore and Stancu, 2012). An effective communication technique integrated into the marketing communication of companies is also considered social branding (Cornelissen et al., 2007).

Individual marketing communication

Personal marketing is a set of activities that people engage in to gain recognition in their target market. Personal marketing communication could use both words and non-verbal coding information (Popescu, 2001). Nonverbal communication can be expressed through facial expressions, vocal characteristics, protocol or body language, visual images, music, art, or colors. In this sense, at the level of personal marketing communication, it is advisable to integrate art, fashion, music, coloring, and other persuasive techniques. This assumes that it accurately communicates various subtleties and knowledge of intercultural differences. A successful personal image strategy requires a lot of personal effort, self-knowledge, and time. It is based on individual values, personal interests, and beliefs that contribute to maintaining a positive reputation. Personal reputation can create a positive impact on relationships, which is an important overall theme in marketing communication. Also, in relationships with different

people or companies, personal dignity is very important and it is mainly influenced by interactions with others (Plunkett and Kelly, 2021).

2.5. Hypotheses developed from the literature

Cities are perceived differently worldwide, including by their citizens as well. At the present time in the city, strategic marketing communication is essential while a powerful brand is also important for residents. The branding process is perceived as a strategic economic necessity (Cotirlea, 2015). While events are used as an image-enhancement tool, mostly for large cities, it is considered that they can have the effect of modeling a favorable image of the host country (Richards and Wilson, 2004).

Based on theoretical literature, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *City image has a positive effect on modeling the home country's image.*

The influence of corporate image on a country's image has rarely been researched. *Corporate image could have an influence on its country's image. It could be moderated by independent variables as "country familiarity, corporate familiarity, brand image fit, and corporate brand category-country brand image fit" as well as corporate level variables, mainly international visibility and market visibility (Lopez et al., 2011). Companies, in these mass communication times with heightened visibility, are interested in restoring their relationships with customers through complaint handling systems, formal apologies, and compensation strategies (Gils & Horton, 2019).* Politeness also can play an essential role in communication in general and in corporate social responsibility in particular, while overly-polite language about dubious actions could indicate deceitful intentions to informed observers (Farrow et al., 2021). Nguyen and Ozcaglar-Toulouse (2021) revealed that whereas the state need to build diplomatic ties in order to promote its country's image in foreign countries through its products in general or cultural products in particular. Foreign states profit from these products for their regionally oriented cultural policy.

We proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: *Corporate image has a positive effect on modeling the home country's image.*

Companies can differentiate their products by focusing on their physical, mainly taste, design, fit, or nonphysical, mainly price, brand name, country-of-origin characteristics. The national origin of a product is considered one of the defining factors of consumers' evaluation. In this context, a product's national origin can represent a product quality signal as well as affect perceived risk and likelihood of purchase. Consumers with strong national social identities (highly ethnocentric) are thought to prefer products from countries perceived to be similar to their own over those with lower levels of ethnocentricity (Lantz & Loeb, 1996). Roth, Diamantopoulos, and Montesinos (2008) analyzed the other side of the relationship by applying a brand equity construct in a country context in order to measure the value-added that the name of a country is endowing a brand or a product as perceived by the consumer. It was indicated that country brand equity was influenced by country image perceptions, while country brand equity positively impacts on product preferences and is not directly influenced by country image perceptions. The country's image is considered to indirectly affect buyers' brand attitudes through inferential beliefs and directly affect their brand attitudes (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). In order to make a difference, some brands have used art in their campaigns, promotions, or packaging (Estes et al., 2018), while others incorporate in their marketing communication corporate heritage or innovation. For example, the British aircraft engine company and the German car company emphasized in their marketing communication the enviable legacy of the

corporate heritage of Rolls Royce (Balmer, 2013), while Slovakian companies, recently, started using the tools of innovation (Janos, 2021) and modern technologies in their marketing communication. Use of brand-name products has an influence on the country's image (Lantz & Loeb, 1996).

We can summarize:

Hypothesis 3: *Product image has a positive effect on modeling the home country's image.*

Gaughan and Javalgi (2018) discuss how globalization affects business ethics. At the present time, ethical leadership with moral attentiveness is a must and has a positive influence on their company's (Gils, 2015) and country's image. Good leaders know the moment when to step back, reflect, and be coherent, balancing consultation and initiative and not being afraid of other leaders as well as mentoring new ones (Allal-Cherif et al., 2021). Bagozzia et al., (2018) research provided a perspective when the self is managed through personal assessment, which prompts the aspiration to proceed in admirable or irresponsible ways. A person can be identified with their country of origin, while residents can also improve the country's image by modeling their personal image (Rosca & Madan, 2020). Fashion, color, and art may play an important role in the process of creating and maintaining a personal image. Social influence has an important role (Ternovski and Yasseri, 2020), and fashion may make a difference in this field. Fashion, as a phenomenon, is considered to represent a marketing communication technique. While coloristic alchemy has a strong influence on people's minds, it communicates the subtleties of color perception. Also, music as an art form can promote ideas and/or emotions (Ogden et al., 2011), and may be integrated even with modern technology (Tran et al., 2018). Art-based initiatives are considered to have an influence on consumer behavior (Estes et al., 2018).

Hence, we conclude:

Hypothesis 4: *Personal image has a positive effect on modeling the home country's image.*

Globalization and the digitization of information are offering new possibilities, but also challenge (Peyravi et al., 2020). Marketing managers, academicians, and researchers are facing unprecedented marketplace and technological disruption (Key et al., 2020). The online environment is used by a large part of the population (Caiazza and Bigliardi, 2020). Marketers are guided to implement "integrated visual marketing communication" techniques of visual and online communication into their marketing toolbox in order to promote "audience" engagement and interaction (John and De'Villiers, 2020). It is considered that positive results can be achieved by implementing the effects of marketing communications power due to the combination of smart sensors like voice-based artificial intelligence assistants that include Amazon Echo and Google Home (Lee et al., 2019) and the dynamic environment of social media (Daj, 2016). These modern technologies contribute to people's well-being (Joao et al., 2019), interaction and cooperation between individuals in order to achieve common goals (Cioruta et al., 2018), the creation of valuable business platforms (Ganchev et al., 2014), as well as safety (Somayya and Ramaswamy, 2016) and have a positive impact on the country's image.

Related to this information from theoretical literature, we summarize the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: *Digitalization has a positive effect on modeling the home country's image.*

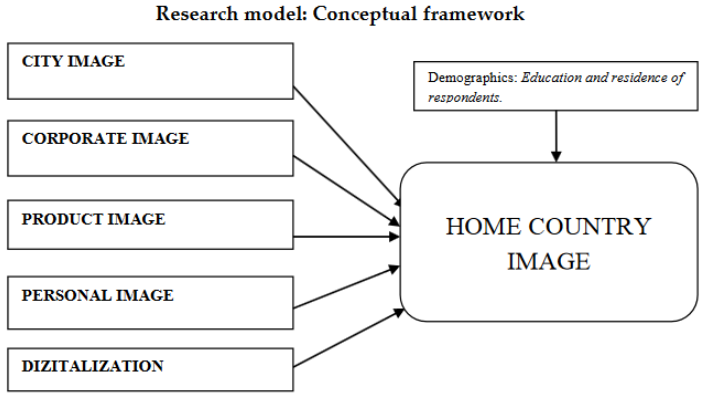

Figure 1. Research model: Conceptual framework

3. Material and methods

The study method was a survey and an exploratory research based on secondary data. Its purpose was to investigate respondents' attitudes, opinions, and values as well as measure their perception regarding marketing communication techniques. This research aimed to emphasize the role of influence techniques in global, regional, country, city, company, brand, and personal marketing communication and their effect on the home country's image.

The model tested the city image (Braun, 2008; Cotirlea, 2015), corporate image (Lopez et al., 2011*; Gils & Horton, 2019;* Farrow et al., 2021, Thelen and Formanchuk 2022), product image (Lantz and Loeb, 1996), Roth et al., 2008), personal image (Gils, 2015; Gaughan and Javalgi, 2018; Rosca and Madan, 2020; Wang and Hackett, 2020), and digitalization (Daj, 2016; Cioruta et al., 2018; Joao et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2019; Caiazza and Bigliardi, 2020; John and De'Villiers, 2020) effect on the country's image. The research topic is important in the process of globalization. All multiple-item constructs were assessed on seven-point Likert scales (between 1 as totally disagree and 7 as totally agree) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	n		Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
	Valid	Missing				
Country Image						
The population / residents are effective communicators of the country's image	535	184	5.00	1.262	1	7
Domestic tourism and visitors are effective communicators of the country's image	535	184	5.20	1.246	1	7
The Diaspora are effective communicators of the country's image	534	185	4.59	1.387	1	7
Investors are effective communicators of the country's image	535	184	4.78	1.310	1	7
City Image						
The city of origin of the company is very important in the purchase decision of a product.	556	163	3.73	1.607	1	7
The country of origin of the company is very important in the purchase decision of a product.	556	163	4.01	1.589	1	7
Corporate Image						
The reputation of the manufacturing company is very important in the decision to buy a product.	557	162	4.98	1.379	1	7
Local companies (e.g., Dacia Pitești) are efficient communicators of the country's image.	530	189	4.89	1.362	1	7
Exports are efficient communicators of the country's image	529	190	5.02	1.374	1	7
Domestic products are efficient communicators of the country's image.	530	189	5.13	1.233	1	7
Product Image						

The packaging and labeling of products is very important in the decision to buy.	560	159	4.43	1.464	1	7
Color is very important in the decision to buy a product.	561	158	3.90	1.642	1	7
The presentation approach is very important in the decision to buy a product.	556	163	4.63	1.425	1	7
Promotion / marketing communication is very important in the decision to buy a product.	541	178	4.28	1.429	1	7
Personal Image						
Leaders have focused on their personal image over time in order to make a difference.	519	200	5.16	1.178	1	7
Famous leaders are effective communicators of the country's image.	530	189	4.75	1.355	1	7
Marketing communication must be ethical and based on morality.	525	194	5.75	1.234	1	7
A person's personal image is influenced by their clothing style.	522	197	5.28	1.245	1	7
Communication is essential for business.	529	190	5.90	1.233	1	7
Nonverbal communication is an influence technique used in business.	521	198	5.26	1.253	1	7
In the globalization process, it is important to study business ethics in different countries.	523	196	5.38	1.241	1	7
Digitalization						
E-commerce sites may be considered as reliable communication platforms.	556	163	4.54	1.350	1	7
Social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Twitter) are reliable communication channels.	553	166	4.30	1.432	1	7
Blogs are trusty communication platforms.	541	178	4.25	1.289	1	7

3.1. Independent and dependent variables

Country Image: represents all perceptions of residents and non-residents related to a country. The totality of people's perceptions, assumptions, and ideas about a country was described as its image (Kotler et.al., 1993). The country's image is also defined as an internal and external structure of beliefs and opinions about people, nations, and the country itself (Szeles, 1998). Beerli and Martin (2004) approached it through the domestic tourists that are visiting the country for the first time as well as those that make multiple visits. Yoo, Jo, and Jung (2014) measured behavioral intentions toward a country by modifying the investigation into country image perceptions: visit or return to the country, learn the country's language, have a friend from the country, purchase the country's cultural products, and purchase the country's commercial products. In this study, the country image impact was evaluated by questioning respondents to evaluate each of the following items on a seven-point Likert scale: (1) the population / residents are effective communicators of the country's image, (2) domestic tourism and visitors are effective communicators of the country's image, (3) the diasporas are effective communicators of the country's image, and (4) investors are effective communicators of the country's image. The three-item measure was obtained by employing factor analysis. Factor analysis confirmed the underlying design. Cronbach's alpha was 0.646, which exceeds the generally agreed limit (see Table 2).

Table 2: Reliability and validity

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Measure	Factor Loading
Country Image	0.646	- The population / residents are effective communicators of the country's image	0.711
		- Domestic tourism and visitors are effective communicators of the country's image	0.742
		- The Diaspora are effective communicators of the country's image	0.685
		- Investors are effective communicators of the country's image	0.651
City Image	0.832	- The city of origin of the company is very important in the purchase decision of a product.	0.925
		- The country of origin of the company is very important in the purchase decision of a product.	0.925

Corporate Image	0.637	-	The reputation of the manufacturing company is very important in the decision to buy a product.	0.583
		-	Local companies (e.g., Dacia Pitești) are efficient communicators of the country's image.	0.733
		-	Exports are efficient communicators of the country's image	0.774
		-	Domestic products are efficient communicators of the country's image.	0.671
Product Image	0.746	-	The packaging and labeling of products is very important in the decision to buy	0.778
		-	Color is very important in the decision to buy a product.	0.783
		-	The presentation approach is very important in the decision to buy a product.	0.784
		-	Promotion / marketing communication is very important in the decision to buy a product.	0.668
Personal Image	0.733	-	Leaders have focused on their personal image over time in order to make a difference.	0.561
		-	Top leaders are effective communicators of the country's image.	0.386
		-	Marketing communication must be ethical and based on morality.	0.748
		-	A person's personal image is influenced by their clothing style	0.662
		-	Communication is essential for business.	0.724
		-	Nonverbal communication is an influence technique used in business.	0.565
		-	In the globalization process, it is important to study business ethics in different countries.	0.687
Digitalization	0.709	-	E-commerce sites may be considered as reliable communication platforms.	0.856
		-	Social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Twitter) are reliable communication channels.	0.872
		-	Blogs are trusty communication platforms.	0.643

City image: refers to the image of all cities from a home country. Marketing techniques is considered to have a positive effect on the city's images (Braun, 2008). Richards and Wilson (2004) surveyed visitors to the event Rotterdam 2001 European Cultural Capital, about the following city image attributes: modern architecture; water; multicultural; working city; international; dynamic; culture and art; lots to discover; events; shopping; nightlife; cosy; and unsafe. In our research, we measured city image by questioning respondents to evaluate the following items on a seven-point Likert scale: (1) the city of origin of the company is very important in the purchase decision of a product, and (2) the country of origin of the company is very important in the purchase decision of a product. Factor analysis confirmed the underlying design. All variables were loaded above the 0.70 threshold. Cronbach's alpha was 0.832, which exceeds the generally agreed limit (see Table 2).

Corporate image: refers to the image of all companies from a home country. Thelen and Formanchuk (2022) noted that an ethical organizational culture plays a decisive role in modeling transparent marketing communication of a company as well as perceived relationship investment that cultivates employee advocacy behaviors. Lopez, Gotsi, and Andriopoulos (2011) developed a conceptual framework grounded on the following items: country of origin, image transfer, corporate and place branding. We measured company image impact by questioning respondents to evaluate the following items on a seven-point Likert scale: (1) the reputation of the manufacturing company is very important in the decision to buy a product, (2) local companies (e.g., Dacia Pitești) are efficient communicators of the country's image, (3) exports are efficient communicators of the country's image, and (4) domestic products are efficient communicators of the country's image. Table 2 presents the factor analysis results. Cronbach's alpha was 0.637, which exceeds the generally agreed limit (see Table 2).

Product image: refers to all products' image from a home country. *Roth, Diamantopoulos, and Montesinos (2008) developed a model with an estimated intervening variable that linked (home) country image and product preferences with country brand equity.* Lantz and Loeb (1996) tested: samples of a rather ordinary product, and countries where quality is relevant but also those where it should not be an issue. In our study, we considered product branding by questioning respondents to evaluate the following items on a seven-point Likert scale: (1) the packaging and labeling of products is very important in the decision to buy, (2) color is very important in the decision to buy a product, (3) the presentation approach is very important in the decision to buy a product, and (4) promotion / marketing communication is very important in the decision to buy a product. Factor analysis confirmed the underlying design. Cronbach's alpha was 0.746 (see Table 2).

Personal image: refers to the personal image of the country's residents. Personal image need to be adapted to context, while ethical leadership styles goes beyond charisma and competencies in order to involve motivations and emotions (Allal-Cherif et al., 2021). Wang and Hackett (2020) analyzed a moral identity framework of virtuous leadership that involves six cardinal virtues, such as courage, prudence, temperance, justice, humanity, and truthfulness. This idea was expanded upon with the prospect of the virtue ethics school of moral philosophy. *Gils, Quaquebeke, Knippenberg, Dijke, and Cremer (2015) investigated ethical leadership* - "my leader *conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner" and "my leader defines success not just by results but also the way that they are obtained"; moral attentiveness "I regularly think about the ethical implications of my decisions" and "I frequently encounter ethical situations"; and organizational deviance "how often did your colleague in the last year take property from work without permission?" and "how often did your colleague in the last year intentionally work slower than he/she could have worked?".* We measured personal image impact by questioning respondents to evaluate the following items on a seven-point Likert scale: (1) leaders have focused on their personal image over time in order to make a difference, (2) top leaders are effective communicators of the country's image, (3) marketing communication must be ethical and based on morality, (4) a person's personal image is influenced by their clothing style, (5) communication is essential for business, (6) nonverbal communication is an influence technique used in business, and (7) in the globalization process, it is important to study business ethics in different countries. Table 2 presents the factor analysis results. Cronbach's alpha was 0.733, which exceeds the generally agreed limit (see Table 2).

Digitalization: refers to digitalization process implemented in the home country. Digitalization allows the extension of institutions in marketing communication to create value jointly for customers and companies through customer interactions and experiences in digital environments. Modern technologies may be integrated into "intense customer interaction, networking different actors, customizations, and personalization" (Peyravi et al., 2020). Zuniga-Collazos and Castillo-Palacio (2016) investigated through variables: marketing innovation of the country's tourist enterprises; customer satisfaction by application of innovative marketing strategies; and image of the company's products and services by application of innovative marketing strategies. In our research, we calculated digitalization by questioning respondents to evaluate the following items on a seven-point Likert scale: (1) E-commerce sites may be considered as reliable communication platforms, (2) Social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Twitter) are reliable communication channels, and (3) blogs are trusty communication platforms. Factor analysis confirmed the underlying design. Cronbach's alpha was 0.709, which exceeds the generally agreed limit (see Table 2).

Control variables: Javalgi et al. (2005) analyzed demographic variables, evaluating the respondents' gender, education, age, and income. Ahmed and d'Astous (2008) measured control variables, evaluating the respondents' age, education, marital status, income, and children. We analyzed the control variables by demographic variables: the respondent's education and residence.

3.2. Statistical analysis and interpretation

The empirical study of the researched hypotheses was based on an assessment of a survey with 719 respondents. The final sample was composed of 52.7% females and 47.4% males; 76.6% living in urban areas (Thelen & Formanchuk, 2022). The majority of the included respondents were Romanian residents (Hajdini & Windsperger, 2020). The response rate was 77% of the overall respondents (Mumdziev& Windsperger, 2011).

Cronbach's alpha statistics were analyzed to evaluate the measurement of multi-item scales' reliability of the model concept (see Table 2). In our study, the country image indicated a reliability coefficient of 0.646, while the city image indicated a coefficient of 0.832, the company image indicated a coefficient of 0.637, the product brand indicated a coefficient of 0.746, the personal brand indicated a coefficient of 0.733, and digitalization indicated a satisfactory coefficient of 0.709. Each reliability coefficient corresponded to the normative acceptability of alpha statistics.

After evaluation of the alpha statistics, the items were statistically tested through factor analysis. All the data confirmed the suitability. Correspondingly, the factor loading for the items set that measured the city image was 0.925. The loadings for the country image ranged between 0.651 and 0.742, which provided a valid construct measurement with heavy loading. The same applied to the four items that presented the company image, which was a formation construct that loaded heavily on the same factor, ranging from 0.583 to 0.774. The factor loading for the items set that measured the product brand indicated a heavy loading that ranged between 0.668 and 0.784. The loadings for the personal brand ranged between 0.386 and 0.748, which also provided a valid construct measurement with heavy loading. The same applied to the three items that contributed to the digitalization, a construct that loaded heavily on the same factor, ranging from 0.643 to 0.872 (see Table 2).

The correlation table below shows the connections between the variables. No correlation coefficient higher than a value of 0.9 was found. However, the highest correlation coefficient was the one between the company image and the country image, which was 0.515. Table 3 summarizes all the results of the correlations between the variables:

Table 3: Correlations of independent variables

Correlations

	Country Image	City Image	Corporate Image	Product Image	Personal Image	Digitalization
Country Image	1	.191**	.515**	.330**	.508**	.121**
City Image		1	.263**	.349**	.027	-.037
Corporate Image			1	.347**	.452**	.151**
Product Image				1	.199**	.072
Personal Image					1	.244**
Digitalization						1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The table below (see table 6) summarizes all independent variable regression analyses created with the factor analysis's help with respect to the country's image as a dependent variable. Due to the factor analysis and scale reliability results, it was analyzed as a single construct. But first, in the linear regression analysis, it is necessary to analyze the model summary. Table 4 indicates a statistically significant multiple correlation of coefficient R with a representation of 62.1%. Additionally, R^2 = 38.6% represented the percentage by which the dependent variable variation was influenced by the independent variable values and only with this percentage did the model fit. A R^2 value of 1 indicates total influence, while a value of 0 indicates a non-existent influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable.

Table 4: Model summary

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.613[a]	.376	.370	.71323
2	.621[b]	.386	.377	.70897

a. Predictors: (Constant), City Image, Corporate Image, Product Image, Personal Image, Digitalization

b. Predictors: (Constant), City Image, Corporate Image, Product Image, Personal Image, Digitalization, respondent residents, respondent education

Second, in the regression analysis, it was required to evaluate the ANOVA (see Table 5). In our research, the significance value was p = 0.000 (p <0.05). Since the significance coefficient was lower than 0.05, the model was significant. Due to this regression model, the independent variables as a cohort were linked to the dependent variable.

Table 5: ANOVA

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	153.244	5	30.649	60.249	.000[b]
	Residual	254.350	500	.509		
	Total	407.594	505			
2	Regression	157.281	7	22.469	44.702	.000[c]
	Residual	250.313	498	.503		
	Total	407.594	505			

a. Dependent Variable: Country Image
b. Predictors: (Constant), City Image, Corporate Image, Product Image, Personal Image, Digitalization
c. Predictors: (Constant), City Image, Corporate Image, Product Image, Personal Image, Digitalization, respondent residents, respondent education

In the third assessment of the model, we evaluated how every single construct was linked to the dependent variable. By investigating the standardized coefficient beta, it is indicated which independent variable significantly affects a dependent variable (see Table 6).

Subsequently, we analyzed how every construct was connected to the dependent variable. Hence, image of a city, corporate, product, person, and respondent education variables were significant in this regression model. The significance of the city image was 0.049 (p<0.05), with a beta value of 0.077, the corporate image was 0.000 (p<0.05), with a beta value of 0.308, the product image was 0.007 (p<0.05), with a beta value of 0.107, the personal image was 0.000 (p<0.05), with a beta value of 0.347, and respondent education was 0.012 (p<0.05), with a beta value of -0.090. The positive beta value sign represented a positive relationship between the image of a city, company, product, person, and their effect on the home country's image. Also, the negative sign implied a negative relationship between the respondent's education and its effect on the home country's image. Consequently, the higher the value of the image of a city, company, product, or a person, the greater the impact on the image value of their home country. These positive relationships were similar to those initially expected by Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Finally, following variables such digitalization and the respondent's residence were not statistically significant, with *p*-values of 0.533 and 0.155, respectively. However, these variables are important to the model's representativeness.

After analyzing the regression model results, they are considered statistically significant. It can be concluded that hypotheses 1, 2, 3, and 4 were confirmed. The relationship fit as we expected. These hypotheses specified a positive link between the independent and dependent variables.

Table 6: Regression analysis

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Unstandardized Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	.980	.274		3.576	.000
	City Image	.040	.024	.066	1.695	.091
	Corporate Image	.280	.041	.297	6.891	.000
	Product Image	.088	.032	.109	2.737	.006
	Personal Image	.396	.046	.354	8.607	.000

	Digitalization	-.099	.133	-.027	-.745	.456
2	(Constant)	1.400	.318		4.397	.000
	City Image	.047	.024	.077	1.971	.049
	Corporate Image	.290	.041	.308	7.146	.000
	Product Image	.087	.032	.107	2.702	.007
	Personal Image	.388	.046	.347	8.451	.000
	Digitalization	-.083	.133	-.023	-.624	.533
	Respondent Education	-.112	.045	-.090	-2.523	.012
	Respondent Residence	-.032	.023	-.050	-1.423	.155

a. Dependent Variable: Country Image

The performed analysis indicated that the research was statistically significant. The image of a city, company, product, and person denoted a positive relationship in customer preference as a positive impact on the home country's image. Basically the same as was estimated. These hypotheses were supported and confirmed by both the theoretical literature and empirical analysis results. The outcomes showed that the image of a city, company, product, and person imply a positive effect on their home country's image. This represents a significant advantage in the process of globalization. These concepts and techniques are required to be integrated into the long-term marketing strategies of a country's marketing communication. These results confirm our expectations about the image of a city, company, product, and person impact on customer behavior with an effect on the country's image.

4. Results and discussions

In the globalization process, macroeconomics is essential to be studied (Nason & White, 1981; Wilkie & Moore, 2009; Rasmussen and Merkelsen, 2012) from a communication perspective (Braun, 2008; Cotirlea, 2015; Odeljan & Gregurec, 2020a; Garaa and Porteb, 2020; David et al., 2021) with respect to the country's image.

The main objective of this research was to investigate the image of a city, company, product, person, and digitalization process influence on customers, mainly Romanian residents, with respect to the country's image. By reviewing the international literature, we established different influence techniques used in marketing communication ranked at global, regional, national, city, corporation, and individual levels and proposed some hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 tested the link between the city's image and their home country's image. This variable indicated statistical significance in the regression round with the positive link between the city's images is perceived and home country's image being perceived overall. This relationship is also supported by the authors: Braun (2008) and Cotirlea (2015).

Hypothesis 2 tested the link between the corporate image and their home country's image. The results in the regression round showed an impact between the two. As a result, the better a company image is perceived, the better the home country's image is perceived overall. This relationship is also supported by the authors: Lopez, Gotsi and Andriopoulos (2011), *Gils and Horton (2019)* Farrow et al. (2021) and Nguyen and Ozcaglar-Toulouse (2021).

Hypothesis 3 tested the link between the product's image and their home country's image. After analyzing the results above, we identified that the product's image was found to impact the dependent variable. This relationship is also supported by the authors: Martin and Eroglu (1993), Lantz and Loeb (1996) and Roth, Diamantopoulos and Montesinos (2008).

Hypothesis 4 tested the link between the personal image and their home country's image. This variable denoted statistical significance in the regression round. It indicated the positive link between the residents' image and home country's image being perceived overall. This relationship is also supported by the authors: Gils (2015), Gaughan and Javalgi (2018) and Rosca and Madan (2020)

Hypothesis 5 tested the link between the digitalization process of the country and their home country's image. Even, that Yoo, Jo, and Jung (2014) mentioned that mass media plays an essential role in shaping prior perceptions of a country and television programs can be an effective form of marketing communication media for conveying positive characteristics of a specific country by delivering information via narrative and visual channels, this variable indicated no statistical significance in the regression round. This hypothesis was no statistically confirmed.

This specified that respondents reflect on the influencing techniques of the image of a city, company, product, and person as suitable to be integrated as part of marketing communications of their home county's image. Mostly, marketers do not have ample information about the impact of marketing communication techniques on the image of city, company, product, and person, while they have an positive effective on their home country's image.

5. Conclusions

Marketing communication evolved towards customer experience and journey management, leading to co-creation due to the emergence of new technologies and globalization. The increasing role of marketing communication is reflected in society. At the scientific level, the evolution from traditional to modern influential techniques used in market communication has not been researched so broadly.

This study contributes to the academic literature. Firstly, it makes a contribution to the body of knowledge through extensive theoretical notions of influencing techniques integrated in marketing communication. Second, the study underlines the complexity of marketing communication and the importance of each element in this phenomenon. Third, this article is the first that assesses the image of a city, company, product, person, and digitalization process in their home country's image. It can be concluded that marketing communication has an essential role in the present period of globalization when countries need to model their image in order to be seen.

The main contribution of this editorial is that it analyzes the home country's image as a holistic concept that is influenced by the image of its cities, companies, products and residents in this process of globalization. While this research is not without limitations, it brings an added value to the body of knowledge of academic literature.

Marketers face both opportunities and challenges in present globalization era. It can be concluded that marketing communication techniques have shifted to modern trends. A complete summary of findings indicates that the images of city, companies, products, and residents are at the basis of modeling the home country's image. Finally, during the recent transformation, marketing communication experienced a significant change in its activities, requiring the modification of its technologies and influencing techniques. This is the first study to analyze the modeling of the country's image as a holistic concept through influencing techniques integrated at the marketing communication level.

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An Empirical Study of Augmented Reality (AR) Technologies Used for Tourism Marketing and Improved Travel Experience

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Abstract
Augmented reality (AR) is fast becoming one of the staples of modern communication, and the tourism industry is potentially one of the most important beneficiaries of this new type of information technology. Its intrinsic characteristics make it very well adapted to mediate and improve the experience of tourists during their visit to various types of destination and attractions. Augmented reality technologies have the potential to help tourism providers promote destinations in more compelling and immersive ways. Our article identifies and discusses various opportunities to use augmented reality in tourism, reviewed the relevant published literature for current AR applications that can be used for tourism marketing, and highlighted research gaps.

Keywords: Augmented reality, tourism industry, tourism marketing.

JEL classification: M31.

Introduction

The tourism industry has faced many changes over time, in terms of how products and services are marketed and how consumers find, use, and share information before, during, and after consumption, as well as in terms of consumer needs and behaviors. These changes were highly influenced by the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs), as they became exponentially used in the twenty-first century for multiple applications (Fritz, Susperregui, and Linaza, 2005), including experiential marketing. According to Breidbach et al. (2014), their most common uses are (1) to facilitate how people search, consume, and use information and help with the decision to purchase a product or service, and (2) to enhance the customer experience before, during, and after the consumption of a product or service. Furthermore, researchers found that in addition to enhancing the customer experience, ICTs can also generally help create brand equity and enhance customer loyalty (Xu et al., 2014).

The extensive role of mediating and co-creating experiences through technologies generated a new concept in the literature, called 'technology-enhanced experience' (Femenia-Serra & Neuhofer, 2018). Co-creation refers to the fact that tourists changed their relation with what they experience, from being passive consumers to being directly involved in creating custom experiences for each individual (Neuhofer et al., 2012).

Many types of ICT are increasingly involved in the process of mediation and co-creation (Orzan et al., 2020). These technologies have a direct impact or can be considered a proxy to guide consumers through all stages of the purchase decision of the product and the consumption

of the product (Pentescu et al, 2014). Neuhofer (2012) gives some examples of technologies that can enhance experiences and mentions virtual life along websites, portable city guides, and others. In the same sphere as virtual life, augmented reality also has an increasing role in creating technology-enhanced experiences.

The literature defines the concept of customer experience as a combination of five types of response to products and services that can be triggered during all stages of the customer journey: cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensory, and social (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Any of these responses can be enhanced, mediated and extended with ICTs (Femenia-Serra & Neuhofer, 2018), through a variety of channels. Having different consumer touchpoints supported by technology is beneficial because nowadays people don't just expect to purchase and use a product, they are looking for experiences that better suit their needs and lifestyle (Krey et al., 2021), and ICTs add that extra value. In addition, the creation and development of multiple channels for gathering information has accustomed consumers to simpler and more entertaining ways to answer their inquiries and perform daily tasks (Fritz et al., 2005).

Although there are many types of tourism products, this article will refer to destinations as the main products marketed in this industry, which is a popular and generally accepted idea among scholars (Fyall and Leask, 2006). Before the development of modern ICTs, tourist consumers used to come in contact with destinations through the press, books, recommendations from recommendations from recommendations from friends and family, or simply through travel agencies. In many cases, there was little to no way around not having agencies as intermediaries between tourists and destinations. This is because, for example, in the past airlines would not sell tickets directly to tourists (Sushchenko & Ekouaghe, 2019). The information received from all these channels was the foundation for building anticipation of traveling and seeing those places. As more technologies developed, new touchpoints were created for tourists, such as movies, TV, as well as the star of the moment, the Internet. All the contact points mentioned are still valid today, but in the last decade the Internet became the most important source of travel inspiration (Orzan et al., 2013).

The impact of AR in this industry is a topic that was researched in many contexts, such as heritage sites (tom Dieck & Jung, 2015; Chung et al., 2015; Martnez-Graa et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2015), museums (Jung et al., 2016), educational tourism (Fritz et al., 2005; Furata et al., 2012; Kazmierczak et al., 2021), tourism management and destination marketing (Fyall & Leask, 2006). However, the topics revolved mostly around AR as a complementary tool for enhancing an experience during a visit at a destination, and research about how AR shapes the tourist experience in pre-holiday mode is very rare. Although this may be due to the subject's interdisciplinary character, there is still an urgent need for analyzing the uses of the technology in each step of the process to identify future research directions.

The use of AR in the tourism industry

Emerging ICTs, such as virtual environments (VE), are tools that are being increasingly used to improve the customer experience. The term virtual environment can have many valences, but it is mostly known as an umbrella term for technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality.

By definition, augmented reality is a technology that superimposes context-aware virtual elements on the real environment of a user (Azuma, 1997; Cranmer et al., 2020). In other words, AR has the ability to enhance the real world. It is interactive and implies that it is adaptive to changes in the surrounding environment, in real time. Depending on the application of AR technology, the overlay elements can be images, videos, graphics, or other types of elements, such as navigational data. Azuma (1997) even considered virtual reality to be the same concept as virtual environments, and augmented reality to be a variation of virtual reality,

but as the technologies matured over the years, it is safe to say that both deserve their own category. The main differences between augmented reality and virtual reality are as follows:

(1) Pricewise, AR is more easily accessible to the general public through smartphones and tablets (Azuma, 1997), while VR requires special hardware equipment, which still has a high price tag for most people.

(2) Unlike VR, AR enhances the real world rather than replacing it (Fritz et al., 2005).

(3) Researchers argued that VR can actually be a threat to tourism, as it can substitute certain experiences (Cheong, 1995), but AR is mostly complementary to the process of choosing and experiencing a destination (Kazmierczak et al., 2021).

Although augmented reality (AR) is not a new technology, in its early days it was used mainly in research and development fields and was rather inaccessible to the general public. That was mostly because the hardware and software compatibility of the technology was mostly limited to head-mounted displays (HMDs) and, in some cases, to monocular systems, monitor-based interfaces (Azuma, 1997), or other types of visualization-enabling device. In addition, the applications for the usual consumers were very limited due to the technology still being in development. Things started to change with the evolution of mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets, and with a dramatic increase in their usage. Their ability to support augmented technology led to the creation of several apps that have AR-based functionalities. Ultimately, these AR integrations brought the technology into the eyes of the general public (Martínez-Graña et al., 2013), gaining traction and maintaining an ascending trend to this day.

Enhancing the customer experience with AR

●***in the pre-holiday stage***

Promoting destinations with AR to tourism consumers can happen for the following reasons: to increase awareness about the destination, to shape opinions and create higher interest, to increase sales, or to provide more information after purchase. Of course, tourism providers can target more than one reason at a time.

Brakus et al. (2009) states that in the pre-purchase stage, either consumers can meet a product physically, virtually or in an advertisement and in all cases the interaction becomes part of the product experience. Because experiences can happen, regardless of whether people have or do not have prior knowledge of a product, existing interest, or a personal connection with it, AR can also be used to increase the level of awareness about it. The experience can be enhanced by providing valuable information that can help potential consumers in their discovery and decision-making process. Additionally, a part of the product experience is the additional information gathered after purchase, but before actual consumption. Various technologies can easily be used to mediate these communications and experiences, but very few can achieve an experience so close to reality compared to AR (Sporea et al., 2020). Using AR benefits not only the tourism suppliers but also the consumers.

Research has shown that consumers prefer to try before they buy when it comes to products with certain characteristics, such as a high price (Breidbach et al., 2014) or a product with a high associated risk. Unfortunately, because a destination is an intangible product, it cannot be fully experienced before the decision to purchase takes place. It is well known that intangibility negatively influences the ability to assess the quality of products and, inherently, the perception of risk by consumers by consumers by consumers (Laroche et al., 2004). A way for marketers to support intangible goods and reduce perceived risk is by creating informational or promotional content with visualization techniques such as photos, videos, maps, and so on. The scope is to aid the consumer mind to create mental imagery of the product and to make it as close as possible to reality.

Another opportunity identified for AR to promote destinations is the use of bogus windows in places like bus stations, travel agencies, embassies, airports, malls, and so on. These devices are actually screens that resemble regular glass windows (Scholz & Smith, 2016). Just like filters, these windows can augment the self, the environment or both. Although this technique was successfully used to promote consumer goods, brands or TV shows, we did not find examples of it being used to promote destinations and consequently no research on this topic either.

Tourists also use mobile apps created for virtual tours prior to their visit, to evaluate the touristic potential of a destination. Martínez-Graña et al. (2013) proposed the use of virtual itineraries to provide users with information needed to evaluate Las Quilamas Natural Park prior to a visit. This example is a little different from the others presented in this paper, because the augmentation does not happen in real time, at the location of the user, but instead over a digital copy of a geological site from Google Earth.

● ***during holiday stage***

When tourists are visiting destinations, they do a lot of research on attractions, restaurants, cultural and historic information, etc. For many of these travel-tasks, people use mobile apps to complete them because they make the process easier and save time. When it comes to travel apps that use augmented reality, not only the enjoyment component comes into play, but also the tasks can be performed better, thanks to the attributes of the technology.

Compared to other tourist stages, the actual visit to a destination benefited the most attention, both from tourism providers and scholars alike, as shown in Table 1. The researchers have validated the acceptance of AR technology at the destination in a number of studies over the years. An example is the study by Tom Dieck & Jung (2015), conducted in the context of urban heritage tourism. They used an AR mobile app for a heritage trail in Dublin and found that information quality, system quality, costs of use, recommendations from other users, personal innovation, privacy concerns, and facilitating conditions (hardware availability, battery life) are the dimensions that can influence the use of the app. Similar studies have been created in the context of using an AR mobile app for a museum (Chung et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2015) or for a city in the form of a virtual travel guide (Kourouthanassis et al., 2014).

The first category is location-based AR. This AR technology comes in the form of an interactive map with superimposed virtual elements to help users discover nearby attractions, search and display information, create itineraries, and more. It usually tracks the user's location with GPS, which is why this type of AR is widely integrated in mobile apps. Han et al. (2017) researched the use of a navigational AR-based app for an urban heritage trail in Dublin.

Because augmented reality and virtual reality are two closely related technologies, a study by Jung et al. (2016) investigated how both influence the tourists' experience in a museum context. To investigate the impact of augmented reality, a mobile AR app was used. The paper found that the sense of presence when using either technology has a positive influence on creating memorable experiences. Another study conducted in a museum in Romania by Nechita & Rezeanu (2019) also researched the implications of using AR and VR technologies together to increase the attractiveness of the museum to younger audiences. Entertainment and empathy were also found to have a strong impact on the experience of visitors for both technologies. Augmented reality systems that provide informational and educational value can be used not only on land, but also for marine tourism. Kazmierczak et al. (2021) propose that using an app to provide tourists with information about their environment in an entertaining way can help alleviate the monotony that might occur during long sea voyages, therefore enhancing both the experience and knowledge of water tourists. The app is only in the development stage, and further research is needed to validate the hypothesis.

Besides superimposing normal elements like text or videos to provide more information to tourists, another application mentioned in the research literature is the ability to reconstruct historical places to see them reconstructed (Azuma, 1997; Fritz et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2012).

Table 1. Overview of AR research in tourism

Article	Authors	Research method	Context	Location of the study	AR tool	Tourist stage	Use of AR
A virtual tour of geological heritage: Valourising geodiversity using Google Earth and QR code	A.M. Martínez-Graña, J.L. Goy, C.A. Cimarra	Qualitative analysis	Geological heritage site	The Las Quilamas Natural Park, Spain	AR mobile app / QR code	Prior to visit/During visit	Navigational /Informational/Educational
User experience model for augmented reality applications in urban heritage tourism	Dai-In Han, M. Claudia tom Dieck & Timothy Jung	Focus group (5 focus groups with 49 participants in total)	Heritage trail	Dublin, Ireland	AR mobile app	During visit	Navigational /informational
A mobile application system for sightseeing guidance using augmented reality	Hitoshi Furata, Kyosuke Takahashi, Ken Ishibashi, Mami Aira, Koichiro Nakatsu	Experiment (5 participants)	Tour	Takatsuki city, Japan	AR mobile app	During visit	Navigational /informational
Effects of Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality on Visitor Experiences in Museum	Timothy Jung, M. Claudia tom Dieck, Hyunae Lee, and Namho Chung	Questionnaire (163 participants)	Museum	Cornwall, UK	AR mobile app	During visit	Informational
Augmenting Museum Communication Services to Create Young Audiences	Florin Nechita and Catalina-Ionela Rezeanu	Questionnaire (400 participants)	Museum	Brasov, Romania	AR mobile app	During visit	Informational/Experiential
Using AR Technology in Tourism Based on the Example of Maritime Educational Trips—A Conceptual Model	Rafał Kazmierczak, Agnieszka Szczepánska, Cezary Kowalczyk, Grzegorz Grunwald	Development/Questionnaire (248 participants)	Cruise	-	AR mobile app	During visit	Informational/educational

The determinants of recommendations to use augmented reality technologies: The case of a Korean theme park	Timothy Jung, Namho Chung, M. Claudia Leue	Questionnaire (241 participants)	Theme park	Jeju Island, South Korea	AR book	During visit	Informational/experiential
Enhancing Cultural Tourism experiences with Augmented Reality Technologies	F. Fritz, A. Susperregui and M.T. Linaza	Development	Skyline	San Sebastian, Spain	AR binoculars	During visit	Informational
Embodiment of Wearable Augmented Reality Technology in Tourism Experiences	Iis P. Tussyadiah, Timothy Hyungsoo Jung, and M. Claudia tom Dieck	Questionnaire (211 participants)	Museum	UK	Google Glass	During visit	Informational

Conclusions

Augmented reality is a multivalent technology that allows users to interact with their environment along with other computer-generated elements. The compatibility of smartphones with this technology has led in recent years to increased interest in implementing it for tourism purposes. This paper identified current and possible uses of AR to improve the experience of tourists before holidays and during the holidays.

In the pre-holiday stage, AR can be used to promote a destination and to help tourists with decision making in two ways. First, by catching their attention by differentiating from typical advertisements in the form of text, images, and videos. Second, by reducing the perceived risk associated with tourism products, especially destinations. Although AR is a highly effective tool to help tourists discover destinations and decide to visit them, its use is still limited. So far, not many tourism providers have integrated AR into their marketing strategy, although tourists have a high rate of adoption of the technology. Research is also scarce when it comes to using AR as a marketing tool, which is why there is a stringent need for scholars to create frameworks and investigate user adoption and behavior in different contexts.

On the holiday stage things are looking a little more optimistic. We have several examples of AR systems that are integrated into the visit to destinations and studies that validate their impact on the overall experience of tourists. However, there are also many research gaps that need to be filled. For example, scholars can further investigate what barriers technology adoption poses for some users and how they can be overcome. In addition, there is a need to create better guidelines for creating AR systems that are enjoyable enough and have utilitarian value for tourists, to enhance their experience even more.

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Online Consumer Behavior Influenced by Rising Prices and Shortage of Goods after COVID-19 and During Wartime

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Abstract
In recent years, technological development in the IT&C field led to the exponential increase in the number of mobile terminals such as smartphones, but also in the speed of data transmission, thus creating the premises for the intensification of online commerce. This research focuses on online consumer behavior influenced by a series of elements from the external environment such as rising prices and shortage of goods after COVID-19 and during wartime to see what changes have been in the consumer's decision-making process. The restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic generate the widespread adoption of online commerce where traditional companies have been forced to think in terms of "digital" and "online", to adapt their operating systems, and intensify their presence on the internet and social media channels. Also, the supply chain disruptions, the container crisis, and the rising prices for energy resources caused a shortage of goods and rising prices. The current global problems are becoming a challenge for both advertisers and consumers. These challenges are met by both parties, and they must adapt to these changes: the consumer to rethink his decision-making process when shopping, and advertisers to understand what influences the consumer in the online environment, to adapt and to be able to survive in this competitive context. The results showed that disruptive elements change this process almost completely and that consumer behavior adapts and changes when major phenomena such as those mentioned occur.

Keywords: Consumer behavior, wartime, shortage of goods, rising prices.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

According to Kotler, P., Armstrong, G., (2018), "The microenvironment consists of the actors close to the company that affects its ability to engage and serve its customers-the company, suppliers, marketing intermediaries, customer markets, competitors, and the public. The macroenvironment consists of the larger societal forces that affect the microenvironment—demographic, economic, natural, technological, political, and cultural forces." The changes that take place in these environments are reflected in the general practice of companies to consumers and vice versa. Companies need to adapt and understand the phenomena they face to fit their marketing strategies to the new needs of the consumer who now have new spending habits, needs, and behavior.

According to Rogers, K., & Cosgrove, A. (2020), "Consumer-facing companies urgently need to anticipate what kind of consumer is emerging, so they can make it through the current crisis and build the capabilities that future relevance will require." The existing crisis was exacerbated by another major event, such as the war between Ukraine and Russia. Thus, the global health crisis followed by a political one leads to a global economic crisis that is reflected in rising prices and shortage of goods. "An international crisis begins with a foreign policy crisis for one or more states. The trigger to a foreign policy crisis derives from three interrelated perceptions generated by a hostile act, disruptive event or environmental change." (Brecher, 1996).

Even if unforeseen events occur, technological development is an essential and helpful factor in continuing natural activities such as shopping which is taking place more and more in the online environment.

Online marketing refers to marketing via the internet using company websites, online advertising and promotions, email marketing, online video, and blogs. Social media and mobile marketing also take place online and must be closely coordinated with other forms of digital marketing. (Kotler, Armstrong, 2018)

2. Problem Statement

Wars and pandemics are unstable events that have major consequences for humanity. Adaptation, understanding the situation we are subjected to and acceptance is the key elements that help us overcome any moment which can be destabilizing. The end of 2019 was a moment that made its mark in history because of the COVID-19 virus, followed by a 2-year period in which the lives of billions of people were fundamentally changed and forced to readjust. Because of the pandemic When things seemed to calm down, a whole new and unforeseen situation arose: Russia attacked Ukraine, the country that was the largest exporter of key crops such as sunflower oil, maize, barley, and wheat. This attack slowed down and even stopped exports to other countries that depended on it and made producers find other ways to supply. According to Hegarty S. (2022), "Covid had a big impact too. In Indonesia and Malaysia, labor shortages meant lower harvests of palm oil, which pushed up vegetable oil prices globally. At the beginning of this year, the price of many of the world's staple foods was reaching all-time highs. Many hoped that crops from Ukraine could help make up the global shortfall. But Russia's invasion has prevented that." According to what was said, the combination between pandemic and war conduces to a difficult situation: labor shortage and shortage of goods.

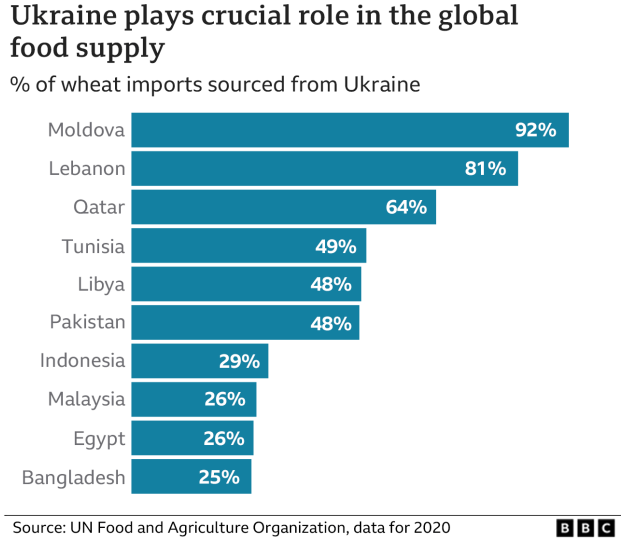

Figure 1. Ukraine's role in the global food supply

Source: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61583492

The pandemic repercussions meant major losses: according to statistics, more than 6 million people died. Some of them represented a part of the working-age population that now needs to be replaced or rethought so that activities can continue. Restrictions imposed to reduce the virus spread were so difficult that people were forced to stay at home as long as possible, and avoid as much as possible interactions and pre-covid activities. Due to those limits, the online environment has become the most used and gained ground in this period for marketers and consumers. Effects were seen quite quickly on the market as well: many businesses have closed and a large part of them have moved their activity exclusively online.

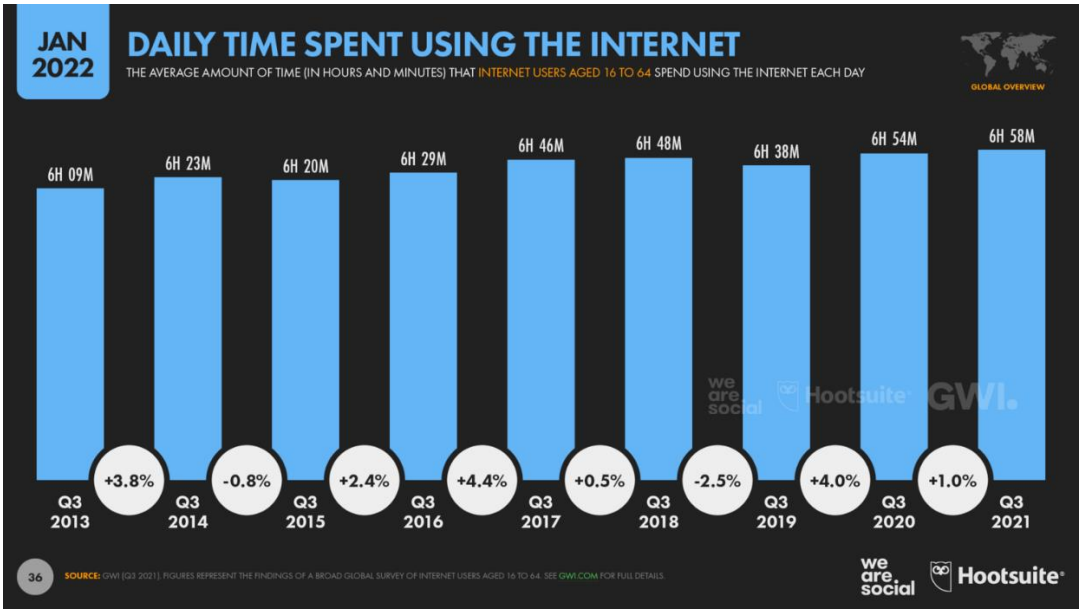

Figure 2. Daily time spent using the internet

Source: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-time-spent-with-connected-tech

According to research from GWI, the COVID-19 pandemic has helped increase the number of hours spent on the Internet. As we see in Figure 2, between 2019 and 2021 the number of hours spent increased, reaching almost 7 hours.

This change comes with several challenges that marketers must overcome: to adapt to online consumer needs. The modern concept of marketing starts from the premise that any economic activity must be directed towards satisfying the requirements -effective and potential- of consumers, with maximum efficiency. [...] In this context, for the development of complex mechanisms for transforming needs into demand for goods and services, a special place in the theory and practice of marketing belongs to the study of consumer behavior. (Cătoiu & Teodorescu, 2004).

3. Research Questions/ Aims of the Research

The research aimed to study the behavior of online consumers aged between 18 and over 55 years from Romania, influenced by rising prices and shortage of goods after COVID 19 and during wartime. This research focuses on understanding consumer behavior during this period of crisis and sees what are the consumer trends in the online environment. To completely understand this, we have developed a series of objectives aimed to discover what influences the consumer during this period, the decision-makers when shopping online and how consumers adapted their needs to the market offer.

- Identifying why consumers have shopped online during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Measuring the relevance of the criteria that determine the consumer to shop online

- Identifying buying habits in this economic period dominated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, and the food crisis
- Determining how the rising prices and shortage of goods influence online consumer behavior in general

4. Research Methods

In the first part, we made exploratory research that helped us to provide a general framework of the investigated problem where we used primary data sources. Also, quantitative research was made where we used the survey method and built a questionnaire about "Online consumer behavior influenced by rising prices and shortage of goods after COVID 19 and during wartime". An online survey platform was used to collect the answers from the targeted sample. For a better analysis, the following data are presented in the form of graphs. Research results should be a benchmark for online marketers to understand consumer behavior and adapt their marketing strategy to it.

5. Findings and research limits

For this research, we made a questionnaire with 21 questions, 15 questions related to the researched topic, and 6 filter questions that help us identify the consumer profile. The study involved 100 respondents, women and men from rural and urban areas in Romania between the ages of 18 and over 55 who shop online.

Figure 3. Consumer characterization in terms of buying habits in this economic period dominated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the shortage of goods
Source: Author's contribution

According to the answers, we can see that a significant part of the respondents is frugal during this period when they shop and choose to spend their money in an organized way, either having an established shopping budget or choosing to buy only the necessary products. 21.4% of respondents choose to shop only when they need something and according to this, we can characterize them as prudent consumers.

The second category of respondents, the ones who carefully calculate their expenses and represent 41.7%, answered that they are limited by a set budget. Considering this we can assume that they are organized consumers.

The last category of respondents stated that they did not have a budget and that they can buy everything they need. According to the answer given by these consumers, they do not seem to be affected by the mentioned events yet. We can say that these are the unaffected consumers.

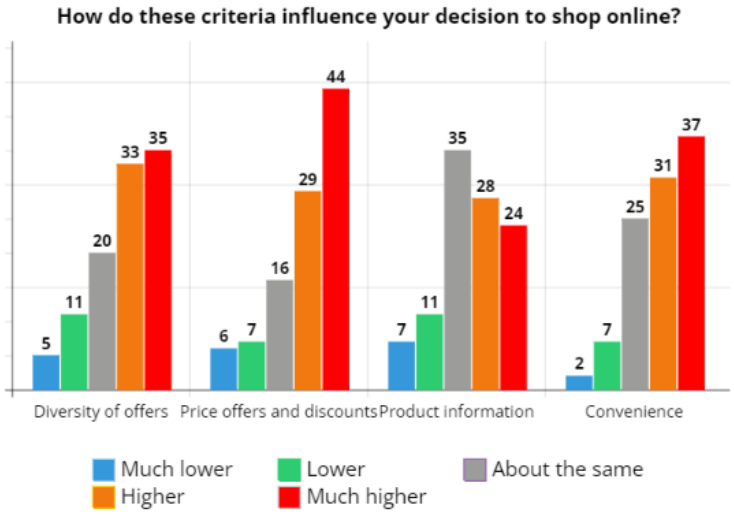

Figure 4. How consumers are influenced to shop online by certain criteria
Source: Author's contribution

To see which criterion influences the consumer's online buying decision the most, we will calculate the average score for each criterion by assigning scores from 1 to 5 as follows: Much higher- 5; Higher-4; About the same-3; Lower-2; Much lower-1.

Score Diversity offers: 35×5+33×4+20×3+11×2+5×1= 175+132+60+22+5=394
Score Price offers and discounts: 44×5+29×4+16×3+7×2+6×1= 220+116+48+14+1=399
Score Product information: 24×5+28×4+35×3+11×2+7×1= 120+112+105+22+7= 366
Score Convenience: 37×5+31×4+25×3+7×2+2×1= 185+ 124+75+14+2= 400

The obtained results after calculating the score show us that the first criterion that influences consumers is convenience, which means that it is quite easy for them to shop online and that they have adapted to this environment quite well, moreover, they use this method of shopping. The second criterion is represented by price offers and discounts, this shows that consumers are attracted by lower prices and offers. The third place is occupied by the diversity of offers, the online environment is a place where the consumer can consult several offers in a much faster and easier way. The last place, product information is less important for consumers who participated in this survey.

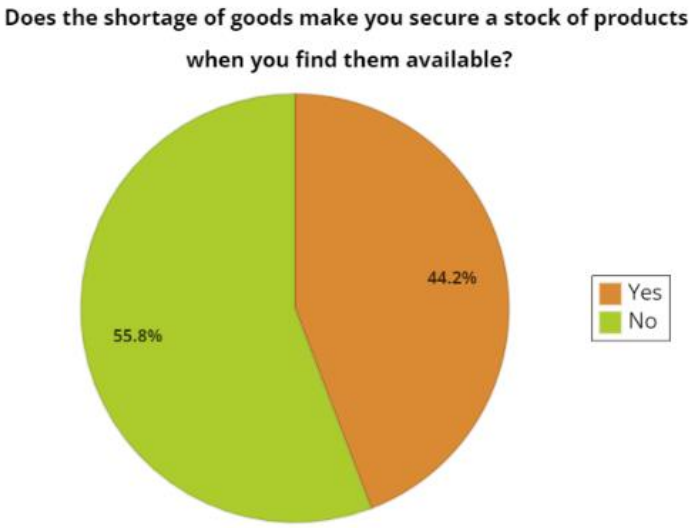

Figure 5, Does the shortage of goods make consumers secure a stock of products when they find them available
Source: Author's contribution

The answers of the respondents participating in this study show that a percentage of 44.2% of them are influenced by the shortage of goods and choose to make a stock of products while 55.8% of them are not influenced by this aspect and do not make a stock of products. Relatively balanced results show that consumers are divided into two categories and act according to what influences them: the feeling of fear because they may not find the product or the certainty that the desired product will appear in the end.

Figure 6. Frequency of online shopping
Source: Author's contribution

Conforming to responses, the respondents participating in the study make online shopping quite frequently: 2% of them daily, 34% weekly, 42% monthly, and 22% rarely. This helps us to place correspondents in a category of online consumers

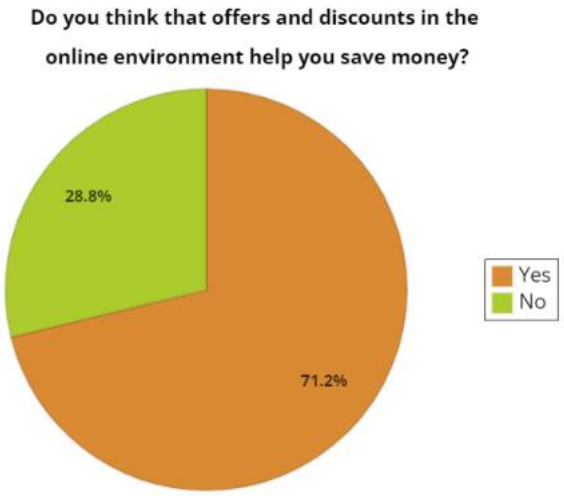

Figure 7. Offers and discounts help consumers save money
Source: Author's contribution

At the question "Do you think that offers and discounts in the online environment help you save money?" a very large part of the respondents answered with "Yes", a percentage of 71.2% of them and 28.8% had a negative answer. This difference shows the importance of the consumer's perception of these price advantages.

It is important to take into account the limitation of this research and the limited number of 100 respondents. For this reason, the research is not representative.

Conclusions

Changes in the micro and macro environment are very likely to influence online and offline consumer behavior. According to the results of the research, a large part of consumers became more cautious when they chose to shop online and were largely influenced by offers and discounts. This means that marketers could adapt their marketing strategy to this need and try as much as possible to offer a discount to the consumer. The results showed that consumers consider that they save money when they benefit from a discount and thus the chances that they will buy increase.

During this period of rising prices, the consumer considers that when he pays less for something automatically, he saves and comes out a winner in this situation. Winners can also be those who take into account this perception and choose to offer the consumer as much as possible what he wants. Also, in this study we discovered many consumer patterns during this period, namely: prudent consumer, organized consumer, and unaffected consumer. Based on these, they make decisions in the online environment when shopping.

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The Need and Future of Digitalization in Romania - a Delphi Method Research

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Abstract
Our research objective is to find the level of understanding and the vision about digitalization in Romania among key decision makers in national and local public institution. The purpose of our research is to find the future directions of public policies, the institutional bottlenecks and assets in the sphere of digitalization in Romania. We used the Delphi method, using a back and forth set of questions thru a set of ten key decision makers with high impact on public policies and three with high responsibilities in Digitalization. We use two rounds of Delphi questions applied, with one updated semi structured interview guide. A content analysis was applied. The major findings are: (a) The decision makers we investigate have an unclear view about the needs of digital transformation in Romania. Most of them when talked about the needs for digitalization in Romania refer to EU digital policies and the need for a more transparent and fast servicing public institutions; (b) The vulnerability of strategic infrastructure in case of digitalization is a powerful reason to procrastinate the digital transformation; (c) Decision makers think that EU policies will force Romania to implement digital transformation even the public institutions will not act; (d) Most of them think that the government should have the initiative to digitalize Romanian society (both public and private); (e) All of them think that the bottleneck of digital transformation is mainly public servants; (f) The myth of Romanians who are IT experts, more above the EU media IT literacy is a fundamental perception of all key decision makers. There is a link between digitalization of states and those of companies inside the states. Better digital private companies are better digital public institutions are (in the same state). The digital transformation in Romania it is done in waves, it is not a constant public policy preoccupation, and the effect of no digitalization of Romania society is not understand in depth. The digital literacy of key decision makers is medium and affect public policies in digital dimension.

Keywords: Digital transformation, digitalize, public institutions, competitive advantage, critical infrastructure

JEL classification: M31.

1. The need for digitalization in society

Digitalization became synonym with development for any entity, country, company etc. In technical sense digitalization of an entity means integration of IT&C technology in the entity with the purpose of increasing efficiency and efficacity. As we can find in any kind of entity, from companies to public institutions, the digital shift profoundly change the economic system and ways to produce and deliver value, public administration outcomes, incomes, relations and expectations on behalf of all stakeholders by using new digital technologies, as stated Rymarczyk (Rymarczyk, 2021). The new reality will bring sooner or later digital identity for citizens which will interact more and more in digital way in all kinds of purposes, from social matters to educational, from business to institutional needs.

In this new reality based on digital economy and on industry 4.0, public institutions and governments have only one way to go further, digital transformation. The pay back of not going digital for some reasons are not so obvious for everybody but there are some important effects. Exclusion from big exchange of data and value, lack of competitivity, incapacity to deliver value to stakeholders as it will became expected. This new institutional reality, digital one will bring more accountability of institution in front of other stakeholders (Androniceanu, et al., 2022).

Some examples of digital public services: ”submitting documents/requests online and receiving their solution automatically; reporting problems of public interest online 24/7, even from the mobile phone (abandoned cars, potholes in asphalt, disturbing public order, obstacles on the road, garbage thrown in illegal places, lighting system failures, stray dogs, etc.); payment of taxes, fees, and fines online on the institutions' website; online verification of the status of documents submitted to the institution; real-time information on the status of submitted documents; quick access to information of public interest, automatically published on the site; citizens can automatically obtain certificates and several approvals", financing projects and companies. "By digitizing public services, citizens can directly consult their land, buildings, declared cars, taxes, fines, and other taxes on the website of the institution" (Androniceanu, et al., 2022). The new reality which includes digital economy will force digital transformation of public institutions and will bring with them new leadership criteria (shift from old leadership to new one with data drive culture), re-engineering of organizations including models, processes based on new stakeholders needs expectations and new social values as Androniceanu quotes (Androniceanu, et al., 2022).

2. Romanian digital status

In public documents like PNRR (National Plan for Development and Resilience) which describes national vision and concrete plans for digital transition of the country, we find that "the aim of the component is to address all these challenges and to achieve a coherent and integrated digital infrastructure for the benefit of citizens and businesses, while providing the necessary tools (such as connectivity, skills development or cybersecurity) for the transition to digitized economy and society. In particular, the component includes the reforms needed to establish the government cloud and ensure interoperability, improve connectivity, strengthen the protection and cyber security of public and private entities, and increase digital skills in the public sector. The underlying reforms include the development of the government cloud, the digitization of health, the judiciary, the environment, employment and social protection, public procurement, non-governmental organizations, connectivity in white areas, and cybersecurity for different structures and the improvement of both the skills of civil servants and the general population. An essential investment refers to the introduction of the electronic identity card for Romanian citizens" (Finances, 2022).

The reality Romania came from, in terms of digital status we show below in Figure 1.:

	Romania		EU
	rank	score	score
DESI 2021	27	32.9	50.7

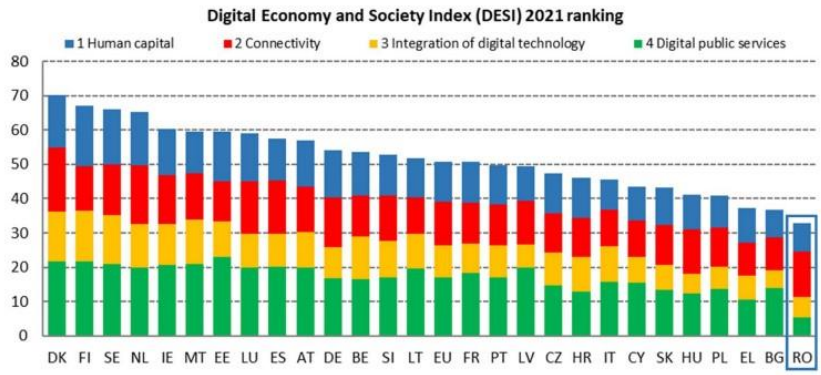

Figure 1 Digital Economy and Society index (DESI) 2021 ranking, Source Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2021 Romania

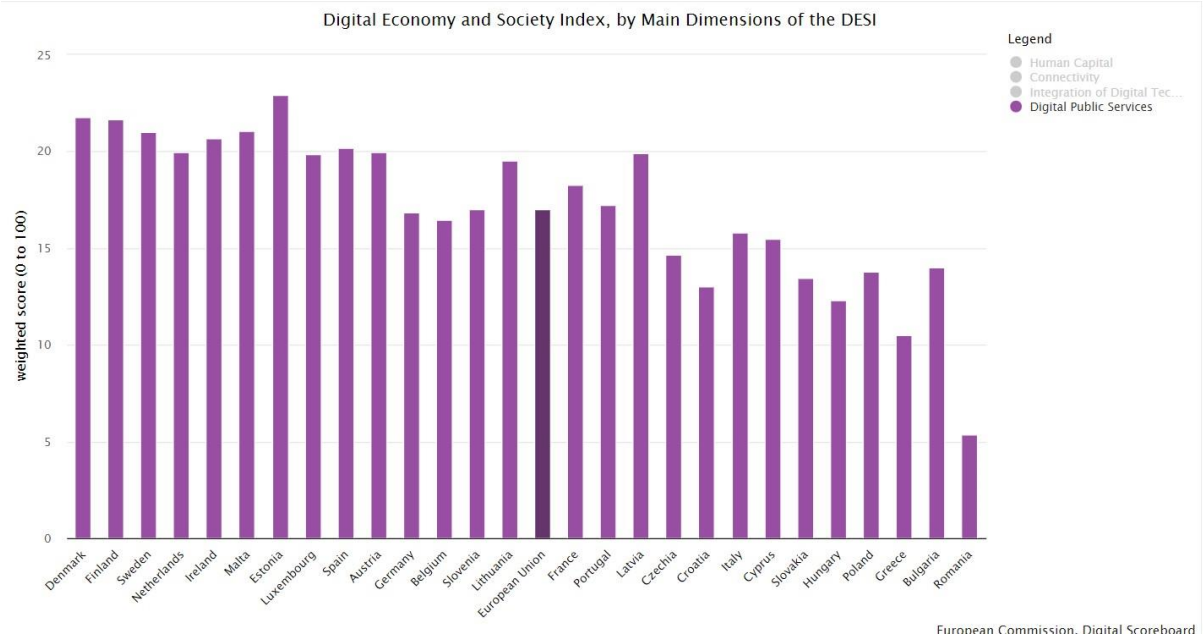

Figure 2 Digital Economy and Society index (DESI) 2021 ranking, Digital Public Services, Source Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2021 Romania

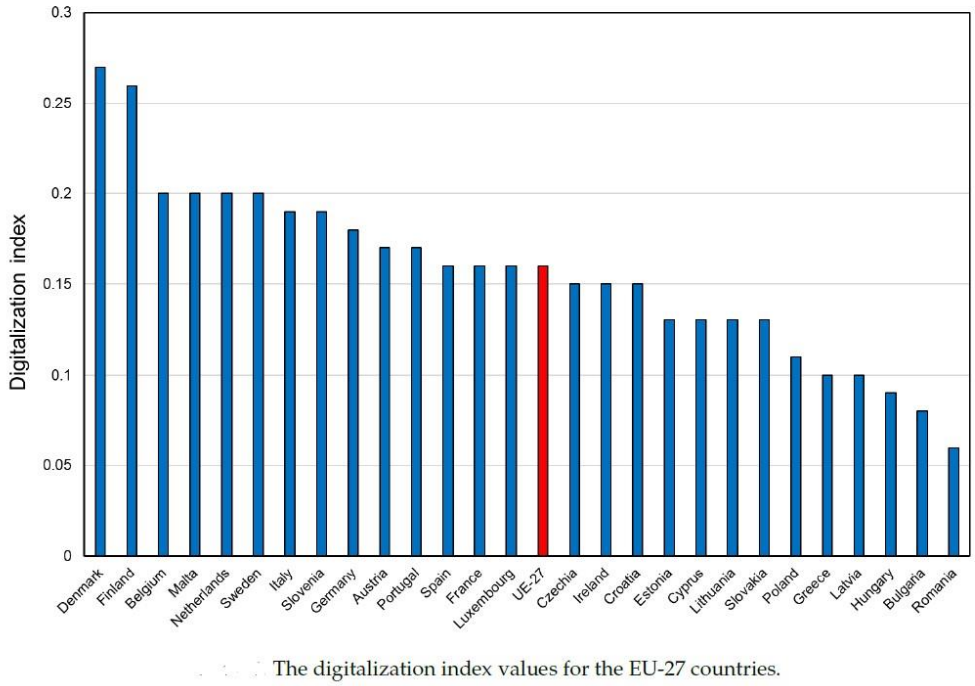

Figure 3 The digitalization index value for EU-27 Countries, (Brodny & Tutak, 2022)

Figure 2 and Figure 3 show us a link between digital transformation of public institutions and of companies, but it is a subject of further research to find the exact correlation. In this respect we find that Romania must do more in the future about digitalization on all components and to overcome the cultural, educational and institutional barriers and bottlenecks.

3. Methodology

The Delphi method is based on expert knowledge or decision makers with the objective of obtaining a consensus about a specific issue, question or solution and use a process of iterative questionnaires and controlled feedback (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). The Delphi technique has been used in research of digitalization and digital transformation (Piccinini, et al., 2015). This method has the advantage of not putting in contact different people with different visions, values, political orientation etc. that could broke the communication or collaborative process.

Because we ask about digitalization different decision makers, with different political orientation, we choose Delphi method. We select ten decision makers, four within national, central government with general overview and responsibilities, including Digital Agenda, three with special high responsibilities in digitalization only, 3 from local public administration. We interview them based on 16 questions (Annex 1), we analyzed and extract conclusions from first round and then we re-interview them with a smaller questionnaire of only three questions (Annex 2).

4. Findings and conclusions

Local public administration still doesn't have any interest in digitalization because they want to have direct contact with citizens. More than half from the decision makers think that public servants are against digitalization because of lack of instruction, fear from transparency and responsibilities. Few of decision makers, but the most important one for digitalization in Romania, are preoccupied by the risks of digitalization for national security.

All of decision makers think that Romania is in a strong position not only in EU but worldwide in terms of human resources expert in IT&C and digital literacy, which is in total disaccord to official data from EU institutions. The level of understanding of digitalization, digital transformation, Industry 4.0 components, is not too high with some exceptions. More than that, the level of understanding of the need for digitalization and the effects of not becoming more digital are not to clear.

For most of decision leaders, digitalization is seen as a part of national system, a subsystem, they don't see digital transition area as a holistic one with effects in all dimensions of society, like electricity. The main assumption of decision makers is that despite of bottlenecks for digitalization, EU general policies will force Romania to become more and more digital. More than a half form decision makers think that to digitalize Romanian society (both public and private sector) government should take the initiative, not private sector. They see that private sector is weak and has a selfish agenda.

The first measure the Government should take in order to digitalize Romanian society is education, at all levels. Finally, is still a retard in vision and determination for digitalization.

5. Future discussions

Some issues rise during our research that should do study more, in the benefit of Romanian society: what if a society in EU did not digitalize itself in due time, the bottlenecks for digitalization in public institutions, the institutional architecture and responsibilities for digital transformation.

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Annex 1 – First round semi-structured interview guide

1. Do you know about Digital Economy?
2. How much digitalize is Romania generally?
    a. Public Sector
    b. Private Sector
3. If you consider it is not so much digitalized, how much Romania should be?
4. Who should take the initiative for digitalize?
5. Where is the most important deficit in digitalization in Romania?
6. How could help public institution the companies to digitalize?
7. What public institutions are more digitalized and what are poor digitalized?
8. Why do you think Romanian Society should digitalize?
9. What could be the effects of not digitalize Romania?
10. What could be the future of digitalization in Romania?
11. Did Pandemia help the digitalization process?
12. What is the most urgent/important thing Romanian Government should do to digitalize country?
13. Do you understand/know the concept of industry 4.0 and the components (AI, 3D Printing, High Speed Internet, Cloud Computing, Big Data, integration of processes/suppliers/customers)?
14. How do you see the Human Resource in Romania able to support the digital transformation of the country?
15. Do you think that public Data Base should democratize?
16. Do you know public institutions with Big Data implementations?

Annex 2 – Second round semi-structured interview guide

1. What are the barriers and bottlenecks for digitalization in Romania?
2. What should Government do for increase the digitalization in Romanian Society?
3. What should happen if Romanian digitalization process will stagnate?

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A Survey of MarTech Adoption and Impact during the COVID crisis

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Abstract
In the simplest approach, the concept of MarTech is at the crossroads of marketing and technology and refers to all the technologies that an organization can use to conduct its marketing activities, generating a significant impact on its marketing plan, its employees. , its specific processes and, ultimately, on its customers, by implementing in the fields of advertising and promotion, content and experience, social and relationship, trade and sales, data and management. Among the most important trends in the field of marketing technologies are: data unification - for their processing, analysis and effective use; creating the position of director for marketing data - meant to ensure the quality of specific processes of data collection, integration and use for marketing purposes; integration and use of artificial intelligence and automation solutions on a large scale - to streamline the organization's marketing activities and processes; personalized real-time engagement with the customer - by integrating and using marketing automation solutions based on artificial intelligence to enable an immediate response to customer actions, scenarios and preferences; protection of personal data - in the context created by the introduction and application of GDPR regulations and consumer awareness of the importance of data protection. In the present paper we present the results of a quantitative research for which its main objective was to highlight the perception of potential users on marketing technologies. The results of the research were further used to propose a conceptual model to predict the behavioral intention of users to adopt MarTech-type technologies in the companies in which they work. The conceptual model, together with further research will be used for developing an empirical model for behavioral intention of users to adopt MarTech-type technologies in companies.

Keywords: Martech, conceptual model, behavioral intentions, marketing.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Literature review

In its simplest sense, the concept of MarTech is at the crossroads of marketing and technology and refers to all the technologies that an organization can use to conduct its marketing activities, generating a significant impact on its marketing plan, its employees. , its specific processes and, ultimately, on its customers, by implementing in the fields of

advertising and promotion, content and experience, social and relationship, trade and sales, data and management (Doughty, 2019).

Marketing technologies are the field of customer relationship management that aims to create, manage and use digital tools to automate activities and assist decision-making with informational support to cultivate customers, customize customer interactions and measure the effectiveness of campaigns.

Among the most important trends in the field of marketing technologies are**: data unification**- for their processing, analysis and effective use; **creating the position of director for marketing data** - meant to ensure the quality of specific processes of data collection, integration and use for marketing purposes; **integration and use of artificial intelligence and automation solutions on a large scale** - to streamline the organization's marketing activities and processes; **personalized real-time engagement with the customer** - by integrating and using marketing automation solutions based on artificial intelligence to enable an immediate response to customer actions, scenarios and preferences; **protection of personal data -** in the context created by the introduction and application of GDPR regulations and consumer awareness of the importance of data protection (Optimove, 2020).

In a constantly evolving society, marketing technology is a market trend for efficient customer relationship management, using digital tools in the realization and development of organizations through efficient management of activities in this field. The most important advantages in using these technologies are: democratization, identification through the use of artificial intelligence of consumer trends, a visible exposure to current social networks, more effective advertising and operationalization of marketing in a cognitive context, current, according to research studies which are imposed by the importance given to the visual part and the development of the brain in the context of the arts. Yes, marketing technology is an art that uses visual operating strategies in designing concepts that arouse interest.

A clear goal of Martech is to support marketers in finding solutions and providing customers with customized products, and the interaction is measured in accordance with efficiency standards for companies. Such an objective can be implemented if the tools used in the creation of the Martech are taken into account, which are based on programmatic advertising platforms, marketing automation software, content management systems that need to be structured, web analytics software to attract more visitors, more population for the products made and digital customer experience platforms (Schultz, 2021).

Due to the evolution of customer behavior even during the pandemic, marketers had to find new solutions to build brand confidence, so large companies had to reform their system based (now) on automated solutions to scale information, customize products to the end result presented to the customer to have a visual impact for a quality marketing (Roe, 2021).

Martech's father, Scott Brinker, categorized the solutions to the new concept into six distinct groups that make a clear distinction between technology and the term Martech: advertising and promotion, content and experience, social relations, trade and sales, data and quality management (Brinker, 2015).

In addition to these concepts that describe a new stage, vision on marketing, it is very important to introduce the 4Ps of marketing technology: process, plan, people, platforms. All these words are based on questions that are answered in order to draw a valid result for the current system (Kiwak, 2017).

To be successful in developing a Martech strategy, experts used four steps to a successful practice: building a stack (strategy and goals with a top-down progression range), involving the inclusion of all data collected (sources are very important for a complete profile), integration with all channels, collaborate with IT and measure and optimize your martech strategy. To fully use and develop the concept of Martech, it is important to know the main

types of systems we can operate with: customer relationship management (CRM) platforms, customer data platforms, marketing automation platforms, management platforms of social networks, personalization platforms, analysis and testing platforms (Moore, 2018).

According to the latest data and current trends in Martech, users and developers of concept in the product must unify the stored data, manage customer data through specialized people appointed as marketing data director, use artificial intelligence and automation on a large scale, and personalized involvement must be done in real time (Lukman, 2020).

Using Martech content tools will save time and simplify workflows already using automated tools, improve the internal communication of the entire team, create more intelligent content based on artificial intelligence and state-of-the-art technology used for this purpose, will build better relationships between companies and buyers, but also with the company team.

2. Research

Martech is the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) area that creates, manages and uses digital tools that enable marketers to automate tasks and make data-driven decisions. An important goal of MarTech is to help marketers find and cultivate customers, customize customer interaction, and measure the effectiveness of their campaigns.

For a better understanding of the perception of potential users on marketing technologies, a qualitative approach was preferred, as the underlying patterns, beliefs, and expectations could be discovered in an open conversation with the company representative, as opposed to quantitative research.

The main results of the research were the following:

- 74% of them mentioned that they have used MarTech technologies in the last year, thatmost organizations are found by customers through the media (51%), followed by recommendations (26%) and paid promotion (20%);
- The most used tools to convert customers are digital remarketing ads (49%) and offer optimization platforms (31%);
- to keep their customers, companies use: constantly scheduled social media posts (49%),constantly scheduled ads on Google media (27%), loyalty offers (24%);
- the main factors that affect the intention to adopt MarTech technologies, from the respondents' perspective are: technological factors (48%), organizational factors (39%),environmental factors (13%);
- The main perceived advantages of using MarTech technology are: allows the creation of personalized content, offers and campaigns (29%), the automation of repetitive manual tasks (22%), the efficiency of workflows (21%);
- the results highlight the following perceived disadvantages (mentioned in order of number of respondents): information hacked or stolen by competitors (44%), privacy issues (30%), various information about the activities and meanings of customers usingcookies (26%);

Regarding the benefits felt by users after using MarTech techniques, respondents perceived the following:

- find out more easily the trends of consumers (33%),
- convert customers online (23%),
- to measure campaigns becomes possible because of use of Martech (21 %),
- build profitable business relationships (21%),
- scalability of the organization is improved (2%);

When respondents were asked for their views on a number of statements regarding MarTech technologies and their use, the statements and responses were as follows:

- When implementing MarTech technologies I had to increase the marketing

budgetwithin the organization. - YES answer (70%)

- Innovation has been the main attribute in the implementation of MarTech technologies.

- YES answer (83%)

- After the implementation of MarTech technologies, the time to solve problems withinthe organization was reduced. - YES (87%)
- We developed a MarTech strategy considering the creation of a plan in line with theorganization's objectives. - YES (74%)
- We have developed a team of specialists with specific MarTech skills. - YES (87%)

Asked how they measure the efficiency of using MarTech technologies, most respondents mentioned that this was highlighted by the growth of the organization (45%), while 39% of respondents stated that it measures efficiency through the channels / platforms used.

All companies are different and this means that the needs of companies will vary when it comes to the technology they use. Given the large number of tools available on the market today, it is necessary to know the needs before the research process. Another thing to keep in mind when choosing technology is that many of the platforms used for marketing technology will have more features. Therefore, it may be discovered that a single piece of new technology may be attached that could replace two or more of the old parts.

In view of all these characteristics, respondents were asked to express their confidence in MarTech-type technologies, and the results indicated the following:

- Trust - 48%
- Have enough confidence - 39%
- They have great confidence - 13%

Regarding the level of perception (knowledge) on MarTech technologies, most of the respondents answered that it is a high one (52%), 30% of them mentioned that their level of perception is average (choosing the answer neither (30%) and only 17% chose the very high variant (17%).

Satisfaction with the use of MarTech technologies was also measured by a question, and most respondents (57%) said they were satisfied with the results, 26% said they were very satisfied and only 17% they chose the neutral answer option (neither).

3. Conceptual model

Following the research presented above, a comparative study of the adoption of different categories of marketing technologies was conducted.

The sharp dynamics of the development of the world market of MarTech solutions from 2011- 2018, with an average annual growth rate of 72.54%, registered a significant attenuation in the period 2018-2020, the average annual growth rate decreasing to only 8.23 %, and in 2021 compared to 2020 to only 1.21%, which indicates a possible entry of the market in a stage of maturity, characterized by a rather qualitative development of the solutions offered to the organizations present in the various industries.

At the end of 2021, the global market for MarTech solutions counted, according to the portal https://martech5000.com/, 8097 marketing technology providers grouped into the following six categories (we kept their names and specific subcategories in English in the original) as can be seen in Figure 1: Advertising & Promotion - 934 suppliers (11.53% in total), increasing by 4.1% compared to 2019; Commerce & Sales - 1319 suppliers (14.06%), increasing by 9.0% compared to 2019; Content & Experience - 1966 suppliers (24.28%), increasing by 5.6% compared to 2019; Data - 1285 suppliers (15.87%), increasing by 25.5% compared to 2019, Management - 606 suppliers (7.48%), increasing by 15.2% compared to 2019; and Social & Relationships - 1987(24.53%), increasing by 13.7% compared to 2019.

Figure 1 Marketing technology providers

In order to predict the behavioral intention of users to adopt MarTech technologies in the companies in which they work, we proposed the following conceptual model, model that together with further researches we will test and based on it will develop an empirical model for behavioral intention of users to adopt MarTech-type technologies in companies, see Figure 2.

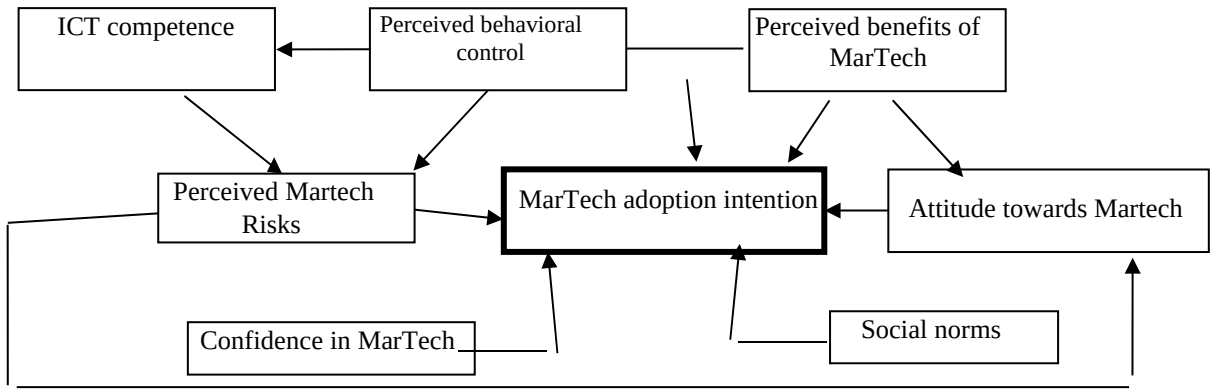

Figure 2 Conceptual model: Behavioral intent of users to adopt MarTech-type technologies in the companies in which they work.

The MarTech Replacement Survey did discover that the pandemic affected how teams staffed up to manage these new technologies. When asked whether new staff were hired in conjunction with the replacement, no fewer than 43% of the respondents in the 2019 survey reported hiring a new team. Only 26% retrained existing staff, while 24% took a mixed approach. But in this latest survey, the answer was dramatically different. 55% retrained the

existing team. Only 18% hired a new team. 24% reported a mix of new hires and retraining, while relying on an outside agency was down from 8% to 3% (Davis, 2021), as can be seen from Figure 3.

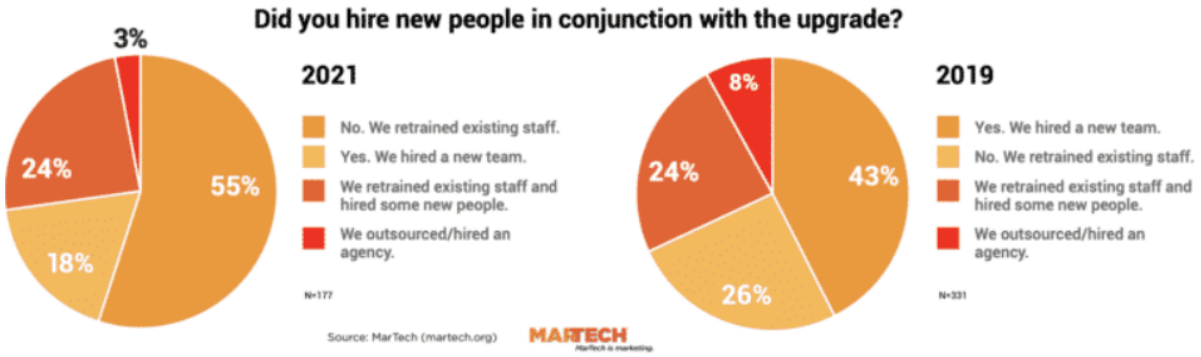

Figure 3 The MarTech Replacement Survey – selective results.

Martech's rising importance can be appreciated from the perspective of the pressures that many telecom providers globally are currently feeling. Telco operators achieve growth in two ways – either by acquiring new customers or increasing average revenue per user. Thanks to falling device and data prices, the number of smartphone subscriptions worldwide today surpasses six billion.

Pre-covid, service providers were nudging consumers to go digital, but it is now the other way round -thanks to a surge in demand for digital customer experiences. Martech enables superfast digitalization which is absolutely crucial in a post covid world. When a consumer does not want to go out, they will evaluate service providers by their ability to serve them online (Sanyal, 2021).

Conclusions

There are many ways in which managers' behavioral intent to use MarTech technologies can be addressed. The adoption of MarTech technologies can be approached as a planned behavior, which is not under the complete volitional control of individuals, so the introduction of perceived behavioral control in the model can increase its predictive power. Not only is the perception of behavioral control able to diminish concerns about the adoption of MarTech technologies, but also users with a high degree of perceived behavioral control tend to report lower degrees of perceived risk. This means that they are more confident in finding ways to protect themselves against the risks of adopting new technologies and exposing them to threats.

Since the adoption of a certain behavior cannot guarantee continuity, it is very important for both the companies producing MarTech technologies and for the third parties that benefit from such a computer system to impose the trust and to increase the behavioral control perceived by the users, taking into account that a user may stop using it at any time.

Acknowledgments

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Optimal Distribution Management of a Milk Sector

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Abstract
Sanitary standards for drinking milk are often affected by unsuitable storage and transport conditions. The composition of milk is sensitive to external factors. The effect of physico-chemical factors on the bacteriology of milk during its storage phase and its transport phase is analyzed by artificial neural networks. Also, a strong acidity is unfavorable to their multiplication. Add to this, the hygiene of the container and the personnel as well as the shelf life play a big role. In order to maintain the milk in optimal conditions, it is necessary to control the storage and transport chain. This study supports the parameters that influence the process. An artificial neural network system is proposed in this analysis. The system input variables represent the factors characterizing these conditions. The output variable is expressed by maintaining the milk within the required standards. As artificial neural networks deal with complex phenomena, their application in this field makes it possible to optimize the conditions of storage and transport of drinking milk.

Keywords: Milk, Sanitary standards, Transport conditions, Storage conditions, Artificial neural networks.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

Because of the increase in milk consumption around the world, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Reports (OECD/FAO, 2016) that this consumption increases by 20% by 2025. This will create storage and transport techniques to control the composition of milk (Malek et al., 2013). Milking and milk storage conditions can contribute to bacterial growth. These bacteria originate from the environment and even animal feed (Gleeson et al., 2013). However, microbiological tests carried out on milk for 96 hours can mislead us. Because something already stored the milk, it made additions at regular intervals (Griffiths, 2010; Perko, 2011). Either way, the effect of temperature on milk quality is obvious. Bacterial growth characterizes this in terms of the total number of bacteria and the number of psychrotrophic bacteria. This effect is also a function of the duration of storage (Reche et al., 2015).

A transformation takes place in the milk according to time and especially according to the temperature during storage. Public health authorities have set regulations that govern these storage conditions it should cool Milk to 2-4 °C after milking while others recommend a temperature of up to 6 °C (Cousin, 1982). Because of autolysis and lowering of temperature, the activity of plasmin in milk is reduced (Amy et al., 2021), and high-temperature influences' enzyme stability (Crudden et al., 2005a). In addition to the effect of diet and the stage of lactation, the fat and protein content are modified. The lactation period has a direct effect on the total number of milk bacteria because of environmental conditions and the increased prevalence of mastitis in the herd (Alichanidis et al., 1986). If the physicochemical parameters

of milk during its storage are widely studied, the problem remains because, during the storage period, fresh milk is added and this changes the conditions for the quantity of the initial milk.

From the above, it seems that the conditions of milk transport in terms of storage, duration, and temperature are very complex to analyze mathematically. The regulatory standards set for this purpose remain far from exact due to several parameters involved in the process and interact with each other. This study addresses the factors involved in using an intelligent artificial neural network system. Classical mathematical tools are inapplicable. We built an analysis system with the factors that influence milk quality as input variables, matched with the output variable that expresses the degree of this quality.

2. Material and methods

The study took place over three months, from March to May of the year 2021. After milk collection, I store it in a refrigerated tank of the atmospheric type with a capacity of 4000 L. Equipped with an integrated indirect refrigerator (water refrigeration). It is double-walled, which is used to exchange the temperature between the milk and the cooling water. A stirrer in action guarantees the homogenization of the temperature distribution.

It took the temperature using an integrated thermometer. We fixed it in a threshold between 2°C and 6°C. Because it is within these limits that bacterial proliferation remains within an acceptable threshold.

The storage time can go up to 48 hours, the time needed to empty the tank to meet the commercial circuit.

The effect of physico-chemical and bacteriological factors on the storage and transport of milk are analyzed by artificial neural networks.

2.1. Microbiology and storage conditions

Since 1978, Muir et al., 2016, established this correspondence. Bacterial growth varies with temperature at (4°C, 5.2 × 105 cfu/mL); (6°C, 3.3 × 106 cfu/mL) and 8°C, 1.0 × 107 cfu/mL) this for a storage time of 48h. This leads to an alteration by the production of proteases and lipases, which break down proteins and fat (Muir et al., 1978).

Finally, raw milk spoils during storage as a result of enzymatic and microbial activity (Muir et al., 1996). This results in the very alteration of its flavor (Barbano et al., 1991; Deeth, 2006).

2.2. Artificial neural networks

Biology has provided a large amount of information on the functioning of the brain, especially its neurons. This constituted a source of data for mathematicians in order to model this natural system. Mathematicians then tried to reproduce the functioning of the brain by integrating this knowledge of biology into computer programs, and giving them the possibility of learning. Artificial neural networks are currently finding various applications in the fields of science and technology (Ma et al., 2000).

Artificial neural networks have the capability of storing empirical knowledge and making it available for use. The network's treatment abilities (and thus knowledge) will be stored in synaptic weights got through adaptation or learning processes (Brion et al., 2002; Fusi, 2005). In this sense, artificial neural networks therefore resemble the brain because knowledge is acquired through learning, but, it stored this knowledge in the connections (Graves, 2013; Bouharati et al., 2018).

The principle of the artificial neuron can be simplified in figure 1. We can consider this neuron as an operator (or a processor element) which receives several inputs and provides an output only when the sum exceeds a certain internal threshold. The weighted inputs do the

evaluation of the output. Mathematically, this can be modeled by the following equations: Each input of the system is associated with a mathematical coefficient like the synaptic weight at the level of natural neurons.

$$Y = f(\sum_{j=1}^{n} w_j x_j - f(s))$$

Where:

xj : are the input vectors

Wj : are the synaptic weight vectors.

The term (x_0 .w_0) represents the value of the internal threshold which must be exceeded for neuron activation.

f(s): represents the activation function

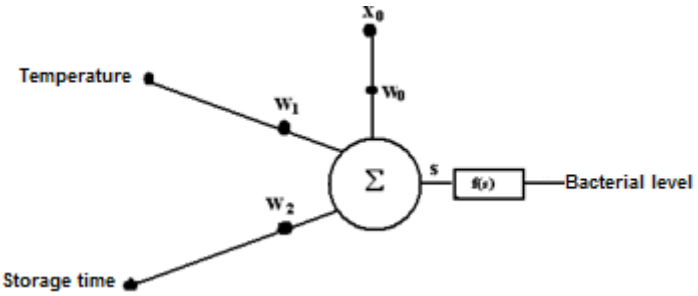

Figure 1. Structure of a neural network with (2) inputs and one output

Our proposed system is illustrated in figure 2. The built system makes the correspondence between the two inputs space which expresses the temperature and the storage duration of the milk and the output space which represents the quality of milk as a bacterial number.

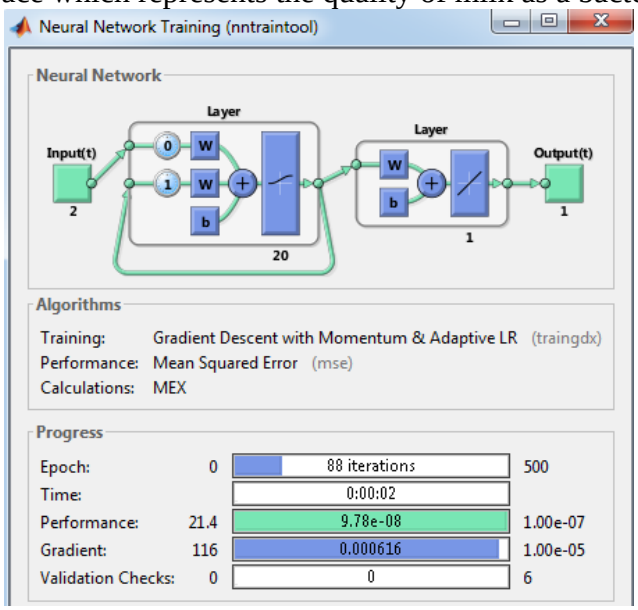

Figure 2. Structure of a neural network with (2) inputs and one output *(generated by Matlab, 2016a)*

Input variables

Each variable is numerically expressed

• Temperature is coded in three levels (2; 4; 6°C)

• Storage time is coded in three durations (12; 24; 48h)

Output variables:

• The bacterial number is represented by its logarithm

Learning the neural network

Actual values of input and output variables are delivered. A transfer function is created for each value (input-output). With each variation, an adjustment of the function takes place by the variation of the weights (in the form of mathematical coefficients). During this learning phase, the function is adjusted to its minimum error. In our case, we fixed 500 iterations in the correction loop. It should be noted that at only 88 iterations, the fit is achieved with an error of $9.7.10^{-8}$. Figure 3.

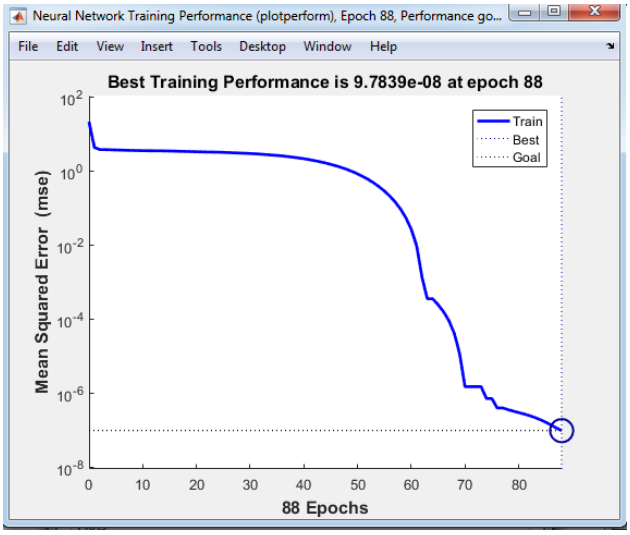

Figure 3. Error correction during learning *(generated by Matlab, 2016a)*

3. Result and discussion

From the actual values resulting from the quality control analyses carried out, the relationship between these factors and the quality of the milk is established. During the learning of the network, the function is adjusted to its minimum error, which makes it possible to predict the quality of the milk. By randomly introducing temperature and storage time values, the system allows the automatic reading of the expected bacterial count. This gives an idea of the quality of the milk and therefore makes it possible to adjust these factors for better quality.

The evolution of bacterial numbers is not linear as a function of time. Several other factors are involved in the duration, including the addition of fresh milk to milk already stored, hence the need for this analysis.

The transfer function that links the inputs to the output is of sigmoid type. During the learning phase, the least squares technique performs error correction. With a fitting gradient of 6.1.10-4, we find we reached the minimum error only at 88 loop iterations. During the learning phase, we note that at the 60th and 70th iterations; the rate is the highest. This rate is 0.04 at the 88th iteration. (Figure 4), input test values are introduced. The result in bacterial number at the exit merges perfectly.

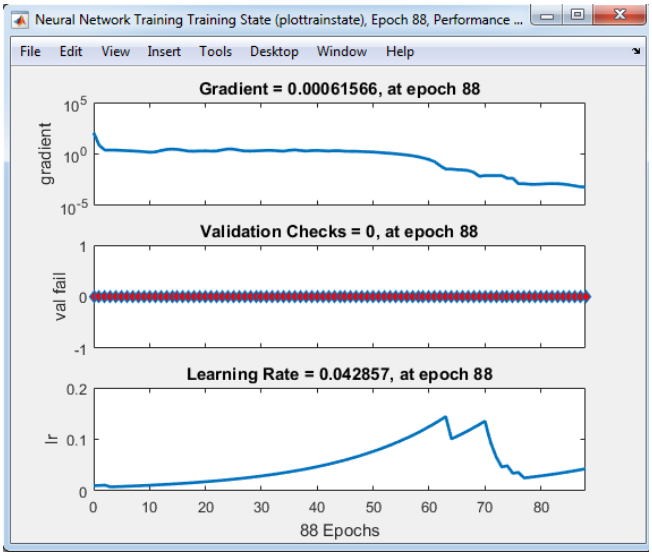

Figure 4. Fit gradient, learning rate and function validation *(generated by Matlab, 2016a)*

3. Conclusion

Considering the complexity of the system of bacterial growth in milk as a function of various factors, in particular the temperature and the duration of storage, the artificial neural network system proves to be adequate.

This study takes into consideration only the two factors of temperature and duration of storage. However, bacterial growth can be a function of other factors, such as feed season, cow's diet, breed of cow, milking conditions, and so forth. The system is very complex. For the sake of simplification, this study is limited and remains to be extended to other parameters. Whatever the complexity of the data is impossible to analyze by classical mathematical techniques, artificial neural networks give better results in the complexity management of the data.

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Impact of Digitization and Big Data on Romanian Companies - a Qualitative Research

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Abstract
Our general investigation is about the degree of understanding of the new economy, "digital economy", in Romanian companies, with a narrow focus on understanding the needs and uses of Big Data technology. We used a structured interview with 30 owners, CEO, IT managers, and Marketing Managers from Romanian companies and applied descriptive statistics on all data collected and content analysis on the open answers. The key findings are that Romanian managers are half aware that the digital economy will dramatically reshape business models and increase the competition. However, around one-third of them don't understand the basic concept of digitalization, digital transformation, and the need for digitalization. The most important department the Romanian managers think they should digitalize is marketing, but some big businesses don't think and want digitalization. One of the main obstacles to the digitalization of Romanian companies is the lack of human resources with proven expertise in the field. In order of Industry 4.0 components, only a few implements and use CRM, ERP, or another form of integration with customers or suppliers. Big Data is poorly known and used, but where it is used, it is a strong competitive advantage. Romanian managers do not understand how public institutions are digitalized to help the private initiative. They expect the public institutions to take the initiative to start digitalization in all society, including companies. The implications of our findings are extremely different from other public studies that suggest Romanian companies are strong in digital transformation. Our study shows the need for further investigation, if not measures to increase support for the digitalization of Romanian companies to remain/become competitive. Our findings are that only a few managers/companies are aware of the new digital economy with increased competition, and the initiative of digitalization, even in the private sector, should be from public institutions.

Keywords: Digitalization, digital transformation, Big Data, Romanian companies, Public Sector.

JEL classification: M31.

1. The new business context – Digital

The new business context is the digital one. The Digital economy is the new economic environment where economic activity is based on data that is an effect of billions of Internet and Intranet connections between people, people and machines and between machines as Deloitte research describes. Also, the same research finds that the main principle of the digital economy is hyperconnectivity which means the dramatic increasing in interconnections between people, machines, organizations, based on Internet, internet of things (IoT) and mobile technologies (Milosik and Evans, n.a.).

The digital economy and the new society, the Network Society, are on the rise and changing even the conventional notions about how businesses and organizations are structured and interact and how consumers purchase services, goods, or information (Verhoef, Kooge and Walk, 2016). From Uber to Amazon, from Facebook to Alibaba, new business models have emerged and succeeded over old taxi services, groceries, and even the social and cultural events industry. New products and services arise, even new utility, new culture and organizational software and processes became the new reality (Amadoa et al., 2018).

In this new context, successful companies became more and more data-driven, more technological, and more marketing and communication organizations in the sense of market-oriented organizations. The new competitive advantage arises from technology, technology innovation, and how companies use data (De Luca et al., 2021).

2. Digitalization, Industry 4.0 and Big Data

Digitalization or digital transformation means not only the migration of data from analog to digital but the use of data in an innovative way using new technologies. We understand digitalization as how businesses and more general societies work in the new societal organization: "The Network Society" (Ciocodeică et al., 2022).

Inside the digital transformation of companies, Industry 4.0 is a concept best described as a fight for competitive advantage based on new digital technologies. New digital technologies implies new skills, new kind of lidership, new organizational design and new organizational values. Industry 4.0 companies are more connected and collaborative inside and outside their frontiers with people, other organizations and generally speaking with all stakeholders and share with all of them information, data and knowledge (Froot et al., 2022). The main Industry 4.0 components are: ”System Integration, Big Data and Analytics, Cloud Computing, Simulation, Additive Manufacturing, Cyber-Physical System, Cybersecurity, Collaborative Robotics, and Augmented Reality” (Brodny and Tutak, 2022, p. 2), as can be seen in Figure 1.

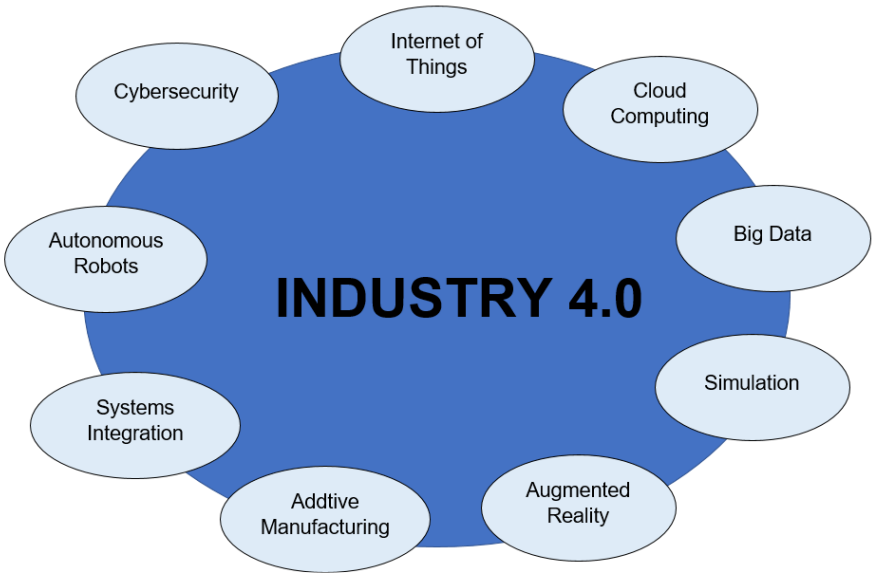


Fig 1 ***Industry 4.0 components,*** Source Analyzing the Level of Digitalization among the Enterprises of the European Union Member States and Their Impact on Economic Growth, by Brodny, and Tutak, 2022

Industry 4.0 describes the new technologies that became competitive advantages for companies in the digital economy and Network Society. Inside Industry 4.0, one special

technology is Big Data which "refers to techniques, technologies, systems, practices, methodologies, and applications related to the acquisition, storage, integration, analysis, and deployment of massive amounts of structured and unstructured data to support business decision making" (Suoniemi et al., 2020). In fact, Big Data is the one technology able to make accurate forecasts and predictions because of the amount of data. The main statistical idea behind Big Data technology is that the reality of an researched universe is better when the sample studied is greater, and Big Data means access and analize of tremendous amont of data (Mikalef et al., 2019).

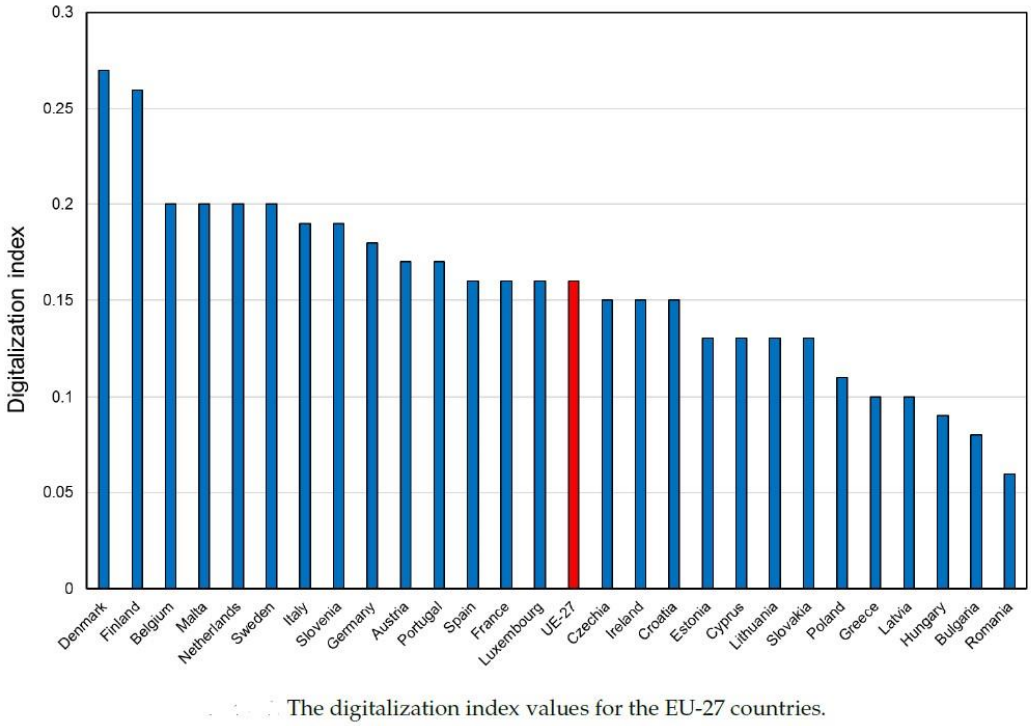
Big data is usually associated with the three Vs: volume, velocity, and variety. Later on, two additional V's are added to emphasize the importance of collecting, analyzing, and extracting meaningful knowledge: veracity and value. "Big data are described as large-volume, high-velocity, and heterogeneous data that emerge from the increasing digitization of transactions, interactions, communications, and everyday experiences" (McAfee and Brynjolfsson, 2012). The amount of data this new technology uses came from the digital shift which includes proliferation of mobile devices, Internet of Things (which means that devices, not only humans, are producing data) and social media, which has made everyone a broadcaster and thus data producer (Demchenko, n.a.).

Big Data technology has become a competitive advantage for companies. "The combination of big data technologies and greater access to consumer data through web-based channels generates customer insights not previously possible. Big data insights thus put managers in a superior position to design timely, automated, and highly personalized product and service offerings, with human expertise remaining critical but in a supporting role" (Suoniemi et al., 2020).

3. EU and Romania Digitalization levels

In order to set our research hypothesis, we have to do secondary research about digitalization and Big Data technologies in the EU, including Romania. The research of Brodny and Tutak (2022) shows that the level of uses for Industry 4.0 in Romania is the last in EU countries, despite some business and institutional successes like UiPath or Governmental Cloud project, see Figure 2.

Also, the Digital Economy and Society index, a composite index provided by EU institutions, is a visualization tool that "allows you to explore some open datasets through the interactive creation of charts and tables. The indicators have been selected to support the EU Digital Single Market policies and to monitor the digital progress of the European Economy and Society, through annual reports, a DESI index, and country factsheets" (DESI, 2021) show us the position of Romania based on four indicators: human capital (experts and level of digital literacy of general population), connectivity (speed of internet connections countrywide), integration of digital technology (companies), digital public services (implementation of digital technologies in public institutions). As we can see in Figure 3, Romania has good internet connectivity, but human capital and digital public services are poor.



The digitalization index values for the EU-27 countries.

Fig. 2 The digitalization index value for EU-27 Countries, *Analyzing the Level of Digitalization among the Enterprises of the European Union Member States and Their Impact on Economic Growth*, by Brodny and Tutak, 2022

	Romania		EU
	rank	score	score
DESI 2021	27	32.9	50.7

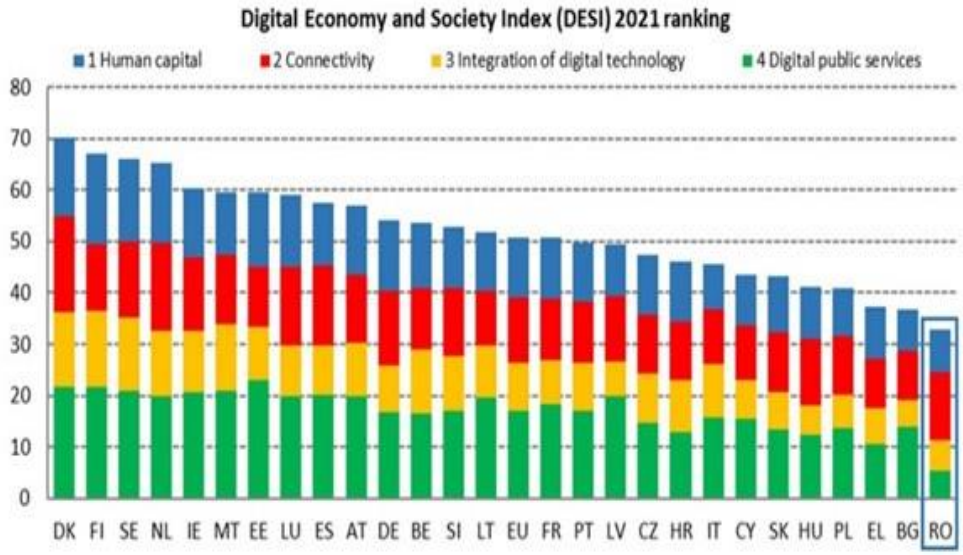


Fig. 3 Digital Economy and Society index (DESI) 2021 ranking, Source: Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2021 Romania

The level of digitalization in Romania is the lowest in EU and COVID-19 Pandemic did not change too much in this respect even the expectation were that digitalization advance because of social distance policies. More than that, the EU index for digital economy and society for 2022 shows that Romania is still the last among all EU countries, see Figure 4.

	România		UE
	loc	punctaj	punctaj
DESI 2022	27	30,6	52,3

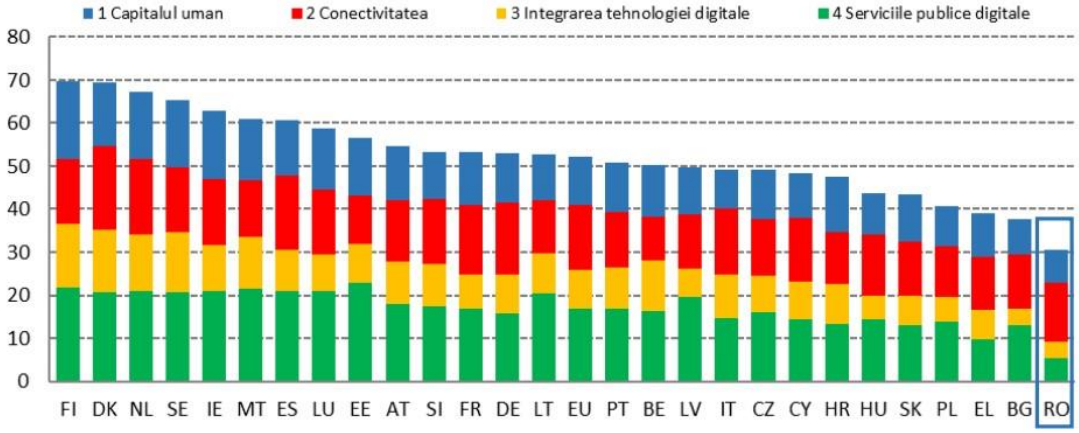


Fig. 4 Digital Economy and Society index (DESI) 2022 ranking, Source Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2022 Romania

The most important digital deficit in Romania is, as we can see in EU data and it is show in Figure 3 and 4, digital public services. This include integration and access to public datasets, in other words democratization of access to public data.

More than a policy or political and institutional will, digitalization means a deeper understanding and new regulations for data and information access.

4. Methodology

We applied a questionnaire at the management level of 30 big Romanian companies that already have implemented Industry 4.0 tools.

We define four levels of digitalization for companies:

Level I – the company does not have internet, e-mail, website, or do not use e-banking.

Level II – the company uses e-mail and e-banking and has a website.

Level III – the company uses digital marketing tools (social networks), and has implemented digital communication mechanisms with customers, and e-commerce.

Level IV – the company is a data-driven company (we have Big Data, CRM, ERP etc.).

We use descriptive statistics to process our data.

Even if there is a small number (30) in the sample, we consider that, because Big Data implementation is not common in the Romanian business environment, the results are accurate and give a real indication about all companies with Big Data implementation in Romania.

5. Research findings and conclusions

Most companies are in the digitalization process (most of them at levels III & IV from our research model). The digitalization started for getting info to run the companies based on data that show a high level of understanding of the digital economy. Marketing is the key department. Many digital transformation initiatives in most companies started from the marketing department.

The future needs for digitalization are coming from the finance department and general management as well, to align & synchronize all the departments in line with the market requirements. More and more Romanian companies understand and apply the concept of a market-oriented company. Most companies are fully aware of how important Big Data management is for the business, but they require help & support. Big Data seems too complicated for companies and should be better explained and understood to become a source of competitive advantage for Romanian companies.

The Romanian state is playing an important role as well, but even itself needs help & support for a digital transformation process to integrate all the processes and interactions between the companies and between society and public institutions. A better public data integration and access will boost Big Data implementation in private sector. One of the interesting things we discover is that digitalization *per se* is not the "silver bullet" for development of companies. Digitalization generate more efficiency and efficacity few years after implementation or integration of digital technology in some conditions. We find that one of constant condition is the belief in and strong support of company leadership for new technological approach.

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Factors Driving Customer Satisfaction for Shopee Malaysia

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Abstract
The Covid-19 pandemic caused the e-commerce adoption rate to skyrocket. Shopee Malaysia was among the few e-commerce platforms that have managed to ride the wave of the e-commerce boom in Malaysia. This study aimed to examine the factors that drive customer satisfaction for Shopee Malaysia, including customer understanding, customer service, and technology. The study used a quantitative method through an online survey. In total, 164 participants took part in this research. The results indicate that although customer understanding contributes significantly towards customer service, it does not influence customer satisfaction unless through customer service or technology. Customer service and technology are significant predictors of customer satisfaction. Additionally, technology is a strong mediator for the relationships of customer understanding and customer service with customer satisfaction. Therefore, Shopee Malaysia needs to improve the areas of its e-commerce platform technology since it significantly impacts customer satisfaction. It is hoped that Shopee Malaysia and other interested parties can benefit from the results of this study.

Keywords: customer satisfaction, customer understanding, customer service, technology, Shopee Malaysia.

JEL classification: L81, M31.

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has spurred the growth of e-commerce as everyone had to quarantine themselves at home during the lockdowns. E-commerce enables people to purchase products or services via the Internet either due to convenience or out of necessity (Lim et al., 2021). During the pandemic, many businesses had to move online to survive. With the advent of the Internet, customers are more demanding because they have access to an infinite amount of information and are now more knowledgeable. In the past, customers had to go to individual stores to obtain the prices of products so they could compare them, but now, all the data are available online. As information is easily accessible, it becomes challenging to please customers. The study context is Shopee, a leading e-commerce company in Malaysia (hereafter known as "Shopee Malaysia"). When the economy reopened in 2022, Shopee Malaysia maintained its top spot as the platform of choice at 79% (Lie, 2022). Amidst solid competition in the e-commerce business landscape, customer satisfaction is vital for any e-commerce platforms to achieve success (Lim et al., 2021). Thus, Shopee Malaysia has to find ways to exceed customer expectations continually. Therefore, this study intends to examine how customer understanding, customer service, and technology drive customer satisfaction for Shopee Malaysia.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Formulation

2.1. Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction allows businesses to assess how effective their products or services can fulfil the needs of their customers (Guo et al., 2012). According to Lim et al. (2021), satisfied customers will likely become loyal customers with repurchase intentions. Moreover, Guo et al. (2012) highlight three main factors influencing customer satisfaction towards online shopping, namely, technology (security, privacy, usability, and site design), shopping (trust,

trustworthiness, convenience, and delivery), and product (product customization, product value, and merchandising). Although there were recent studies on customer satisfaction in Shopee Malaysia (Lim et al., 2021; Yo et al., 2021), other factors that influence customer satisfaction may exist; thus, this study was conducted to fill the research gap.

2.2. The Relationship of Customer Understanding, Customer Service and Customer Satisfaction

Customer understanding involves learning everything about the customer, which includes their needs, wants, pain points, and current experiences. Based on a systematic review of customer management, Dibley et al. (2016) recommend that companies need to enhance their customer engagement and interaction as customers are becoming more demanding. To achieve this, understanding the customer is needed, and the appropriateness of products in customers' lives is equally important. E-commerce platforms that provide a broader selection of products motivate customers to shop online frequently. As a result, their image as a more reliable source increases compared to physical stores that only provide limited product choices (Boardman and McCormick, 2018; Mallapragada et al., 2016; Tata et al., 2021). Customer understanding also means that e-commerce platforms can provide personalized service as they know the customers' purchasing history and payment preferences, thus avoiding information overload (Lv et al., 2017; Tzavlopoulos et al., 2019). Good customer service will improve customer satisfaction and generate new future sales through positive customer recommendations (Lim et al., 2021). With the justification provided on customer understanding, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1 – Customer understanding significantly influences customer service of Shopee Malaysia

H2 – Customer understanding significantly influences customer satisfaction of Shopee Malaysia.

2.3. The Relationship of Customer Service and Customer Satisfaction

Customer service in e-commerce is the act of assisting new or existing online customers when they encounter doubts or challenges throughout the customer journey. The customer service teams of e-commerce platforms strive hard to provide a smooth digital shopping experience for their customers (Tata et al., 2021). This experience means that e-commerce platforms' customers should be able to shop anytime and anywhere they like (Boardman and McCormick, 2018). Customer service also enables e-commerce platforms to understand their customers' requirements, solve their issues or problems, and anticipate their future needs (Tata et al., 2021; Tong et al., 2020). Good customer service based on understanding customers' requirements and having a responsive feedback system enhances customer satisfaction. Additionally, prompt delivery is a critical value-added service that customers demand (Riley and Klein, 2021). Providing an exceptional delivery service is crucial for e-commerce platforms because customers can easily switch from one platform to another with a single click if they experience late product delivery (Handoko, 2016). As such, the following hypothesis is posited:

H3 – Customer service significantly influences customer satisfaction of Shopee Malaysia.

2.4. The Relationship of Technology and Customer Satisfaction

In the current competitive business landscape, e-commerce platforms primarily depend on technology to achieve customer satisfaction. Past studies have provided evidence that accessibility, easy navigation and fast page loading speed contribute towards the overall

customer satisfaction with e-commerce platforms. For instance, with technology, e-commerce platforms should be able to ensure that their website is easily accessible 24/7 throughout the year (Sanyal, 2019). It should also be easy to navigate with a simple and convenient clicking process (Camilleri, 2021) and with a fast website page loading speed to avoid making customers feel frustrated or impatient while browsing the website (Kiew et al., 2021). As such, technology should provide customers with the convenience of using any of the e-commerce platform. Based on the points mentioned above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4 – Technology significantly influences customer satisfaction of Shopee Malaysia.

2.5. The Indirect Relationships

Customer understanding has a relationship with customer service (Lim et al., 2021), in which it is through customer service that customer understanding will affect customer satisfaction. With a good understanding of their customers' choices and preferences, e-commerce platforms can personalize their customer service to provide their customers with the convenience, recommendation and prompt delivery of products. To further strengthen customer service, e-commerce platforms need to ensure that their technology enables customers to easily access and navigate the online platforms with quick loading time. In this study, technology focuses on the functionality of the website. Also, through technology, understanding customers' product choices and preferences can lead to better personalization of customers' buying experiences, thus, increasing customer satisfaction (Bastani et al., 2021). As such, the following hypotheses are assumed:

H5 – Customer service mediates the relationship between customer understanding and customer satisfaction of Shopee Malaysia.

H6 – Technology mediates the relationship between customer service and customer satisfaction of Shopee Malaysia.

H7 – Technology mediates the relationship between customer understanding and customer satisfaction of Shopee Malaysia.

3. Research Methodology

The study used a quantitative approach via a self-administered online survey. The target population for this study included those who had previously purchased a product/service from Shopee Malaysia. Non-probability sampling method was chosen for this research as it was a more straightforward and cheaper method to collect data due to the time and resource limitations. In total, there were 164 survey respondents. Table 1 shows the characteristics of these respondents. Slightly more females than males responded at 57%; the majority are from the age range of 18 – 30 years old at 60%, with an educational level of degree or higher at 56%, and with a balanced mix of students (45%) and working adults (44%).

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Item		Number of Respondent	Percentage of sample (%)
Gender	Male	70	43
	Female	94	57
Age Range	18-20	10	6
	21-30	88	54
	31-40	26	15
	31-50	16	10
	51-60	10	6
	61 and above	14	9
Education Level	SPM/O-Levels	8	5
	STPM/Pre-U	18	11
	Diploma/Adv. Diploma	46	28

	Degree	72	44
	Postgraduate Degree	20	12
Employment Status	Student	74	45
	Employee	54	33
	Self-employed	10	6
	Employer/Owner	8	5
	Unemployed	6	4
	Retiree	12	7

All variables in the research framework were measured in a five-point Likert scale questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Data were analyzed with SmartPLS version 3.3.8, a partial least square structural equation modelling statistical processing software, as it is more appropriate for a small sample size.

4. Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for all the variables examined in the study. Interpretation of the mean values followed the classification of 1.00 to 2.33 as low, 2.34 to 3.66 as medium and 3.67 to 5.00 as high (Selvanathan et al., 2020). All of the mean values were more than 3.66; thus, respondents seemed satisfied with Shopee Malaysia.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Measurement Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation of Mean Value
Customer Understanding	CU1 – product variety	4.256	0.921	High
	CU2 – payment method	4.171	1.102	High
	CU3 – purchase history	3.890	1.000	High
Customer Service	CSv1 – convenience	4.232	0.966	High
	CSv2 – enquiry handling	3.805	0.943	High
	CSv3 – delivery speed	3.890	0.937	High
Technology	TG1 – accessibility	4.220	0.937	High
	TG2 – ease of navigation	4.220	1.000	High
	TG3 – loading speed	3.927	1.021	High
Customer Satisfaction	CS1 – recommendation	4.146	1.049	High
	CS2 – satisfaction	4.085	0.953	High
	CS3 – future intention	4.268	0.911	High

The research framework was first assessed for reliability and validity. Table 3 indicates that the measurement items have internal consistency reliability as the composite reliability values are above the recommended value of 0.708 (Hair et al., 2017). There is convergent validity as the factor loadings and average variance extracted are all above the required value of 0.6 and 0.5, respectively (Hair et al., 2017). There is also discriminant validity between the variables as the individual variable's outer loadings are higher than its cross-loadings with the other variables (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 3. Measurement Model Results

Variable	Item	Reliability	Convergent Validity		Discriminant Validity (FL)			
		CR	Loading Range	AVE	1	2	3	4
1. Customer Understanding	CU1-CU3	0.782	0.627-0.835	0.548	0.740			
2. Customer Service	CSv1-CSv3	0.880	0.823-0.866	0.711	0.691	0.843		
3. Technology	TG1-TG3	0.916	0.869-0.892	0.784	0.615	0.740	0.886	
4. Customer Satisfaction	CS1-CS3	0.954	0.916-0.961	0.873	0.634	0.717	0.808	0.934

Note: CR – Composite Reliability; AVE – Average Variance Extracted; FL – Fornell-Larcker criterion

The research framework was then assessed for its predictive capabilities and the relationships of the constructs within the framework. A bootstrapping of 5000 subsamples was used to analyze the path coefficients, loadings and weights following Hair et al. (2017). Table 4 shows that out of seven hypotheses, only one (H2) was rejected as the relationship between customer understanding and customer satisfaction was not significant ($\beta = 0.148$, $p > 0.05$). All other hypotheses (H1, H3, H4, H5, H6, H7) were accepted.

Table 4. Structural Model Results

Relationship	Std. β	t-value	Result
H1: Customer Understanding → Customer Service	0.692	13.38**	Accepted
H2: Customer Understanding → Customer Satisfaction	0.148	1.923	Rejected
H3: Customer Service → Customer Satisfaction	0.185	2.415*	Accepted
H4: Technology → Customer Satisfaction	0.580	7.082**	Accepted
H5: Customer Understanding → Customer Service → Customer Satisfaction	0.128	2.393* [CI: 0.029, 0.242]	Accepted
H6: Customer Service → Technology → Customer Satisfaction	0.349	4.967** [CI: 0.223, 0.500]	Accepted
H7: Customer Understanding → Technology → Customer Satisfaction	0.116	2.661** [CI: 0.033, 0.208]	Accepted

Note: **p<0.01; *p<0.05

The findings provided evidence that customer understanding is a significant predictor of customer service; customer service and technology are significant predictors of customer satisfaction; and customer understanding and customer service are significant predictors of technology, explaining 47.9%, 69.5%, and 56.8% of the variances respectively (see Figure 1).

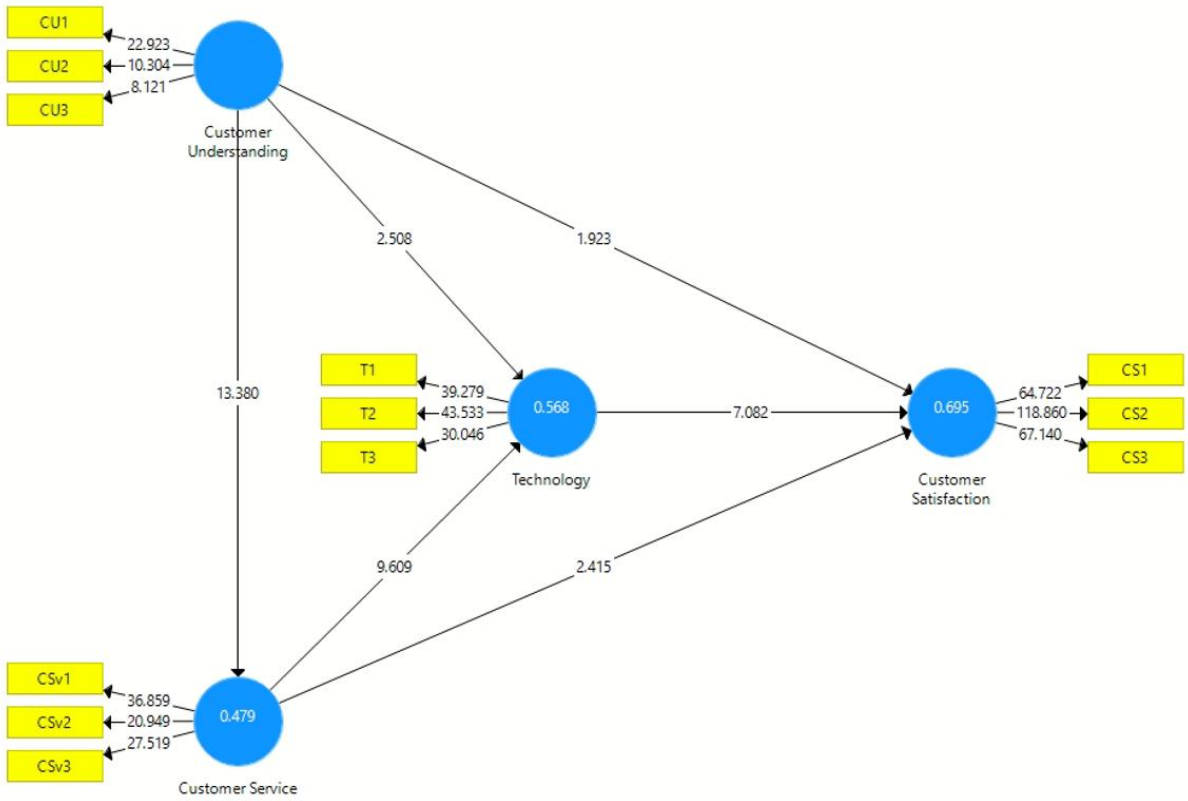

Figure 1. Structural Model Results

5. Conclusion

The study aimed to examine the factors driving customer satisfaction for Shopee Malaysia. Unlike customer service and technology, customer understanding did not have a significant relationship with customer satisfaction. It means that customer understanding on its own does not have any effect on customer satisfaction. However, as acknowledged by Lim et al. (2021), customer understanding is critical for any e-commerce platform to provide good service to its customers. Good customer service, in turn, will strengthen customer relationships and satisfaction (Boardman and McCormick, 2018; Tata et al., 2021).

In the case of Shopee Malaysia, it is only through customer service or technology that customer understanding can significantly influence customer satisfaction. This finding indicates that customer understanding plays an important role. By understanding their customers' preferences of product choice, payment method, and purchase history, Shopee Malaysia's customer service and the technology used for their e-commerce platform can become more effective (Bastani et al., 2021). It means that when Shopee Malaysia focuses on its customers' specific needs, Shopee Malaysia can increase customer satisfaction.

The study's finding also highlights that technology will further strengthen the influence of customer understanding and customer service on customer satisfaction. Similar to past studies of Sanyal (2019), Camilleri (2021), and Kiew et al. (2021), technology is crucial for e-commerce platforms.

Shopee Malaysia should ensure that its e-commerce platform performs well, not only from the functionality of its website but also in how it enables Shopee Malaysia to understand its customers and provide better service for them. Shopee Malaysia should also adopt data analytics. Amazon is an excellent example of data analytics technology to provide spot-on product recommendations for its customers (Camilleri, 2021). Customer data such as previous searches, buying habits, and total expenditure can be easily obtained and tracked.

Lastly, Shopee Malaysia should further improve their enquiry handling and delivery speed. Their e-commerce platform could leverage technology to feature product information that is timely and accurate regarding prices, delivery costs, and approximate shipping and delivery dates/times (Camilleri, 2021; Sanyal, 2019). Also, Shopee Malaysia should invest in technology to ensure the fast-loading speed of their e-commerce platform to attain continual customer satisfaction and future repurchase intention (Kiew et al., 2021).

7. Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, although the number of respondents met the required sampling size, it was skewed towards students within the age range of 18 – 30 years old, which may not represent the entire population well. Since this study targeted Shopee Malaysia's customers, future research could consider people from other places. Secondly, not all customer satisfaction factors could be examined for Shopee Malaysia due to time constraint. Future research could look into studying other factors that may affect the customer satisfaction of Shopee Malaysia. Other factors may include privacy/security, loyalty, social media influence, and post-purchase behavior.

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Service Quality and Patient Satisfaction in Public Hospitals in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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Abstract
This study sought to determine how patient satisfaction in Akwa Ibom State public hospitals was impacted by service quality parameters. A survey research design was utilized for this investigation. Data for this study was obtained through a well-structured questionnaire and was administered to 389 in-patients in 9 selected public hospitals within the 3 senatorial districts of Akwa Ibom State. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis was utilized to analyze the data. The findings of the study showed that there was a weak relationship between responsiveness in service delivery, assurance in service delivery, tangibility in service delivery, empathy and patient satisfaction. However, there was a strong relationship between reliability in service delivery and patient satisfaction. It was suggested that additional study be done using other service quality parameters to examine their influence on patient satisfaction in both private and public hospitals in Akwa Ibom State.

Keywords: Service quality, Proxies of service quality, Patient satisfaction.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

Service quality in the healthcare sector is a measure of how the healthcare facilities deliver their services compared to the expectations of their patronized patients. Public hospitals in Akwa Ibom State are continuously searching for methods to alter the way patients are cared for through quality improvement programmes (Al-Damen, 2017). The demand for healthcare services is constantly on the rise (Schempf and Kaufman, 2011), and researchers have supported the fact that the closer one is to healthcare services, the more accessible they will become (Hiscock, 2008). The use of service quality to improve satisfaction has received a lot of attention in service marketing literature in Nigeria and all over the world (Rust and Oliver, 1994; Osho and Ogunode, 2016). Most recently, Brady and Cronin (2010) believe perceived satisfaction mediate the link between the offerings (services) and patient satisfaction.

In the literature on satisfaction, an expectation is seen as a consumer‘s forecast of what is likely to occur during an exchange process (Kotler, 2000). When a patient is dissatisfied, he/she will respond differently, and if the response is negative, he/she may try to reduce their patronage loyalty. Patient satisfaction is increased by service quality underpinnings such as service reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Nonetheless, Studies on service quality or quality of service are frequently discussed and analyzed in marketing literature, and

as a result, the construct has attracted more interest in recent times. However, preliminary studies show that there has not been enough investigation into patient satisfaction and service quality as it relates to healthcare institutions in Nigeria. In Akwa Ibom State public hospitals, little or no such research has been conducted. Hence, these lapses therefore prompted the researchers to carry out an investigation to ascertain the extent to which the five adopted underpinnings of service quality developed by Parasuraman et al., (1988), which is commonly referred to as the SERVQUAL Model, affect the satisfaction of patients in Akwa Ibom State public hospitals. By adopting empirical methodologies, the findings from this investigation will be of huge benefit to government, private and public health institutions clinics and other relevant stakeholders in improving and understanding patient's behavior and satisfaction.

Aims of the research

The precise aim of this research was to assess the influence of service quality on patient satisfaction in public hospitals in Akwa Ibom State. The following specific goals are set:

i. To examine the link between responsiveness in service delivery and patient satisfaction.
ii. To determine the correlation between assurance and patient satisfaction.
iii. To investigate the relationship between tangibility and patient satisfaction.
iv. To ascertain the connection between empathy and patient satisfaction.
v. To examine the association between reliability and patient satisfaction.

Hypotheses of the study

Ho_1**:** In Akwa Ibom State public hospitals, there is no statistically significant relationship between the patient satisfaction and the responsiveness of care delivery.

Ho_2**:** The assurance of quality service delivery and patient satisfaction do not significantly correlate.

Ho_3**:** There is no significant relationship between tangibility in service delivery and patient satisfaction.

Ho_4**:** There is no demonstrable relationship between empathy in the provision of service and patient satisfaction.

Ho_5**:** There is no association between reliability in service delivery and patient satisfaction.

2. Literature review

Overview of service quality

Service is any act or performance that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything and can be related to a physical product or not (Kotler and Keller 2012). Kotler and Keller (2009) indicated the characteristics of services to include intangibility, perishability, inseparability, and variability. However, Anyanwu (2000) added other characteristics of service to include lack of market concept, non-portability and lack of standardization.

Contrarily, one of the things that consumers look for in an offer is quality (Solomon, 2009). The ability of a product or services offered by an organization to meet very clear demands of consumers is referred to as quality, which includes all features and characteristics that contributes to that capability (Kotler et al., 2002). Service quality refers to the extent to which patients' perceptions of service meet and exceed their expectations. According to Gronroos (2000), service quality is the outcome of an evaluation process in which the consumer compares and contrasts his/her intentions with the service they have received. Bitner and Mohr (1994) define it as "the consumer's overall perception of the relative infirmity or superiority of

the organization and its services", whereas Cronin and Taylor (1994) assume service quality as a form of attitude representing a long-run overall evaluation. Parasuranman, Zenithal and Berry (1985) define service quality as differences between expectations for service performance and perceptions of a service.

Proxies of service quality in public hospitals

To assess the caliber of services offered, several scholars have proposed numerous service quality dimensions. These include time, consistency, completeness, courtesy, accuracy, responsiveness and accessibility (Evans and Lindsay, 2001). Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in 1988 conceptualized the SERVQUAL model, namely: tangibility (T), reliability (R), responsiveness (R), assurance (A) and empathy (E). Researchers have acknowledged that these five-dimensional constructs from Parasuraman et al., are the most widely used and applied parameters to measure satisfaction, loyalty, and patronage (McCabe, Rosenbaum and Jennifer, 2007).

Tangibility: Tangibility refers to the quality of physical facilities and the modern-looking equipment available to make the hospital service a delightful experience with the neatness and outward show of doctors, nurses and assistants who are providing the services. Patients expect that the atmospheric should be appealing (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). The patient wants information materials provided to be well composed and attractive. The frontline personnel providing services should be neat, clean, and well dressed and have a pleasing appearance (Ching-I Teng and Chen, 2006).

Reliability: relates to the capability of offering the precise services that is requested in accordance with a specified specification and condition that is dependable and accurate. In the healthcare sector, reliability means accuracy of medical reports, accuracy of medical expenses, staff respect for patient privacy and provision of adequate information about a patient's medical condition. According to Zeithaml (2000), reliability is the capacity to carry out the contracted service with dependability and accuracy or to adhere to the terms of the agreement. The patients want accurate and on-time billings. The patients expect accurate and accessible records of their service use (Bassey, Awara and Anyadighibe, 2019; Pollack, 2000).

Responsiveness: This relate to the willingness of the healthcare provider to assist and facilitate the patients by offering them prompt services. Response time to patient demands is determined by responsiveness. Gerpott, Rams and Schindler (2001) stresses the need for timely service delivery to hospital patients. Pollack, (2000) noted that the hospitals desk officers are expected to respond proactively to the needs of their patients and on time. Hospital patients are keen to get a prompt response from the employees regarding their complaints and enquiries.

Assurance: this component of service is concerned with the professionalism, civility and security among employees. Assurance refers to the employee's ability or service providers to project trust and confidence on consumers (Zeithaml et al., 2006). Andaleeb (2008) observed that assurance may not be as significant in comparison to other industries where the risk is greater and the outcome of using the service is uncertain. He came to a conclusion that assurance, for instance, is a crucial element for clients when evaluating a hospital or a surgeon before an operation. Assurance is about knowledge, skills and expertise of the employees involved in delivering services and the ability to create trust and confidence among the patients.

Empathy: Lee, Khong and Ghista, (2006) sees empathy as treating the patient (consumers) as unique individuals. It is defined as the tender, personalized care the hospitals provide their patients (Zeithaml et al., 2006). Like the other elements, the significance of this factor varies from organisation to organisation. Empathy has been found to be more appropriate and important in enhancing service quality in industries where building relationships with patients or clients ensures the firm's survival as opposed to transaction marketing (Andaleeb

and Conway, 2006). Empathy necessitates placing patient over and above everything else during the course of staff interaction.

Concept of patient satisfaction

When patient's expectations are met or exceeded during the lifespan of a healthcare service, they are said to be satisfied with the health facility (Kevin, 1995). Only in relation to an individual's expectations, wants, or desire can satisfaction be measured. It is a relative concept: any product or service that satisfactorily fulfils one consumer expectations may leave another consumer unsatisfied (fall short of their expectations). When a service feature or the service itself is judged to have produced an adequate amount of consumption-related fulfillment, the patient is satisfied (Etuk, Usani and Udoh, 2022). In healthcare sector, patients are patients, thus, satisfaction is a tool to evaluate the success of services delivered by healthcare facilities. Although, patients are the focus of healthcare institutions, but, administrators pay less attention to patients in developing countries. Satisfaction is a major outcome of marketing activity whereby it serves as a link between the various stages of consumer buying behaviour (Jamal and Nasser, 2002).

Theoretical framework

The underpinning theory for this study is the Theory of Assimilation-Contrast (Sherif and Hovland, 1961). The theory was suggested as another way of explaining the relationships between variables within the disconfirmation model. According to this paradigm, the size of the performance gap between what was expected and what was really delivered determines how satisfied patient's are. In general, consumers wander between acceptance and rejection areas based on their perceptions. According to the assimilation contrast theory, patients have a propensity to assimilate or modify disparities in how they perceive the performance of a healthcare service in order to bring it up to the level of their prior expectations, but only if the difference is relatively modest. A significant contrast between perceived performance and expectations produces contrast effects, and the tendency of the consumer is to make the perceived difference bigger. When there is a perceived gap between expectations and the performance of service, assimilation contrast may be present. This theory tries to illustrate the fact that both the assimilation and the contrast theory paradigms have applicability in the study of patient satisfaction.

Empirical framework

Timothy, Ode and Richard (2014) conducted a study on service quality and customer satisfaction in Nigeria mobile telephones in Jos. The result of their study indicated that the two constructs (service quality and customer satisfaction) were undeniably independent but closely related. The findings reveal an increase in one is likely to cause a change in another.

Dung Chus, Nguyen and Sin Khong (2017) did a paper to measure healthcare quality in big public hospital in Vietnam. The objective of their study was to measure the dimension of service quality (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility) on patient satisfaction. Findings from their paper revealed that the dimensions of services quality measured are strongly affected by patient satisfaction.

Rehaman and Husnain (2018) conducted a study to investigate the impact of service quality on patient satisfaction in the private health sector located in district Sargodha, Pakistan. The results of the study reveal that the service quality dimensions affect the satisfaction of patient in Sargodha district Pakistan. Lovelock and Wright, (2002) carried out a study on the influence of service quality on patient satisfaction: evidence from public hospitals in Jordan. The aim of this study was to rate and analyze satisfaction level with the level of service

delivered. Findings from the study shows that the level of service quality delivered had a significant impact on Patient Satisfaction.

In a study published in 2016, Ojo explored the connection between service quality and satisfaction of telecommunication consumers in Nigeria, with focus on MTN in Osun State. The study found a positive correlation between the quality of service delivered and telecommunication consumers. Joshua (2013) conducted a study on service quality and patients' satisfaction with healthcare delivery of a public university hospital in Ghana. His study was a cross- sectional survey that adopted the convenience sampling technique to select 400 out-patients in a public university hospital in Ghana. The findings revealed gaps across all the SERVQUAL dimensions and it was indicated that patient's satisfaction was best explained by responsiveness, followed by empathy, perceived assurance tangibility and perceived reliability.

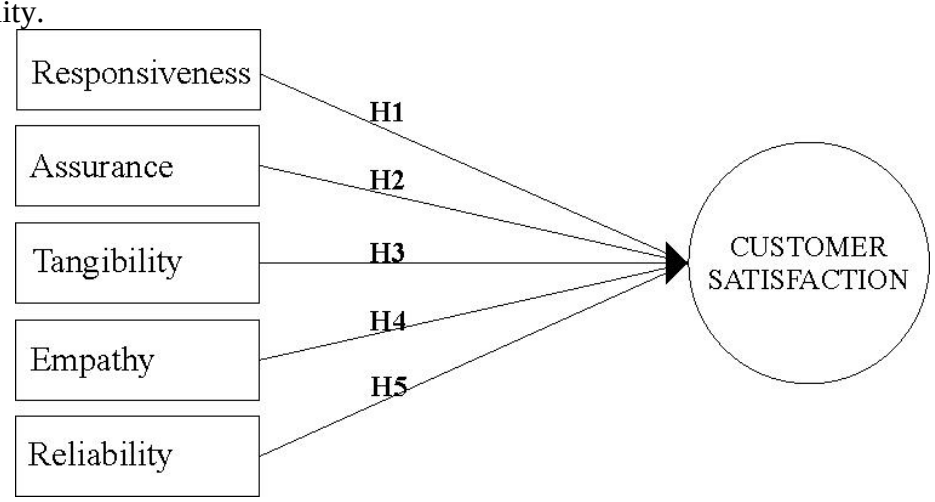

***Figure 1**: Conceptualized framework*
Source: Researchers compilation (2022).

3. Methodology

The researchers adopted a survey research technique that allowed the collection of primary data from respondents. The instrument used in data collection was the research questionnaire rated on a modified Likert scale, i.e., strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree with values of 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively. Since the research relied on primary data, the survey instrument was adapted from existing studies. The statements measuring tangibility, reliability and responsiveness (statements 1-3; 4-6 and 7-9) were adapted from Bassey et al., (2019), while the statements measuring assurance and empathy (10-12; 13-15) were adapted from Dung-Chu et al., (2016). The instrument was checked for content and face validity, while reliability testing was done using Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients to test the internal consistency of the instrument. Akwa Ibom State served as the study area. The researchers focused on nine (9) selected public hospitals in the three (3) senatorial districts, namely Eket, Ikot Ekpene and Uyo senatorial districts of Akwa Ibom State.

The population of the study comprises all in-patients who patronize the selected nine public hospitals in the three senatorial districts with chronic diseases and a few with emergency cases. The population was deemed to be known, as it was drawn from records of Akwa Ibom State Hospital Management Board, Annual Report (2021). These records showed a total of 13,814 in-patients were available as at the time of the study. Being a known population, the Taro Yamane formula was utilized to agree on the sample size of 389. A purposive sampling technique was used in selecting the respondents in the 9 selected public hospitals with the assistance of a 3-member team of enumerators. At 0.05% level of significance, Pearson Product Moment correlation analysis was used to test the hypotheses. The null hypothesis was rejected as the probability value was less than 0.05 ($p<0.05$).

4. Analysis and interpretation

Test of hypotheses

Ho_1: There is no positive significant relationship between responsiveness in service delivery and patient satisfaction at public hospitals in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 1. Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis between Responsiveness and Patient Satisfaction

		Respon	Pat_Sat
Respon	Pearson Correlation	1	0.276**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.0001
	N	397	397
Pat Sat	Pearson Correlation	0.276**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.0001	
	N	397	397

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The correlation (r) value of 0.276 in the Table 1 indicates that there is a weak relationship between responsiveness and patient satisfaction. Additionally, because the p-value (0.0001) is lesser than the criterion of significance ($\alpha = 0.05$), we therefore, reject Ho_1 and come to the conclusion that responsiveness and patient satisfaction are significantly correlated in Akwa Ibom State public hospitals.

Ho_2: There is no positive significant relationship between assurance in service delivery and patient satisfaction at public hospitals in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 2. Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis between Assurance and Patient Satisfaction

		Assurance	Pat_Sat
Assurance	Pearson Correlation	1	0.387**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.0001
	N	397	397
Pat Sat	Pearson Correlation	0.387**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.0001	
	N	397	397

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

According to the aforementioned Table 2, the correlation coefficient value of 0.376 shows a weak connection between assurance and patient satisfaction. Furthermore, since the p-value (0.0001) is lower than the level of significance ($\alpha = 0.05$), we reject Ho_2 and conclude that there is a significant connection between assurance and patient satisfaction in the public hospitals under study.

Ho_3: There is no positive significant relationship between tangibility in service delivery and patient satisfaction at public hospitals in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 3. Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis between tangibility and Patient satisfaction

		Tangibility	Pat_Sat
Tangibility	Pearson Correlation	1	0.363**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.0001
	N	397	397
Pat Sat	Pearson Correlation	0.363**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.0001	
	N	397	397

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The correlation (r) value of 0.363 indicates that there is a tenuous relationship between tangibility and patient satisfaction. Since the p-value (0.0001) is below the level of significance (0.05), the researchers therefore, rejected Ho_3 and concluded that there is a substantial relationship between tangibility and patient satisfaction in public hospitals in Akwa Ibom State.

Ho_4: Empathy in service delivery has no significant relationship with patient satisfaction.

Table 4. Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis between empathy and patient satisfaction

		Empathy	Pat_Sat
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	1	0.225**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.0001
	N	397	397
Pat Sat	Pearson Correlation	0.225**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.0001	
	N	397	397

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

A weak correlation relationship of 0.225 between empathy in service delivery and patient satisfaction is shown in the Table 4. Also, given the p-value (0.0001) is less than the level of significance (0.05), we reject Ho_4 and conclude that empathy in service delivery has a significant correlation with patient satisfaction in Akwa Ibom State public hospitals.

Ho_5: There is no positive significant relationship between reliability in service delivery and patient satisfaction in Akwa Ibom State public hospitals.

Table 5. Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis between reliability and patient satisfaction

		reliability	Pat Sat
reliability	Pearson Correlation	1	0.507**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.0001
	N	397	397
Pat Sat	Pearson Correlation	0.507**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.0001	
	N	397	397

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

From the Table 5, it can be seen that there is a significant correlation between reliability and patient satisfaction, with a coefficient value of 0.507 indicating a strong relationship. Similarly, because the p-value (0.0001) is less than the threshold of significance (0.05), we reject Ho_5 and come to the conclusion that there is a significant correlation between the independent variable (reliability) and the dependent variable (patient satisfaction) in public hospitals in Akwa Ibom State.

Discussion of findings

Based on the findings and analysis stated above, the following outcomes are explored in relation to the study's goals. The result of the first hypothesis shows that there is a positive but weakly significant relationship between the variables under study, with a correlation (r) = 0.276. This implies that prompt service delivery by healthcare providers to patients will enhance patient satisfaction, patient loyalty and retention. This outcome supports the research and conclusion of Dung Chus *et al.,* (2017); Timothy, *et al*., (2014), Joshua (2013) and Ojo (2016), which indicated that responsiveness, had a favorable impact on patient satisfaction. This means

that patients perceived positively the service of the public hospital staff, and they were satisfied by the services rendered to them.

The second objective was to determine the correlation between service assurance and the satisfaction of in-patients in public hospitals, in Akwa Ibom State. The result posits a positive but weak relationship between assurance in service delivery and patient satisfaction with the correlation (r) value of 0.376. This is an indication of the positive influence of assurance on patient satisfaction. The discovery is consistent with the findings of Dung Chus *et al.,* (2017); Hamza, and Mohd, 2016) and Ojo (2016).

The third objective was to investigate the correlation between tangibility in service delivery and patient satisfaction in public hospitals in Akwa Ibom State. The result of the study shows that there is a positive but weak correlation between the variables under study, with correlation coefficient of 0.363. This finding is in agreement with the works of Rehaman and Husnain (2018); Timothy, Ode and Richard (2014), Joshua (2013), Ojo (2016) and Lovelock and Wright 2002). In their study at various locations they discovered that service quality has a positive impact on patient satisfaction, with tangibility quality having the greatest positive significant relationship on patient satisfaction.

The result of the fourth objective was to ascertain whether empathy in service delivery has a correlation with patient satisfaction in public hospitals in Akwa Ibom State. The study proved that there exists correlation, though weak, between both variables, with correlation (r) value of 0.225. This shows that being friendly, caring, and giving individual attention to patients' problems, understanding one's specific needs, and being interested in a patient's health can increase patients' preference for patronizing the hospitals of their choice. This finding is in agreement with the works of Rehaman and Husnain (2018); Lovelock and Wright (2002) and Timothy, Ode and Richard (2014).

The result of the fifth objective, which was to examine the relationship between reliability in service delivery and patient satisfaction in Akwa Ibom State, showed that there exists a positive, significant and strong relationship between the independent and dependent variables with a correlation (r) value of 0.507. This indicates that for the hospital management to keep their promise of doing things on time, solving patient problems quickly, willingness to listen carefully to patients and keeping records accurately can significantly increase patient satisfaction in terms of recommending the healthcare facility to others. This finding backs up the findings of Timothy, Ode and Richard (2014), Rehaman and Husnain (2018); Joshua (2013) and Ojo (2016) who found that reliability in service delivery have a positive significant relationship on customer satisfaction. In their study, they discovered that service quality has a significant and positive impact on satisfaction of consumers, with tangibility having the greatest positive significant relationship on customer satisfaction.

From the findings of the study, it was adequately revealed that there exists a significant relationship between each of the five (5) proxies of service quality (responsiveness, assurance, tangibility, empathy, and reliability) and patient satisfaction. The result of the correlation(r) had shown that the variable, reliability had a major role to play in creating overall satisfaction in the minds of the patients, followed by assurance, tangibility, responsiveness and empathy, which was rated the least importance of all.

1. Conclusion, limitations and recommendations

Conclusion

From the study conducted, it is obvious that responsiveness, assurance, tangibility, empathy, and reliability are the key variables in the choice of a particular hospital. The SERVQUAL model is indeed the ideal parameter. Furthermore, the researchers also came to the conclusion that a planned and ongoing process of learning about and correcting patients

views of service delivery can help public health care institutions provide better quality service. This study has been able to establish a substantial link between the underpinnings of service quality and patient satisfaction in the nine (9) selected public hospitals in Akwa Ibom State. In spite of the insightful empirical methodology and conclusion of this study, this study was faced with various limitations. First, the study focused solely on in-patients with critical diseases and a few emergency cases in Akwa Ibom State public hospitals covering the three senatorial districts of the state; hence, the scope of the data was limited because it left out in-patients in the private hospitals within the same senatorial districts under study. Also, this study centered only on the SERVQUAL parameters opined by Parasuraman in 1988. This study did not consider other dimensions that inevitable affect patient satisfaction. Finally, the utilization of purposive sampling constitutes another limitation because it is often viewed as non-random and subjective in nature. Despite the various limitations mentioned, this study is special and distinctive because it creates a framework for future research on how in-patients are affected by hospitals service delivery.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions have been made:

1. Health practitioners should at all time adopt practices that conform to internal standard and best practices vis-à-vis health service delivery.
2. Health facilities operators should operate a 24-hour-service on a daily basis in a bid to increase convenience for patients.
3. Considering the significance of tangibles as a service quality dimension, old hospital structures should be rehabilitated and given a facelift to signal some psychological healing to patients. Similarly, the satisfaction of patients will be enhanced with the availability of modern health equipment especially for laboratory test and scan.
4. A conscientious effort must be made by public hospitals to frequently wash and change hospital materials like bed sheets, and curtains. Health administrators should also continuously ensure that hospital staff always appears neat before coming into contact with patients since this conveys a message of high professionalism.
5. The State Hospital Management Board should ensure health service managers develop modern systems (computerized systems) to ensure accuracy, speed and precision in the management of patient records at records units to avoid missing cards.

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Efficiency of Online Advertising Strategies on Romanian Social Networking Websites

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Abstract
Social networking websites have constituted the backbone of online marketing campaigns for the last decade. The advertising budgets migrated to online tools steadily since the end of the last century, and for the past decade they became the preferred tool for most marketing campaigns around the world. Romania's market had caught a little late on this trend, but for the last few years marketers have tried to make up for lost time and transferred most of their budgets in online, and advertising on social networking websites constituted the bulk of their efforts. The aim of our study is to determine the impact of online advertising in social networking websites on Romanian consumers and to determine if there are any significant differences to related regional markets.

Keywords: Online Marketing, Social Networking Websites, Online Advertising.

JEL classification: M21, M31.

1. Introduction

In Romania, online advertising has developed a lot, so more and more companies have been determined to focus and invest in various marketing campaigns and find the best strategies to reach out the users quickly and efficiently. Consumers have been open to this phenomenon, but it should be noted that there is a difference between attractive ads that persuade the user to act (buy the product, go to the site for more information, distribute, etc.) and annoying ones (ads which appear even after they are closed by that person because they are not of interest).

Social media has revolutionized the way business people market. More and more companies are abandoning traditional marketing due to high costs. To promote a product or service, it is much easier to use social media advertising, precisely because it gives companies the opportunity to convey the information they want to a well-defined audience in a personalized way.

Companies focus on using social media, especially as they can get valuable information about customers, so they can stimulate demand, creating offers according to the wishes of users. Social media advertising is considered effective, precisely because it offers people personalized spots according to the preferences of the target audience.

The study presented shows how the most used tool for online advertising, social media, is effective in influencing decisions to buy a product or service. This research also aims to determine which is the social media channel, where users get in touch with most commercials.

2. Online advertising

Efficiency is a widely used concept in business. Linguistically, efficiency is defined according to Explanatory Romanian dictionary as "the ratio between the results obtained in economic activity and the efforts made", but from an economic point of view it has many more meanings. A common definition of economic efficiency is "the lowest unit cost provided" (Levihn, 2016, p.1155).

Among the oldest methods of promoting sales are advertising spots that were placed outdoors, such as billboards, various flyers through which companies promoted themselves (Orzan et al., 2013). Over time, this industry began to develop more and more and to take on a new look. Many companies are beginning to realize that a business becomes profitable if they choose to make commercials to persuade people to try the product by example, using influential people who are in the company's values (Evans, 2008, pp. 359-340).

Through online advertising, companies can transmit, using as an online communication channel, useful information about the company, services and products, but also about the events they will participate in, thus creating a permanent and personalized connection with the user (Grosseck, G., 2006, p.243). In carrying out an online advertising strategy on social media, the target audience must always be taken into account, because this is the only way to create a clear, concise message that reaches the target audience.

In recent years, online advertising has revolutionized the way companies send messages to people, especially since the use of the Internet brings many opportunities that marketers need to take advantage of. Today, the emphasis is on personalized commercials, and this is based on a complex infrastructure composed of a variety of intermediate entities and technologies (Jimenz et al., 2016).

There are divided opinions about the effectiveness of online advertising. Most companies believe that online advertising is no longer a fad, but rather a necessity and that it is very important, and if it is used properly, it benefits both companies and customers. In 2019, according to a report made by certain specialists in the field, it shows that advertising spots accounted for a percentage of 50.3% of total advertising spending on average, in 2021 reaching an increase of about 6 percent compared to 2019. Due to the fact that online advertising is on the rise, more and more companies have migrated to the online environment, and an example of an internationally known company that has invested over 500,000 euros in such advertising between 2016-2017 is Coca Cola, a company that also operates on the Romanian beverage market. Nivea HairCare is another company that, through conversion, transforms users into buyers, investing approximately 400,000 euros in online advertising. However, there are small exceptions that consider that online advertising is not as effective for their field of activity, as they rely on traditional advertising because the target audience does not constantly use the Internet. Protector & Gamble has reduced online advertising budgets by up to $ 200,000 million, investing money in the traditional one (Ewijk et al., 2021, pp.272-273).

2.1. Social media advertising

Some authors define social media as the totality of web-based applications, offering the possibility to content users (Hamouda, 2018, pp. 426-429), other authors define social media as a group of applications based on the Internet, having ideological and technological elements of Web 2.0, allowing the exchange of content between people (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010 quoted in Ratten, 2020, p.61).

Social networks are used worldwide. According to a study by Arora and Predmore (2013, pp.117-119), over 86% of people aged between 18 and 19 currently have an account on a social network, 72% of those aged between 30 and 49, about 50% of those between the ages of 50 and 64 and about 34% of all people over the age of 65 have an active account on a social

network. If in the beginning the role of these social networks was to spend free time with loved ones, in the meantime it has become an effective communication tool for companies as well (Sporea et al. 2020).

Some time ago, companies communicated with their customers through traditional advertising, using flyers, newspapers, television or various magazines through which they wanted to capture their attention. Today, social media is considered the most popular marketing tool that can create long-term relationships between users and companies (Ruane and Wallace, 2013 quoted in Logrosen and Grunden, 2014).

According to a study conducted in 2015, it is found that companies have spent about $ 24 billion worldwide on social media advertising, and 65% have been used in advertising on Facebook. They use social networks as a bridge between themselves and users because through them they gather valuable information about their customers, which can be used for the benefit of companies, thus managing to satisfy the wishes of consumers, personalizing online communications (Aguire et al., 2016 , p.3).

With the increase in the number of users on social media, according to a study, impulsive purchases on the Internet have also increased, so that about two thirds of the European population buy their products and services online (Stoica et al., 2015), being largely influenced by advertisements on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. However, although the number of people acting has increased, people are very informed about what they are buying, documenting themselves before making a decision (Argoncillo and Orus, 2018).

What is interesting about social media platforms is that they have different characteristics, and companies can publish information in different forms. For example, on Facebook, information is usually published to reach the general public, where people can comment, share or react, instead on platforms such as Instagram, you should use attractive content, funny, as short as possible, which in a few seconds to say the story behind the commercial (Deller, 2019, pp.151-152).

Social media is considered the virtuous world of people, becoming a central element in people's lives, sometimes more important than real life (Pentescu et al., 2014). The number of users on these platforms is constantly growing, an example of a platform that has increased a lot is Facebook, in 2008 it had an active user number of 69 million worldwide, so that in 2019 it will increase to 2,45 billion users (Ruggieri et al, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the TikTok platform developed in China had a big growth. In January 2018, 54 million active accounts were opened, and 3 years later, in 2021, the number of users reached 689 million. What led to this huge increase was the COVID-19 pandemic because people were forced by circumstances to find different leisure activities during quarantine (Mashiyane, 2020, p.22).

LinkedIn is a platform where companies meet with individuals for different reasons, the most predominant being the professional reason. More than 443 million members exist on this platform worldwide. Through this platform a strong connection is established, and users can find a job much easier and can get in direct contact with the desired company to find out the necessary information (Mocchi, Bissola and Imperatori, 2017, pp.110-112). This platform is used to promote vacancies and to promote the values of companies, being a simple method of connection.

YouTube is the most famous video content platform in the world. Over 78% of all people, according to a study conducted by Tafesse (2020, oo 1689-1691) choose to watch a video clip weekly. That is why many companies have started to invest in this time of promotion to increase their notoriety, especially since it is considered one of the most effective tools that helps to grow the digital marketing segment (Bishop, 2018).

Twitter is another application widely used by both companies and users, so due to its features, you can send hashtags of keywords to identify a topic of interest in a timely manner. Depending on the person's searches, this platform is constantly updated with personalized content Grasso, 2022, pp.77-80).

2.2. Online advertising on social media and companies

Social media is the most popular communication channel of the 21st century. The number of users increasing from 2019 with a percentage of 9% annually. The impact that the use of online advertising on social media has had can be seen in the fact that there have been large increases in online advertising spending. According to a study, it is noted that if in 2018 about 73.8 billion US dollars were invested worldwide, by 2023 the value is expected to reach about 186.7 billion dollars (Bitiktas and Tuna, 2020).

In 2020, according to another study, it is found that the activity in the online environment of a company and the visibility it manages to establish with users or investors, is an important factor in its activity. The migration of companies in the online environment is constantly rising, and their favorite platforms are Facebook and Instagram, where there is a large part of those who can become potential customers, regardless of the field in which the company operates (Hassan and Wang, 2021, pp. 26-27).

When establishing a marketing strategy that the company must apply, the social network where the information must be transmitted is always taken into account, because depending on the message they want to convey, the best is taken into account. alternative. According to some authors, social networks are considered as hybrid elements of the promotion mix. It is much easier to identify potential customers, because using the personalization method, advertising spots mostly reach people interested in the products or services offered by the company (Virtanenm Bjork and Sjostrom, 2017, pp. 468-471).

The rapid development of social media has led more and more companies to change the way they approach people (Chae, Mattaney and Sheu, 2020, pp. 74-75). One advantage of using the internet is that it is a cheap and fast method. Overcoming time and space barriers in maintaining a stable and long-term connection with both current and potential customers (Yee et. al, 2021, pp.517-519).

In Romania, it is found, according to a study made by EY Romania, that out of the total number of companies operating on the Romanian market, approximately 78% use social networks as a promotional tool, and of these, about 50% use this method of approximately 3 years. In the preferences of Romanian companies when it comes to posting on platforms, the most used are Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn. Multinationals repeatedly use social media. It is worth mentioning that although in Romania approximately 78% of the total active companies use social networks, the level is much lower than the global one, which is almost 100%.

The revolution of the online market is the merit of the Amazon company, developed in 1995 and which has come to sell any type of product at this moment. The model approached by the company is an example for all companies that want to assert themselves in the online market. Amazon managed something considered impossible for that time, namely, to remove the barriers of real interaction, giving customers a personalized and unique experience even if they were not face to face with them (Kotler and Armstrong, 2012, p.494).

Kaufland is another example of a company that, through social platforms, maintains a permanent connection with users, posting various photos, contests, current news, videos every day to arouse customers' curiosity.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a record use of social media channels. Many people had to find a way to spend their free time in isolation or quarantine, so they began to

spend more and more time in the digital world, with companies taking advantage of this opportunity to post more. More than 58% of teens and about 48% of adults, according to a study, spent much more time during the pandemic than before the pandemic began (Vranken, Brimmel, Vandenbosch and Trekels, 2022).

3. Research methodology

The purpose of this research is to demonstrate the effectiveness of social media as an online advertising tool used by Romanian companies in influencing the consumer's behaviour of purchasing a product or service promoted by these methods.

The main objectives of the research

Objective 1: Determine the percentage of respondents who trust social media advertising.

Objective 2: Determine the main elements that attract the consumer to an advertisement on social media.

Objective 3: Determine the main factors that can influence them in the decision to purchase a product or service in social media.

Objective 4: Determine the effectiveness of promoting companies in social media.

Objective 5: Determine the channels in the online environment where respondents observe advertising spots most often.

Objective 6: Product categories that regularly appear on social media.

Objective 7: Determine the reasons why companies choose as a way to promote social media.

The questionnaire is the basic tool for the research to be a successful and distinctive one. The questionnaire consists of a set of questions, planned to produce the data necessary to achieve the objectives of a marketing study (Cătoiu, 2009, p.327). The questionnaire was filled in by more than 100 people

4. Analysis and interpretation of results

The questionnaire was transmitted through the online environment, with the help of the http://www.isondaje.ro/create/ website, between May 15 and May 26, 2022, and the collected data were analysed personally. It could be completed at any time by respondents and shared online, on social networks: Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and E-mail.

In order to systematize the information in the questionnaire, the recommendations for filling in, the way of creating the graphs and tables, but also the encoding of the questions, important in the process of gathering the information, were used.

Following the dissipation of the questionnaire, it was filled in by 110 people.

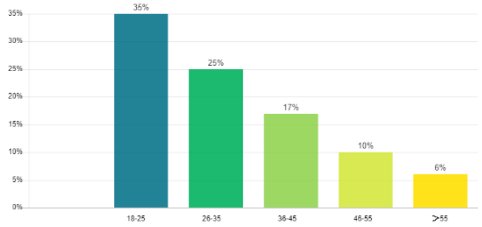

Figure 1. Age of respondents

As shown in Figure 1, most of the people who participated in the questionnaire were between 18-25 years old, female, mostly from urban areas, the last school graduated being in proportion of 38.5% high school and 36.5% Faculty - Bachelor cycle, having the occupation employee, with an income between 1501- 3900 lei.

Out of the total number of respondents, 41% have complete confidence in the products and services promoted in the online environment and only 2% do not agree with the fact that they are trustworthy.

29% of the total respondents consider that the main element that attracts them in the construction of an advertisement is the emotion transmitted by it, on the second place being with a percentage of 24% the content, on the third place, with a percentage of 18% the text of the ad, and on the last place the scenario used in its realization.

According to the answers received from the interviewed persons, it can be seen that 93% of them consider that companies use the Internet as a method of promotion in order to better promote themselves, to increase visibility and notoriety in front of current and potential customers

35% of the total respondents most often notice the advertisements for the products / services offered by the companies operating on the Romanian market on Facebook and only 19% say that they notice such advertisements on TikTok.

It can be seen in Table 1 that there is a balance between the categories of products for which advertising is most often received, which proves that at the moment most Romanian companies regardless of the field of activity are present in the online environment. 20% of all respondents receive advertisements for clothing products, 17% for hygiene products, 15% for food products and only 14% for accessories and jewelry. Note that these ads also appear based on people's searches. For example, if someone searched for an evening dress on Google, as soon as they entered one of the social networks they will receive advertising for similar products).

Table 1. Express your opinion on the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
In the last month I purchased at least one product as a result of the influence produced by online advertising on social media?	2.9	3.8	9.6	39.4	44.2
I'm bothered by the ad spots that appear while watching a video on Youtube	3.8	9.6	27.9	28.8	29.8
The ads that appear on social media platforms are useful	1	1	25	34.6	38.5
I like it when I get ads based on previous searches	3.8	5.8	26.9	33.7	29.8

Online advertising turns out to be very effective because 44% of all respondents say they are in total agreement with the fact that they have purchased at least one product in the last month, influenced by social media advertisements, and only 7% say they disagree with this statement.

59% of all respondents say that they don’t when bothered by the ad spots that appear while watching a video on Youtube. Over 50% of all respondents agree that the ads that appear on different online platforms from Romanian companies are useful because they find out useful information about what the campaign wants to implement, about the offers or about the next contests to be organized. Of the total respondents, most of them believe that social media advertising is useful if it is based on their previous searches.

There is a balance between the answers obtained from the 104 respondents, 25% consider that companies choose the method of promotion in the online environment to increase sales, 24% say they choose this method for the referee of the public, 19% for notoriety, 18% for the

fact that it is a means of fast communication and 15% for transmitting concise information about the services and products sold.

Table 2. Express your opinion on the following statements

Question		Where do you most often notice advertising spots for the products / services offered by the companies operating on the Romanian market?				
	Variants	Facebook	Instagram	TikTok	YouTube	Total
In which product categories do you most often receive advertisements on social media?	Clothing products	7.0%	4.8%	3.9%	4.5%	20.1%
	Personal hygiene products	5.9%	4.1%	3.3%	3.8%	17.1%
	Food	5.1%	3.5%	2.8%	3.3%	14.8%
	Electronics and home appliances	6.2%	4.3%	3.4%	4.0%	17.8%
	Beauty products	5.3%	3.7%	3.0%	3.5%	15.5%
	Accessories and jewelry	5.0%	3.6%	2.7%	3.2%	14.5%
	Others	0.1%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.3%
	Total	34.6%	23.9%	19.3%	22.2%	100%

As a result, it can be observed in Table 2 that most of the respondents who answered the question "What categories of products do you most often receive advertising spots?", answered the question "Where do you most often notice advertisements for the products / services offered by companies operating on the Romanian market" that Facebook and Instagram are the main social media channels where they notice advertising spots, regardless of the product category.

Conclusion

Online advertising remains a very important topic in the reign of marketing, especially since the number of companies in Romania is increasing. They have several competitors and must find a way to differentiate themselves in front of consumers, using different types of campaigns focused on promoting products and services in the online environment. Their attention is directed to how the consumer behaves in society, but especially on his habits, desires and intentions, especially since they are constantly changing.

Through the research carried out, we have achieved the purpose of the paper, that of determining the efficiency of the use of online advertising tools in social media by companies in Romania and all hypotheses have been validated following the processing of data obtained from respondents.

What has made online advertising successful in Romania is the increase in the number of people who have access to the Internet, but also the willingness of Romanians in general to make online purchases. This trend has also been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of which the quarantine measures imposed by the Romanian Government offered no alternative other than the purchase of basic products (food and medicines).

The study found that most people are influenced by online advertising and that it matters a lot to them that an advertising spot conveys strong emotions, has quality content and is relevant to the product / service promoted. I recommend companies to use influencers in their advertising spots that have the same values as the company, so that the message is transmitted in an easier way to the user. I also noticed that for people the emotional part matters more and that even if they do not want a product or service, they purchase it if it conveys an emotion. All companies must keep a long-term connection with the customer and provide them with a unique experience every time, so it is recommended that companies send customers personalized offers based on purchases made by them and gifts on different occasions to turn them into loyal customers.

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Issues About Marketing Journals' Special Issues

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Abstract
A special issue (SI) of an academic journal is a collection of articles on a specific research topic or theme, guest-edited by experts in the field. These SIs are becoming increasingly popular among marketing journals. Surprisingly, this group includes the discipline's top-tier and top journals. But, what are the consequences of the profusion of SIs, particularly in marketing's most prestigious/reputable journals? What are the disadvantages of SIs' new incursion, and sometimes even dominance? In this paper, the author investigates the SIs published over the last five years (i.e., 2018-2022) in marketing's top and top-tier journals. The aim of doing so is to draw attention to SI-related issues such as space allocation, intellect left to rot, command economy of ideas, over-fragmentation/specialization of marketing, and publication ethics.

Keywords: Special issues; marketing journals; issues; publishing ethics.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

Already in 2003, Baumgartner and Pieters (2003, p.123) described marketing journals as products that evolve in a rapidly growing market. In their article on faculty perceptions of marketing journals, Hult et al. (2009, p.1) stated that "[e]ach journal fills a role in a marketplace where 'publish or perish' in journals is increasingly becoming a norm". Based on data from Cabells' Scholarly Analytics, Moussa (2021a) estimated the size of the marketing journals market to be over 1,100 publication venues.

For over a decade, an act of monitoring the market of marketing journals has been undertaken. That market is worth watching because it is very dynamic and responsive to the needs of the times: New journals are constantly being launched (e.g., *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* was launched in 2015) while others have ceased to exist (e.g., *Journal of Marketing Behavior* published its fourth and final volume in 2020); some journals have changed their titles in order to gain a new status and identity (e.g., *Journal of Marketing Channels* was re-titled *Journal of Inter-Organizational Relationships* as of 2021) while others have merged (e.g., *Journal of Database Marketing and Customer Relationship Management* merged with *Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing* to form, in 2013, the *Journal of Marketing Analytics*); Some academic associations have distanced themselves from journals (e.g., The European Marketing Academy has separated itself from the *Journal of Marketing Behaviour*) while others have acquired some (e.g., The American Marketing Association [AMA] has acquired the *Journal of Interactive Marketing* in 2022).

Whilst monitoring the marketing journals market, it can be noticed that many journals, including the discipline's top-tier journals, are increasingly publishing special issues (hereinafter SIs). In this paper, an attempt is made to highlight five issues concerning SIs in marketing journals: space allocation, intellect left to rot, command economy of ideas, over-fragmentation/specialization of marketing, and publication ethics. The ultimate goal is to spark discussion about the use and abuse of SIs.

2. What is a special issue?

Marketing journals, like any other academic journals, publish from time to time SIs. An SI "usually serves the purpose of delving more deeply into a specific topic" (Repiso et al. 2021, p.593). It is a collection of articles that focuses on a specific research topic falling within the scope of a journal. There are also thematic journals where each issue is an SI, but the number of such journals in the marketing discipline is limited (e.g., *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*).

An SI is commonly edited by a guest editor (GE). A GE is "an individual who is appointed to edit a special thematic section [or] an issue of a journal, and who is responsible for the solicitation and initial peer review of its content" (Morris et al., 2013, p.77). Most SIs are developed when a subject expert identifies a demand for an SI in a particular research area and approaches a journal's editor-in-chief to propose an SI (Leigh and Edwards, 2022). Some publishers, like Emerald Publishing (a publisher of 23 marketing journals), require the applicant and aspirant for GE to submit an entire dossier with a description of the topic, how it fits with the scope of the journal, arguments that support the demand for an SI on the topic, and a planning schedule (Emerald Publishing, n.d.).

In most cases, GEs take the place of editors-in-chief for the SIs and have entire autonomy and control over the peer review processes; that is, they appoint reviewers and decide on which papers to accept and which to rejected. For Sage Publishing (2022)—publisher of 12 marketing journals, AMA's fleet of five journals included— a GE "should be an expert on the subject of the special issue and ideally will be sufficiently well-networked internationally to bring top authors and articles to the journal". An SI, according to Sage Publishing (2022), "allows for a specialist to oversee the issue and bring in their contacts and networks".

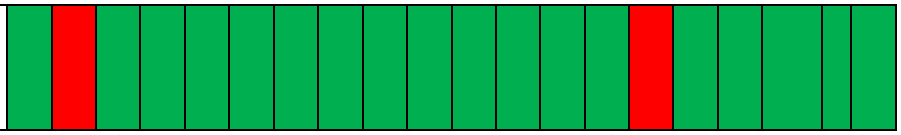
3. Proliferation of special issues in top-tier and top marketing journals

3.1. Special issues in top-tier journals

To get a glimpse at the proliferation of SIs in elite marketing journals in the last five years (i.e., 2018-2022), Table 1 was created. In this table, the six top-tier marketing journals are listed. An SI is represented by a red cell, while a regular issue is represented by a green cell.

Table 1. Special issues in the six top-tier marketing journals

Journal title (Year first published)	Ratio of SI	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Journal of Marketing (1934)[4*]	10%					
Journal of Marketing Research (1964)[4*]	6.67%					
Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (1973)[4*]	23.23%					
Journal of Consumer Research (1974)[4*]	6.67%					
Marketing Science (1982)[4*]	10%					

Journal of Consumer Psychology (1992)[4*]	10%	

Notes: 4* denotes the journal rating ("Journal of Distinction") as per the 2021 Academic Journal Guide of the Chartered Association of Business Schools. These six journals are also included in the Financial Times list of top 50 business and management journals (or FT50 for short).

Of the six top-tier marketing journals, the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (JAMS) is the one with the highest number of published SIs during the last five years (i.e., seven SIs). It is followed by *Journal of Marketing* (JM) and *Marketing Science* (MS) with three SIs each. The JAMS has the highest ratio of SIs to all issues published in the last five years, with 23.23%. Stated differently, nearly a quarter of what was published in JAMS in the last five years appeared in SIs. It is also worth noting that JAMS has published 17 SIs since its inception in 1973. This means that 41.18% of JAMS' SIs were published in the last five years. The same could be said about the *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR) which published two SIs in the last three years. In its entire history, the JCR has only published five SIs.

To get an idea on the likely future trajectory of SIs in the investigated top-tier journals, these journals' websites were examined along with their latest editorials. According to a recent editorial, JM is planning to publish three SIs in its upcoming volumes (see Sridhar et al., 2023, p.5). JMR is planning to publish an SI on "Mitigation in Marketing" in 2023 (see https://www.ama.org/mitigation-in-marketing-call-for-papers-for-a-special-issue-of-the-journal-of-marketing-research/). At the time of writing, on JAMS' official website, there were two calls-for-paper for two forthcoming SIs. The first SI on "Enhancing Customer Engagement" (See https://www.springer.com/journal/11747/updates/19810968) and the second on "Reimagining Marketing Strategy" (see https://www.springer.com/journal/11747/updates/18087648). The JCR is planning to publish a 50th anniversary SI in 2024. To sum up, there will be at least seven SIs to be published in these four top-tier journals in the upcoming couple of years.

3.2. Special issues in top marketing journals

The profusion of SIs is even more pronounced in top (mainstream/generalist) marketing journals. As Table 2 shows, the three top journals that have published the largest number of SIs thus far are, in a decreasing order, the *Journal of Marketing Management* (JMM), the *European Journal of Marketing* (EJM), and the *International Journal of Research in Marketing* (IJRM) with 69, 38, and 20 SIs, respectively. The JMM also has the distinction of publishing the most SIs in the last five years, with 18 SIs. In other words, 26.08% of JMM's SIs were published between 2018 and 2022. This is the result of JMM's recent editorial policy of publishing five double SIs per annum (see https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjmm20/special-issues). According to EJM's digital archive, 423 issues were published between 1967 and 2022. The archive also shows that 38 out of these 423 issues are SIs. Fourteen of these 38 SIs (or 36.84%) were published in the last five years. *Marketing Theory* (MT), the youngest of these five journals, has published 86 issues since its debut in 2001 and up to December 2022. Seventeen of the 86 issues are SIs. In other words, nearly one out of every five issues of MT is an SI. Four out of MT's 17 SIs (i.e., 23.53%) were published in the last five years. To summarize, 23.53% to 36.84% of the SIs in these three top marketing journals appeared between 2018 and 2022. For the IJRM and the *Journal of*

Marketing Theory and Practice, SIs published in the last five years represented 10 to 20% of the total number of SIs published in each of them, respectively.

Table 2. Number of special issues in five top marketing journals

Journal (Year first published)	Total number of SIs	Number of SIs for the 2018-2022 period	Year first SI was published	Year/Journal volume with the highest number of SIs (ratio of SIs to all issues)
Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice (1992)[2]	15	3	1996	1998/Volume 6 (4/4)
Marketing Theory (2001)[3]	17	4	2003	Multiple volumes with 2 out of the 4 issues are SIs
International Journal of Research in Marketing (1984)[4]	20	2	1988	1995/Volume 12 (3/5)
European Journal of Marketing (1967)[3]	38	14	1997	2019/Volume 53 (4/12)
Journal of Marketing Management (1985)[2]	69	18	1994	2017/Volume 33 (6/9)

Notes: Journals are ranked in an increasing order of the number of published SIs. The numbers 4, 3, and 2 in the superscript denote the journal rating as per the 2021 Academic Journal Guide of the Chartered Association of Business Schools.

4. Issues about special issues

The five major issues concerning SIs are explained and discussed in this section.

4.1. Space allocation

The first issue about SIs is space allocation. This issue was raised about a decade-and-a-half ago in our sister discipline (i.e., management) by Priem (2006). Too many SIs, according to Priem (2006, p.385), will "squeeze out quality articles on other topics that otherwise would have appeared in regular issues". The publication of SIs forces out regular submissions of high-quality that might have been accepted otherwise. As shown in Table 1, in JM's volume 85 (i.e., 2021), two of the six issues are SIs. Four of the 12 issues in volume 53 (i.e., 2019) of the EJM are SIs. SIs account for one-third of the content published in these two journals in 2021 and 2019, respectively. Table 1 also shows that three of the six issues in MS' volume 39 (i.e., 2020) are SIs. The same is true for JAMS's volume 48 (i.e., 2020). SIs accounted for half of all publications in these two top-tier journals in 2020. As indicated in Table 2, two-third of what was published in JMM during 2017 (i.e., Volume 33) appeared in SIs. To sum up, SIs accounted for one-third to two-thirds of what was published in these journals in the last five years. The space (i.e., pages) available to publish regular papers is becoming smaller within these journals.

4.2. Intellect left to rot

Calls-for-papers for SIs typically advertise the volume/year in which the SI in question will be published (see https://www.ama.org/journal-of-marketing-call-for-papers-marketing-impact-with-research-driven-apps/). GEs will do everything possible to keep that promise. Papers submitted and accepted for publication in a regular issue may be held in the online queue for many months or even years (as "early view", "online first", or "ahead-of-print" papers) before being assigned volume, issue, and pagination information (Teixeira da Silva, 2022). SIs "can lead to backlogs in the publication of other articles because it interrupts the normal publishing flow" (Repiso et al., 2021, p.595). For example, on 7 December 2022, JM listed 26 "online first articles" and "accepted manuscripts", with one of them published online on 15 July 2022. For the sake of information, JM published 51 articles in 2022. Hence, while JM is soliciting papers for its upcoming three SIs (Sridhar et al., 2023, p.5), nearly half-a-

volume is waiting on the online queue of accepted articles. An article slated for a regular issue is likely to take six months or longer to be published. Authors want to have their accepted papers published as soon as possible. They do not wish to see them perpetually left "in press", in a limbo state (Teixeira da Silva, 2022).

4.3. A command economy of ideas

A journal is a marketplace of ideas (Moorman et al., 2022). A mainstream/generalist journal, like JM, is an open marketplace of ideas. SIs shift the open marketplace of ideas towards a "command economy" of ideas by prioritising certain topics over others (Priem, 2006). To have an idea on the topics that were chosen for focus in the top-tier journals, Table 3 was created.

Table 3. Topics of the SIs published in elite marketing journals between 2018 and 2022

Journal	Year	Volume/issue	Topics of the SIs
JMR	2022	Volume 59, Issue 1	Education and marketing
	2021	Volume 58, Issue 6	Marketing insights from multimedia data
JM	2022	Volume 86, Issue 1	New technologies in marketing
	2021	Volume 85, Issue 3	Better marketing for a better world
	2021	Volume 85, Issue 3	From Marketing Priorities to Research Agendas
JCR	2021	Volume 48, Issue 4	The Future of Brands in a Changing Consumer Marketplace
	2020	Volume 47, Issue 3	Consumer responses to external threats
MS	2020	Volume 39, Issue 6	Marketing Science and field experiments
	2020	Volume 39, Issue 3	Marketing science and health
	2020	Volume 39, Issue 1	Consumer protection
JAMS	2022	Volume 50, Issue 6	Creating customer, firm, and social value through cutting-edge digital technologies
	2021	Volume 49, Issue 4	Innovating in the Digital Economy: Leveraging Technology to Create Value for Consumers and Firms
	2020	Volume 48, issue 5	Managing Business and Innovation in Emerging Markets
	2020	Volume 48, issue 3	Generalizations in Marketing: Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
	2020	Volume 48, issue 1	Technology and Marketing
	2019	Volume 47, Issue 6	Marketing Strategy in Digital, Data-Rich, and Developing Market (D3) Environments
	2019	Volume 47, Issue 1	Consumer Journeys: Developing Consumer-Based Strategy
JCP	2021	Volume 31, Issue 3	Consumer Psychology for the Greater Good
	2018	Volume 28, Issue 2	Marketplace Morality

Though some topics chosen for these SIs seem to be prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, others are recurring themes. To get an idea on these recurring topics, the titles of the 19 SIs published in marketing's top-tier journals were entered into a free online word cloud generator (https://www.jasondavies.com/wordcloud/). A word cloud is a visual representation of text data in which tags are single words, and their relative sizes and colors represent their weight/importance in the context of the considered text (Tellis and Tirunillai, 2021). The purpose of using a word cloud generator is to visualize the most prevalent/frequent words in the thematic names of the SIs under consideration (see e.g., Weinstein, 2022). As could be seen from Figure 1, the words "marketing", "consumer", "digital", "technology", and "technologies" dominate the word cloud. This is quite understandable since five SIs published between 2021 and 2022 in JM (Volume 86, Issue 1), JMR (Volume 58, Issue 6), and JAMS (Volume 48, issue 1; Volume 49, Issue 4; Volume 50, Issue 6) focused on technology, multimedia, and digital data. These same topics were also addressed in seven SIs that appeared in 2019-2022 in IJRM, EJM, and JMM (see Table 4). Thus, according to Tables 3 and 4 as well

as Figure 1, it appears that our top-tier and top journals are prioritizing research on these specific topics at the expense of other more pressing topics (such as the United Nations' 17 Sustainability Development Goals) (Moussa, 2021b). The hype around research about technology, multimedia, digital data is further evidenced by AMA's acquisition, in 2022, of the *Journal of Interactive Marketing* (JIM) (Weingarden, 2022). It's also worth noting that two of JAMS' most recent SIs have nearly identical titles (cf. Issue 4 of Volume 49 and Issue 6 of Volume 50).

Figure 1. Word cloud of the titles of SIs published in marketing's six top-tier journals

Table 4. Special issues on technology, multimedia, and digital data in top and top-tier marketing journals

Journal	Year	Volume/issue	Topics of the SIs
JAMS	2019	Volume 47, Issue 6	Marketing Strategy in Digital, Data-Rich, and Developing Market (D3) Environments
	2020	Volume 48, issue 1	Technology and Marketing
	2021	Volume 49, Issue 4	Innovating in the Digital Economy: Leveraging Technology to Create Value for Consumers and Firms
	2022	Volume 50, Issue 6	Creating customer, firm, and social value through cutting-edge digital technologies
JMR	2021	Volume 58, Issue 6	Marketing insights from multimedia data
JM	2022	Volume 86, Issue 1	New technologies in marketing
EJM	2019	Volume 53, Issue 6	Consumers and Technology in a Changing World
	2019	Volume 53, Issue 9	Engaging Customers in an Evolving Technological Environment
	2020	Volume 54, Issue 3	Computerized Content Analysis Of Online Data - Opportunities For Marketing Scholars And Practitioners
	2022	Volume 56, Issue 6	Artificial intelligence as a market-facing technology
	2022	Volume 56, Issue 10	Understanding prosumer behaviour in the platform ecosystem
IJRM	2019	Volume 36, Issue 3	Marketing Perspectives on Digital Business Models
JMM	2020	Volume 36, Issues 3 to 6	The Future of Technology in Marketing; Utopia or Dystopia?

4.4. The over fragmentation/specialization of marketing

Hunt et al. (2022, p.7), and Eisend (2015, p.24) before them, described the current era of the marketing discipline as being characterized by specialization and fragmentation. They further added that 'academic disciplines without a mainstream, central focus and a strong sense of community have long been recognized to experience significant problems' (Hunt et al., 2022, p.7). SIs, particularly in our top-tier journals, will drive the discipline into ever-narrower subfields. SIs can exacerbate marketing fragmentation, leading to ever more specialized areas

(McKinley, 2007). This will eventually lead to the formation of silos (or compartments) with a small number of like-minded specialized scholars publishing articles by and for themselves.

Take, for instance, the topics related to technology, multimedia, and digital data. They all fall within the scope of such specialized journals as JIM, *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing* (JRIM), and *Electronic Markets* (EM). While each of the three specialized journals mentioned above provides an adequate/decent publication venue, researchers prefer to have their papers published in top-tier journals (Herndon, 2016; Moussa, 2022). Whether it's because of the "publish in elite journals or perish" way of thinking or not, SIs in top-tier journals shift submission flows away from specialized journals and toward the formers. By publishing SIs, top-tier journals are infringing on the territory of these specialized journals, jeopardizing their supply of high-quality submissions. Fearing a lack of good articles to fill the available pages (i.e., white pages fever) (Mowday, 2006), editors of specialized journals have two options: (a) to accept articles of a lesser quality; or (b) to publish SIs on topics that fall within their journals' aims and scopes. The first option could be disastrous for a journal's reputation and image. The second may eventually result in further fragmentation/specialization of the marketing discipline. SIs within specialized journals are indeed becoming commonplace. For instance, the JIM has lately published two SIs, one in 2020 (on "Big Data, Technology-Driven CRM & Artificial Intelligence") and another in 2022 (titled "Examining the Unanticipated Consequences of Interactive Marketing"). SIs could also be found in the latest volumes of JRIM and EM.

4.5. Publication ethics issues about special issues

4.5.1. Lack of publishing transparency

Previous research in other disciplines (e.g., psychology) indicates that papers published in SIs have peer review processes that were completed in too short time frames (see Sala et al., 2017). Article submission and acceptance dates must be made available in order to conduct similar analyses. Unfortunately, only a few marketing journals provide reception and acceptance dates for articles published in them (either in SIs or regular issues). For example, MS is the only journal among the top-six publication outlets that provides this information. Such a lack of transparency regarding article submission/acceptance dates is regrettable because it prevents any independent inspection of the peer review process for SIs' articles.

4.5.2. Fake peer review

For a not-to-be-named marketing journal, the author was able to perform that investigation as it provides submission/acceptance dates for its articles. For that journal, one article, published in an SI, submitted on 12 June 2018 and accepted on 14 June 2018 was found. The author's queries here are: Is 48 hours enough time for a paper to be peer-reviewed? Is this an instance of fake peer review? Fake peer review arises "when editors rely on authors' recommended reviewers. These names are often genuine but have a false e-mail address that enables the authors to write a favorable review of their own paper" (Gao and Zhou, 2017, p.33). These fake reviews are then returned very quickly, often within 24 hours.

4.5.3. Gift authorship

In that same marketing journal, the author has found another article, also published in an SI and co-authored by three scholars, where it is stated the following: "This paper *replicates* a keynote address delivered by [author 1]' (emphasis added). The following are the author's questions: Have the two co-authors made significant contributions to the paper? Have they critically revised it for important intellectual content? If the answer to either of these two

questions is no, then this is an instance of gift authorship. Gift authorship is perhaps the most common unethical behavior seen in academic publishing (Chawla, 2020). Gift authorship involves adding one or more authors to a paper when they have not actually made a contribution to the work, perhaps to reward a collaborator, to return a favor, or for some other gains (Teixeira da Silva and Dobránszki, 2016).

4.5.4. Questionable guest editorship

While searching the archive of the same unnamed marketing journal, the author also discovered four SIs on almost the same topic. Delving deeper, the author found that these four SIs were (co)guest-edited by the same scholar. This finding raises the following questions: Why is that scholar repeatedly (co)guest-editing SIs on the same topic? Is it motivated by a strong desire to help others? Or is it because that scholar/GE is using SIs deliberately to finally find a publication outlet for their papers? (Else, 2020). For readers' information, that scholar has (co)authored up to nine papers that have been published in the four SIs s/he co-guest-edited. It must be stressed that these nine papers are articles, not editorials for the respective SIs. In three of these nine articles, that guest editor is also the sole and corresponding author. The four SIs (co)guest-edited by that scholar contain 39 articles. To put it more clearly, 23.077% of the content of these four SIs was (co)authored by that GE/scholar.

Is this an isolated incident? Unfortunately, the answer is no. Another scholar who has co-guest-edited two SIs in the same marketing journal has co-authored up to five papers. There are 27 articles in these two SIs. In other words, that scholar co-wrote 18.518% of the content of these two SIs.

The White Paper on Publication Ethics by the Council of Science Editors in its subsection 2.1.7 (added on 6 September 2021) states the following (see https://www.councilscienceeditors.org/resource-library/editorial-policies/publication-ethics/2-1-editor-roles-and-responsibilities/#217):

- Guest Editors should avoid facilitating peer review of a supplement/special series paper in which they are also listed as a coauthor. In this instance, peer review of these papers should be done by someone else qualified to facilitate an objective review.
- Guest Editors who submit manuscripts for consideration in the proposed supplement/special series/call for papers must maintain the highest publication standards and ethical practices. Therefore, Guest Editors must recuse themselves from all handling of such manuscripts. Further, Guest Editors and the journal must utilize a predetermined independent review and decision-making process. In addition, the journal should disclose to the public how such papers were handled, if papers are accepted for publication.

Surprisingly, only one of the 14 articles (co)authored by these two GEs discloses information about the peer review process. The following statement appears in that article: "This paper has been reviewed separately by the [...] review board".

5. Concluding comments

SIs have always been a part of the academic publishing landscape. Though publishers and their journals can use Artificial Intelligence and Deep Learning models to automatically create virtual SIs of accepted papers (see Gündoğan and Kaya, 2019), SIs will most likely remain so indefinitely, despite the issues associated with them. The goal of this paper has been to bring attention to this publishing practice and the issues it raises. It is hoped that this commentary will spark discussion and debate among marketing scholars about the use and abuse of SIs.

Despite the fact that this paper has highlighted the profusion of SIs in top and top-tier marketing journals and its consequences, the causes of this profusion were not thoroughly investigated. One of the likely causes of this proliferation of SIs is that there is evidence suggesting that articles published in some SIs of some marketing (e.g., Kahn et al., 2020; Repiso et al., 2021) and management (Conlon et al., 2006) journals receive more citations than those published in regular issues. Publishing more SIs is commonly known as one of the most used ten publishing strategy to boost citation-based indicators such as Clarivate's Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and/or Scopus' Cite Score (Falagas and Alexiou, 2008). For example, JAMS, the top-tier journal with the most SIs published, saw its JIF (CiteScore) increase from 8.488 (11.9) in 2017 to 14.904 (15.2) in 2021. Are these significant increases in journal-level citation-based metrics due to the publication of more SIs?

Publishing more SIs is also one of the features of predatory journals (Meijer and Webster, 2022). Predatory journals publish anything for a fee (also called article processing charges or APCs). These journals often charge high APCs, but provide little or no peer review or editing services (Moussa, 2021a). All of the investigated marketing journals are hybrid journals; that is, journals that offer both open access and traditional subscription-based models for accessing its articles. In a hybrid model, authors can choose to pay APCs to make their article open access, while other articles in the same journal remain behind a fee-wall. This raises the question, is the increase in SIs in marketing journals a strategy to lure more submissions and ultimately generate more income through APCs?

The author leaves the two questions raised above to future researchers.

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Effect of Complaints Handling by Consumer Federation of Kenya on Consumer Protection in Commercial Banks of Kenya

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Abstract
Despite the growth of the financial services industry, the formulation of consumer protection legislation has not been done in many jurisdictions. This calls for the need for basic protections for the clients of financial services to bolster their confidence and encourage the uptake of new products, therefore, this study sought to find out the extent to which the complaints handling by the Consumer Federation of Kenya (COFEK) influences effective consumer protection in commercial banks. The presence of ignorant clients dependent on the trust they place in financial institutions has caused increased abuse of consumer trust. Imposition of excessive charges on customers' accounts without formal advice or agreement and other insider abuses are becoming common amongst banks and their marketers. The study used the descriptive research design and the population of focus was 87 COFEK employees. The census method was used to reach the COFEK employees owing to their relative manageable numbers. The study used questionnaires as the tools for data collection. Data were analyzed by use of descriptive and inferential statistics. Statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 22 was used. Data was presented by the use of frequency tables, percentages, and related statistical abstracts. All the respondents affirmed that COFEK appreciated the responsibility of dispute arbitration and collaboration between COFEK and that commercial banks had assured synchrony in the marketing messages disseminated to the consumers. The analysis of the data showed that complaints handling had a significant coefficient (p-value = 0.001; β=0.408). This means that complaint handling is statistically significant in ensuring consumer protection. The study concluded that the service quality levels had improved occasioned by the capacity of COFEK to monitor consumer complaints.

Keywords: complaints handling, consumer protection, commercial banks.

JEL classification: M31.

Introduction

The public is highly exploited by financial institutions in the retail markets which is attributed to information imbalances, power, and resources (Mittal, Saxena and Matta, 2014). Public Consumer protection seeks to correct the information imbalances by way of conferring provisions to ensure that the public access the right marketing information (Mittal, Saxena and Matta, 2014). Information access to the consumers infuses market discipline to the players in the financial sector and ultimately ensures sustained growth (Mittal, Saxena and Matta, 2014). Empowered consumers force the players to compete on a fair playing ground and professionalize their pursuits (Serrano, 2010) . This improves the governance of the financial sector by ensuring the right corporate ethos and enhancing transparency. The foregoing assures enhanced sustainability, more deepening and access to the products on offer. (Becher, 2008) posited that financial markets will seldom work independently without any supervision. The

quest for putting in place institutions to stabilize the markets and offer statutory frameworks for policing is thus imperative. The same was further augmented by (Akinbami, 2011) who noted that in highly competitive markets, government intervention was not required because the entities worked to give the clients high value products. Improved information access was considered a great ingredient in assuring the efficiency of the markets and the protection of the consumers. This deterred fraudulent trading and instances of having clients taken advantage of.

Self-regulation with minimal government intervention is the way to handle the consumer protection aspects in the financial sector to minimize the risk of dwindling performance (Billett, Flannery and Garfinkel, 2006). Self -regulation also helps the players in the industry to conform with the rules since they have been part of their formulation (Billett, Flannery and Garfinkel, 2006). In well-advanced markets, the practice of having professional bodies involving the practitioners take charge of the policing consumer protection activities brings out the element of independence and professional integrity. The poor institutional capacity is however the undoing of the developing countries as pertains to the regulatory practices (Brix and McKee, 2010).

Country-specific inadequacies and challenges as pertain to the regulatory parameters guide the institutional frameworks for consumer protection (Delgadillo, Erickson and Piercy, 2008). Empowerment of the authorities and enhancing their policing capacities in terms of giving them optimal room to exercise authority would ultimately enhance their performance (Delgadillo, Erickson and Piercy, 2008). However, in developing countries evidence of dwindling growth associated with over-regulation is evident (Lasagni, 2019). This has resulted to weak consumer protection leading to mistrust of the systems by the consumers. Spillover of the financial scandals in the United Kingdom and Australia occasioned the potential of the players to avoid the financial markets owing to the over-regulation (Lasagni, 2019). This retarded the performance of the sector in terms of the opening up of new outlets and the development of other products.

COFEK is a statutory entity founded on the Consumer Protection Act, No. 46 of 2012. The Act protects the consumers from unfair business practices and related transactions which may expose them to risks (GoK, 2010). The spirit underpinning the formulation of the statutory provisions is the realization of the vulnerability of the consumers in the wake of carrying out business transactions. The core mandate of COFEK is to assure that the goods and services offered for consumption nationally are within the expected standards as regards conformity to consumer demands. COFEK has played an active role in creating consumer awareness in the republic of Kenya. The organization has been in the frontline in terms of disseminating information on the consumer protection laws that have been enacted for the citizenry to appreciate and understand consistently. Despite the activities carried out by the organization, consumer protection has not picked up to the requisite levels. This has exposed vulnerable consumers to the risks of poor-quality goods and services (Asher and Rijit, 2012). Many attempts have been made to ensure protection of consumers in Kenya. One great milestone was the registration of the Consumers Federation of Kenya (COFEK) which is an apolitical and non-aligned body to protect and cushion consumers from risks. Other related entities are the Consumer Unity Trust Society (CUTS) and Consumer Information Network (CIN). The organizations carry out civic advocacy programs to assure fair prices, and greater access by the consumers to the goods and services.

The new constitution enacted in the year 2010 has provisions for consumer protection well captured in section 46. This was followed by putting in place the Competition Act 2010 which was the precursor for the Consumer Protection Act 2012. The pieces of legislation consolidate the gains in place for assuring consumers the requisite protection. Despite the presence of a robust framework for consumer protection in the Republic of Kenya, the

exploitation of consumers is still evident (Oremo, 2012). This was confirmed in studies carried out by (Njuguna, 2015) who established low levels of consumer rights awareness in Nairobi and Nakuru. This has negatively affected the achievement of the requisite consumer protection thresholds nationally. Further studies carried out by (Asher and Rijit, 2012) established low levels of consumer assertiveness in Kisumu, Nyeri, Mombasa and Nairobi. This was an indication of low levels of appreciation of the need to put the vendors to the task despite the requisite protection measures having been put in place to assure optimal protection. It is against this background that the study seeks to focus on the banking industry to confirm the effectiveness of complaints handling activities carried out by COFEK to assure consumer protection.

There is scarcity of research information on the subject with studies by (Warui 2012; Amuti 2016) placing a major focus on the statutory provisions in place for customer protection in commercial banks. Mutua *et al.* (2012) focused on consumer protection in the banking and telecoms sector. The study had a bias on the legal safeguards in place to assure the mobile money transfer services consumers are protected from the sector's risks. This paper addresses the role of complaints handling in ensuring effective consumer protection in Commercial Banks in Kenya.

Literature review

The importance of handling complaints on service dissatisfaction cannot be underestimated. The practice is integral in assuring the ability to have enhanced client retention, deter negative words about a firm, and enhance profits (Rajapakse and Rajapakse, 2011). In the banking industry allowing for complaints gives clients room to provide ideas on the changes that they would want to be instigated in the firms as a measure of growth. In real test case scenarios, the complaints serve as a tool for business process re-engineering and improvement of management data. Complaints have been evidenced to support client recovery and assure the organizations of business continuity prospects in the event of well-handled complaints. In some instances, though, the organizations realize that the client's complaints were not genuine and therefore the firm has to recheck its future engagements with clients to protect the firm's image (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). Complaints thus give the organizations insights into how to handle future engagements with the complaining customers more so in the wake of pecuniary complaints. This helps realign the internal processes and assure the firms of the ability to revive relationships with their customers. This leads to reduced costs through customer retention as it costs more to get new customers compared to retaining current customers.

Consumer protection agencies play a critical role in complaints handling and management. They act as the outlets for client information dissemination. This makes them critical mechanisms of assuring continued relationship between organizations and their clients in the long term. They need to assure clients of results in the way of handling the clients' complaints as a measure of boosting their standing from a moral and duty perspective. The relations between the consumer protection agencies and the players in the different industry facets thus have a large bearing on the determination of client retention and the assurance of continuity in terms of future business engagements. Inadequate responses attributed to the complaints emanating from the consumer protection agencies ultimately accounts for high service failures and the risk of client switching (Samuelson, 1971; Slawson, 2006). These phenomena may affect even the traditional loyalists of the organizations and occasion a run on the firms. There is evidence of clients failing to patronize firms that had not effectively handled their complaints in Malaysia and Australia.

Ebers (2004) argued that failure to have in place the right avenues for complaints handling was the undoing of most financial institutions. This created a culture of arrogance in

the relations with clients which has negatively affected the organizations. The position was confirmed by Hadfield, Howse and Trebilcock (1998) who argued that the failure to have forums for handling customer complaints was a great undoing to many establishments. This distorted the matrix heavily in terms of impairing future engagements with dissatisfied clients who felt their complaints were not effectively handled (Hadfield, Howse and Trebilcock, 1998).

(Llewellyn, 1999) cited complaints made by clients on the low levels of disclosure to consumers in the United States. Further complaints about deceptive advertising were voiced in the mortgage market (Llewellyn, 1999). Evidence of market instability is attributed to the failure of the regulators to act on complaints made by clients and consumer protection agencies (Lusardi and Mitchelli, 2007). This affirmed the position of failure to act on complaints eroding clients' confidence leading to instability in the markets. Poor performance of financial institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina was attributed to the failure to handle clients' complaints. The clients felt helpless in the event of the regulatory framework failing to effectively protect them from the challenges in the financial sector (Morgan and Chimhanzi, 2005). Similar difficulties were experienced in Morocco and India and they were all chiefly attributed to the poor handling and management of the complaints made to the agencies mandated with the tasks of consumer protection (Morgan and Chimhanzi, 2005).

The United States of America and Britain have had evidence of impaired growth and slowed performance from poor customers' complaints handling in the financial sector attributed to the watchdog consumer agencies. The Wall Street and Enron scandals are classic examples that had the customers' complaints build slowly. This almost resulted to an economic depression due to failure in addressing the complaints effectively (Sanjeev and Chekitan, 2003). The autonomous powers accorded to the central banks notwithstanding, avenues for handling customer complaints have been muted by the state bureaucracies of the central banks (Sanjeev and Chekitan, 2003). This is because the central banks concentrate on the mandate of fiscal prudence assurance on the part of the commercial banks as opposed to consumer protection functions which entail complaints handling in the financial markets (Young, 2014).

Mutua et al. (2012) called for a functional medium in handling consumer complaints. They called for the need to involve the consumer in the activities carried out and demystify the avenues for complaints thus making them open for all. The need to place the focus on the consumer and the essence of having continuity in the business activities carried out was a great imperative for the achievement of results (Mutua et al., 2012). A synergistic approach detailing all the players to work as a team and have the activities carried out from the same point was of the essence. This gives room to the consumers to voice their complaints as long as the ideals of the realization of the expected goodwill in terms of results from the positive changes after the complaints are addressed are realized (Mutua et al., 2012).

Channels for consumer complaints in the republic of Kenya are in the COFEK which has statutory backing (GoK, 2010). The complaints can be verified from a professional perspective entailing the interaction in the consumer protection agency by having it draw its membership from the Kenya Bureau of Standards, Kenya Association of Manufacturers, the Law Society of Kenya, Kenya Medical Association and the Kenya Bankers Association. All the above-mentioned entities have rich professional knowledge of their areas of practice and adjudication thus making addressing the complaints effected by knowledgeable entities (GoK, 2010). The study sought to find out the activities carried out by COFEK to address client complaints in commercial banks.

Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey research design to find out the initiatives undertaken by COFEK for consumer protection in their interactions with commercial banks.

According to Orodho and Kombo (2002), a descriptive survey is a method of collecting information by way of interviewing or administering a questionnaire from a selected sample.

The target population of this study consisted of all employees of COFEK. This is because they were all engaged in consumer protection. Questionnaires were administered to COFEK employees after a pilot test at the Competition Authority headquarters. The questionnaires had both closed and open-ended questions. The researcher hand delivered the questionnaires to the target respondents and collected them immediately to deter any discussions amongst the respondents. The data collection instrument was tested for validity and reliability using the Mugenda and Mugenda (2013) criteria, with no violation noted.

The study also relied on secondary data to relate the COFEK initiatives and customer protection. This had the objective of determining the extent to which complaint handling affect consumer protection in the banking sector in Kenya.

Descriptive statistics

Using mean score analysis, it was established that complaint handling was a multifaceted construct, comprising several items. Using a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being the strongly agree and 5 the strongly disagree, the items had the following mean score; The organization has mediums of monitoring all complaints made by clients to commercial banks (mean score=1.97); COFEK provides channels for consumers to complain directly in the event of poor services (mean score=1.97); The service quality levels have improved by monitoring the complaints from the consumers (mean score=1.94); Mediums of addressing complaints encourage the consumer (mean score=1.75); COFEK partners with the commercial banks to institute a culture of making them appreciate the complaints voiced out (mean score=2.11). The average mean score for complaints handling was 1.95, which meant that most of the participants agreed that complaints handling enhanced consumer protection in Commercial Banks.

Table 1. Means Statistics on Complaints Handling

CODE	Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
CH	Consideration of complaints handing activities as a factor ensuring effective consumer protection	72	1.95	0.682	0.080
CH1	The organization has mediums of monitoring all complaints made by clients to commercial banks	72	1.97	0.872	0.103
CH2	COFECK provides channels for consumers to complain directly in the event of poor services	72	1.97	0.822	0.097
CH3	The service quality levels have improved by virtue of monitoring the complaints from the consumers	72	1.94	1.01	0.120
CH4	Mediums of addressing complaints encourage the consumer	72	1.75	0.5818	0.096
CH5	COFECK partners with the commercial banks to institute a culture of making them appreciate the complaints voiced out	72	2.11	0.797	0.094

The mean statistics showed that the attribute of consumer protection with the highest mean value was that COFEK and commercial banks have as standing committee for continuous review of emerging issues on consumer protection. The average mean score for complaints

handling was 1.90, which meant that most of the participants agreed that COFEK has put in place strategies of ensuring effective consumer protection in Commercial Banks.

Table 2. The Mean Statistics for Attributes of Consumer Protection

Code	Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
CP	Composite index for consumer protection	72	1.90	0.052	0.441
CP1	COFEK assures all commercial bank clients the requisite protection	72	1.76	0.050	0.428
CP2	Active programs of action are carried out by COFEK in liaison with commercial banks as measures of assured client protection	72	1.96	0.057	0.488
CP3	Mutualism as a basis of synergy is crafted between COFEK and the Kenya Bankers Association to review measures of consumer protection on a regular basis	72	1.92	0.062	0.524
CP4	COFEK and commercial banks have as standing committee for continuous review of emerging issues on consumer protection	72	1.99	0.067	0.569
CP5	COFEK commissions external audits to confirm the efficacy of the consumer protection activities carried out	72	1.90	0.077	0.653

Correlation analysis

The linear relationship was assessed using Pearson correlation coefficient. The findings indicate that Complaints handling was found to be positive and significantly related to Consumer protection ($r=0.417$, p-value<0.05).

Table 3. Correlation of study variables

		Complaints handling
Consumer protection	Pearson Correlation	0.417**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001
	N	72
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).		

Normality test for the study variables

The normality of data distribution was assessed by examining its skewness and kurtosis. A variable with an index smaller than an absolute value of 2.0 for skewness and an absolute value of 7.0 implies non-violation of the assumption of normality (George & Mallery, 2010). The results of the normality test of the study variables indicated skewness and kurtosis in the range of -1 and +1 as shown in the table below. This implies that the assumption of normality was satisfied.

Table 4. Normality test

Variables	N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Consumer protection	72	0.077	0.283	0.84	0.559
Complaints handling	72	0.928	0.283	0.899	0.559

Regression analysis

The objective of the study was to find out the effect of complaints handling on consumer protection. This was tested under the following hypothesis:

H_0: Complaints handling has no significant effect on consumer protection.

The R squared value was 0.326 which indicated that there is a strong relationship between independent variables (Complaints Handling) and dependent variables (Effective consumer protection) as indicated in table 5 This implies that Complaints Handling share a variation of 32.6% of Effective consumer protection.

Table 5: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.571[a]	0.326	0.305	0.85451137
a. Predictors: (Constant), CH				

ANOVA

The table below indicates that the overall model was a good fit since (F-value=14.735 and p-value=0.001<0.05).

The model becomes as indicated in coefficient table 7

$$CP = -0.190 + 0.408_{CH} + \varepsilon$$

Table 6. ANOVA

ANOVA[a]						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	10.759	1	10.759	14.735	0.001[b]
	Residual	51.113	70	0.730		
	Total	61.873	71			
a. Dependent Variable: CP						
b. Predictors: (Constant), CH						

Coefficients

From the coefficient table 7 below, complaints handling had a significant coefficient (p-value = 0.001, β=0.408). This means that complaints handling is statistically significant in ensuring consumer protection, therefore, H_0: Complaints handling has no significant effect on consumer protection was rejected at a 0.001 level of significance.

Table 7. Model coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-0.190	0.080		-2.383	0.020
	CH	0.408	0.106	0.417	3.839	0.001
a. Dependent Variable: CP						

Results and recommendations

Most of the respondents deemed the complaints submission channels as always open for the targeted clients. A very significant percentage of the respondents considered the channels as open sometimes. From the responses, there was mixed reactions on the effectiveness of submission channels. The study findings reinforced the position of Reichheld and Sasser (1990), who established that in the banking industry, allowing for complaints gives clients room to provide ideas on the changes that they would want implemented in the firms as a measure of growth. In real test case scenarios, the complaints serve as rooms for business process reengineering and tools for the improvement of management data. Complaints have been evidenced to support client recovery and assure the organizations of business continuity prospects in the event of well-handled complaints.

Most of the respondents deemed the instances of inadequacies arising in the complaints handling mediums put in place by the consumer protection agency to have been rare. The responses were a confirmation of the trust and faith that the respondents had put in the complaints handling mediums. The findings reflected an ideal situation as envisioned by Samuelson (1971) and Slawson (2006). They were of the view that inadequate responses attributed to the complaints emanating from the consumer protection agencies ultimately account for high service failures and the risk of client switching. These phenomena may affect even the traditional loyalists of the organizations which can result to brand switching. Evidence of clients failing to patronize firms that had not effectively handled their complaints after raising them was reported in Malaysia and Australia.

Most of the respondents appreciated the adequacy of the complaints receipt mediums put in place by the consumer protection agency. The responses were therefore a confirmation that there were measures put in place by the agency to assure effective lines of reporting in the event of the need to channel complaints to the organization. The study findings confirmed the position taken by Ebers (2004) who argued that failure to have in place the right forums for complaints handling was the undoing of most financial institutions. The foregoing created a culture of inconsiderateness in the relations with clients to the organization's detriment. The position was further confirmed by Hadfield, Howse and Trebilcock (1998) who argued that the failure to have forums for ventilation and client services thresholds improvement by way of complaints management was a great undoing to many establishments. This distorted the matrix heavily in terms of impairing future engagements with dissatisfied clients who felt their complaints were not effectively handled (Hadfield, Howse and Trebilcock, 1998).

The study recommends that COFEK should create greater awareness of the complaints handling channels in place for consumers. Public drives to raise awareness levels should be carried out and the provisioning of a toll-free number should be done as a measure of encouraging voicing of complaints. This will ultimately impact the service quality levels especially when the complaints management approach does not involve any form of mediation which may delay the process. The study suggests that research should be carried out to confirm the extent to which the competition authority has restrained dominant tendencies by players in the commercial banks' sector. The study also suggests that research on the statutory provisions to assure commercial banks consumers of protection should be carried out. This is to determine the effectiveness of the statutory safeguards in place. The researcher experienced a challenge in securing time for such COFEK employees to respond to the questionnaires considering their busy schedules.

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The Manipulation of Images, as Personal Data, by Facebook – a Case Study for Ethical Approach

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper was to explore whether the use of images, by the social platform Facebook, presented ethical concerns, and whether a user was sufficiently aware when he consented to the use, of the ways in which his images could be manipulated by the platform. It is a common practice for a person to open a social media account, and to start uploading content, in order to make it available to his family, friends, clients or larger groups. However, it is not obvious, when opening such an account, that these images escape, in a sense, from the hand of the account owner. This article has reviewed the underlying relationship between a user and a platform, by analyzing the Meta (former Facebook) data privacy policy and some additional texts, underwent a step further and looked at the possible use done by the platform, and finally tried to understand how the user was given the information needed to control such use. Although the documents were clear enough for a person skilled in the legal field, the paper discussed the finding of an intent to keep a certain technical vocabulary, thus barring a non-specialized user from the clear understanding of the rights transferred to the platform. Also, there was a non-obvious differentiation of the levels of explanation, when trying to summarize a friendly approach to a new user, while the following real explanation of the rights granted to that user were highly technical. This paper tried to bring, finally, some solutions about the way the users should be informed and brought to a clearer understanding of the use of their personal data, by a social media platform.

Keywords: personal data, images rights, social media, ethical marketing.

JEL classification: M31.

Literature review and preliminary considerations

The company Facebook has been rebranded as Meta. The stated purpose of this rebranding is to bring the metaverse to life and help people connect, find communities, and grow businesses (Meta, 2023a). For the purpose of this paper, Facebook and Meta will be used each time within the same signification.

Several studies have reviewed the necessary ethical standards related to marketing in the social media networks. Extensive literature is available in relation to multiple issues raised by scholars in this field (Sharma, G. and Baoku, L., 2012). However, the purpose of this brief article is to focus on a very limited scope of activity of Facebook, namely the explanation given

to its users concerning the use of images, during the very recent rebranding from Facebook to Meta.

When opening an account on Meta, the new user must agree to a number of documents. One of such documents is critical for this paper, and is called Data Policy, hereinafter called Data (Meta, 2023b). Another one, discussed in this paper, is called Terms of Service, hereinafter called Terms (Meta, 2023c). Once agreed to the documents requested by Meta, the user can upload information, including text, media files, images. The focus of this paper is on images, therefore there will be no, or unsignificant discussion of other types of information.

Images can be considered personal data, as long as they include a clear representation of a face of a person (*Law on the Protection of Individuals 2018)*. For instance, the *Law on the Protection of Individuals 2018* considers facial images as biometric data, including them therefore in a specific category of personal data. Therefore, one can assume that, because the name of a platform is called "Facebook", an important part of the content vehiculated on such a platform will include a significant number of images containing persons' faces.

A relevant publication addressing links between business and legal and ethical aspects while collecting consumers' data can be found in Weber, R. H. and Thouvenin, F. 2017. Another author lists almost exhaustively the relevant literature and case-law in the intellectual property field, including here the personal image of a private person (Romitan, 2018). The use of the representation of a person (including a picture used on Facebook) is regulated, in its main aspects, by the *Law on Copyright 1996*.

Following on this and other similar publications, the purpose of this paper will be to better understand the way Meta explains the use of the images, especially the images representing the user and therefore being considered personal data. The focus here will be on possible ethical issues, related also to the business activity of Facebook.

The revenues of Meta based on users' images

Meta is not explaining the fact that images, once posted by a user, will be used to generate revenues from the advertisers. The link between the images and the ads is not detailed. However, a careful reading allows one to understand that any personal data, including therefore images, is used to determine which ads will be shown to that user. Meta terms state: "By using our Products, you agree that we can show you ads that we think will be relevant to you and your interests. We use your personal data to help determine which ads to show you." *(Meta, 2023c)*

The Terms start with a generous statement, saying: "We don't charge you to use Facebook or the other products and services covered by these Terms. Instead, businesses and organizations pay us to show you ads for their products and services*".* (Meta, 2023c). Once this statement is presented, Facebook goes further and requests the user to agree to several things, and this agreement becomes effective at any use of a product or service covered by the Terms. The user has to accept the fact that he will be shown advertising. The statement used by Meta 2023c reads the mild words: "we can show you", suggesting the fact that, maybe, the user will not be shown adds at all. However, there is a matter of evidence that adds are omnipresent on Facebook products. Facebook is not clear on the algorithm used, nor is it explicit on the possibility to refuse adds, even ones of interest. On the contrary, Facebook reserves its right to determine unilaterally the degree of relevancy, by saying: "We can show you ads that we think will be relevant to you and your interests" (Meta, 2023c). It is at least questionable what would this syntagm "we think will be relevant" mean. From an ethical point of view, it might be at least a need for a choice, or validation, of the centers of interest on behalf of the user.

Moreover, and this is of interest for the purpose of this paper, personal data comes into account in order for Facebook to determine the relevancy of the adds, when Meta says: "We use your personal data to help determine which ads to show you." (Meta, 2023c). It is without question that images posted by the user, for example the ones containing the representation of his figure, are considered personal data. Therefore, these pictures can be used, according to the Terms, for any purpose decided upon unilaterally by Facebook, as long as Facebook "thinks" such pictures or their use is needed to determine the relevancy of an add, or of an interest of a user.

It is unclear whether images are considered information that directly identifies a user. This is particularly important, because Facebook claims to refrain from sharing information which directly identifies a user, unless a specific permission is given, by declaring: "We don't share information that directly identifies you (such as your name, email address or other contact information) with advertisers unless you give us specific permission." (Meta, 2023c). However, from an ethical point of view, the options to express one's permission should be identifiable at this very moment, when it is mentioned. However, the user has no clue about the place and extent where such a permission is given, and thus he can only rely on the statement made by Facebook.

Another ethical constraint would imply a clearer separation in the following explanation, stating: "We don't sell you personal data, and don't share information (…) unless you give us specific permission" (Meta, 2023c). Is it that Facebook requests a specific permission to sell personal data, and to share information that directly identifies a user, in which case again, an ethical behavior would be to indicate where and how such permission is requested, or is it that Facebook never sells personal data, and just shares upon approval from user? As long as this is not clear, an average user needs to do an effort in order to locate the approval, the context and particulars of such approval, in order to understand clearly how its personal data is sold or shared.

A last point here, it is not clear whether a sale is understood as a price for a direct transmission of certain information, or something more subtle, which seems to be the case here: Facebook receives money from the advertisers (sometimes called businesses or organizations), and it declares: "businesses and organizations pay us to show you ads for their products and services" (Meta, 2023c) in order to access the visual field of a certain user and, in fact, in order for an add to be displayed to a specific user having a specific personal data, for instance a certain profile picture. As long as someone is paid to give access to a specific person, by means of images representing that person, we can talk about a sale of personal data which directly identifies the user. This situation goes against the statement "we don't sell your personal data" (Meta, 2023c), and an ethical approach would require more transparency at this level.

Terminology and users' knowledge – a matter of ethical concern

The Terms start with a statement which hardly allows one to think he can lose something, when, in the section 3.2. Permissions you give us, they state: "You own the intellectual property rights (things such as copyright or trademarks) in any such content that you create and share on Facebook and other Meta Company Products you use. Nothing in these Terms takes away the rights you have to your own content. You are free to share your content with anyone else, wherever you want." (Meta, 2023c).

This statement is problematic both from a legal point of view, and an ethical marketing point of view. First, it is not always the case that the intellectual property rights over a creation belongs to the creator. This can happen, for instance, if the creator has created under an agreement whereby he assigns such creation to another person. Or, if the creator has worked under a work for hire agreement. Or, if the creator worked in a team, where several co-creators

own the rights. Therefore, this statement can be considered incomplete and, partially, misleading.

From an ethical marketing point of view, the statement presents an untrue claim, when stating: "Nothing in these Terms takes away the rights you have to your own content." (Meta, 2023c). However, a couple of lines below, in the section 3.3 of the Terms, called Permissions you give us, Meta excludes from its responsibility and from other users' duties, the need to delete images which have been expressly deleted by a certain owner, declaring: "Your content has been used by others in accordance with this licence and they have not deleted it (in which case, this licence will continue to apply until that content is deleted)." (Meta, 2023c). In other words, although the holder of the copyright owns the intellectual property rights, and is free to share his content with anyone else, wherever he want, he is not allowed anymore to delete images which have been reshared by others. In this case, the user who reshared these images can continue to use them, as a lawful licencee.

An ethical approach would require showing more transparency for these two situations towards the users. First, Meta should explain that, under certain conditions, the images posted by their lawful owner can no longer be deleted. For example, if a user has a public account, and publishes there his picture, and a friend takes that picture and shares it further to other users, the initial user is no longer allowed to stop that picture being shared. This happens because the initial user agreed to licence his friend to sub-licence other users. Second, Meta should explain that a user is allowed to share its own copyrighted material, but a clearance is highly recommended, as most of the times, images hold rights of other persons than the initial user.

It is difficult for a person untrained in the legal jargon to understand legal wording like the one in the section 3.3. of the Terms, Permissions you give us, which states: "However, to provide our services, we need you to give us some legal permissions (known as a 'licence') to use this content." (Meta, 2023c). First, the formulation is unclear: "*we need you to give us*". This should be formulated in a simpler way: "*you must agree to*". A too fast reading would have as result the skipping of the true meaning, which is a very extensive agreement. This is why it is questionable, and at least needs review from an ethical perspective, the fact that a company mentions: "we need you to give us some", whereas the true meaning comes just one paragraph below and represents not "some permissions", but a complete and unlimited royalty-free licence which states: "Specifically, when you share, post or upload content that is covered by intellectual property rights on or in connection with our Products, you grant us a non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free and worldwide licence to host, use, distribute, modify, run, copy, publicly perform or display, translate and create derivative works of your content (consistent with your privacy and application settings). This means, for example, that if you share a photo on Facebook, you give us permission to store, copy and share it with others (again, consistent with your settings) such as service providers that support our service or other Meta Products you use. This licence will end when your content is deleted from our systems." (Meta, 2023c)

There is no clear explanation of the connection between the full free licence and the need to provide and improve the Products. The Terms mention: "This is solely for the purposes of providing and improving our Products and services as described in Section 1 above." (Meta, 2023c). A clear and complete explanation would link such a royalty-free licence to the fact that Meta is using the content of the user to display to such user an adapted advertising, which, in turn generates revenues for Meta.

There is another important thing to clarify and explain, otherwise the terms do not address enough ethical concerns. The licence is not explained as being granted for an unlimited period of time, unless terminated by the user through the deletion of the content. Each new upload of content by the user, on a public account, generates a new worldwide unlimited licence, and

each such content needs to be deleted, in order to terminate the unlimited licence over that specific content. The wording of the Terms is insufficiently clear in this respect, because it treats the content as a whole, although such content is uploaded day after day, moment after moment, during weeks, months, years. The text states: "This licence will end when your content is deleted from our systems. You can delete content individually or all at once by deleting your account." (Meta, 2023c).

Loss of control and loss of rights over the images

It is not enough explained another essential consequence that follows once content is willingly uploaded by the user. When a user uploads an image on his public account, the above mentioned licence enters into force and, at that moment, the respective image can be used no longer exclusively by the user, but by Meta, or by any other user that is part of the user's friends group. These are, in turn, allowed to use the respective image and to keep it as long as they want. They are even allowed to reshare that image to their respective group of friends, thus making the image available and reusable, potentially, without any further approval by the initial user.

If one carefully reads the Terms, he will remark the fact that such loss of control occurs in two steps. As a first step, the user uploads an image on his account, which is accessible whether to the large public, or to a selected group of friends. Based on this first step, Meta is given a licence to use, reshare etc. this image. At this moment, the entire group of friends, or the public at large, receive in their own name, from Meta, a sub-licence which in lay terms means the right of several persons to use, reshare etc. the image of the initial user, all this based on the first licence given to Meta and the subsequent sub-licence given by Meta to these several persons.

In a second step, the initial user terminates the licence to Meta, by deleting the image from this account. Although the initial licence between the initial owner and Meta is immediately terminated, the sub-licence between Meta and the group of friends remains in force, and such group is allowed to further use, reshare etc. such image.

The specific text which allows this two-steps technique for loss of control is based on the two following texts, both found in section 3.3. Permissions you give us, of the Terms. The first one states: "Specifically, when you share, post or upload content that is covered by intellectual property rights on or in connection with our Products, **you grant us** a non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free and worldwide licence to host, use, distribute, modify, run, copy, publicly perform or display, translate and create derivative works of your content (consistent with your privacy and application settings). This means, for example, that if you share a photo on Facebook, you give us permission to store, copy and share it with others (again, consistent with your settings) such as service providers that support our service or other Meta Products you use. This licence will end when your content is deleted from our systems" (Meta, 2023c).

The second text, on the contrary, indicates that a licence continues in fact to apply, at the will and discretion of other users. Such text mentions: "When you delete content, it's no longer visible to other users; however, it may continue to exist elsewhere on our systems where: (…) your content has been used by others in accordance with this licence and they have not deleted it (in which case, this **licence will continue to apply** until that content is deleted);" (Meta, 2023c).

In fact, there is a contradiction in the two explanations, since it is not clear which content has to be deleted, and by whom, in order for a content to stop existing. For instance, when one reads: "This licence will end when your content is deleted from our systems." (Meta, 2023c), one has to understand "this licence will end when **you** delete the content and such content is

deleted by **all your friends** and **their successive friends up to the last one**, and **all our partners** to whom we have shared it with your approval." And in fact, there should be made clear from the beginning that an uploaded image has the risk to become publicly available and usable without any further control by the initial owner, for decades after the initial upload.

A last point is, again, technical in terms of legal language, which language is insufficiently described for the easy understanding by a user. The word is hidden in the long list of rights granted to Meta, and is represented by the technical syntagm "create derivative work". Such a right, once granted, allows Meta to modify the initial image in such a way, that the modified image represents a new work. Such a new work is in its entirety owned by Meta and does no longer represent a licenced work, but an independent work, on which the initial user has absolutely no rights anymore.

Let's suppose the user sends a picture representing himself in colors, in a certain place in town. Based on the licence, Meta is allowed to cut such picture, turn it black and white, and add some text and some graphical elements to is. Such modifications allow in principle Meta to claim that the resulting image is a derivative work, and although the user can be recognized in the new image, he has no more copyrights on this derivative work. At this moment, Meta can use at his own discretion the new image, regardless if it is for a commercial or non-commercial use. An ethical marketing would require at least to break down into elements the various components of such a licence granted to Meta, and to explain the real extent of such a licence, with appropriate examples.

What if the user would think "money"

The commercial use of the image of the user is extensively detailed by Meta, and this is a good point. The use of personal data like name and profile picture is linked to the various commercial actions taken by the user, in order for Meta to present similar advertisement to friends of the user. However, such use, which in principle is intended to generate more revenues for Meta, based on the social resemblance among the friends of a user, could generate revenues also for the user. The fact that no revenue can be expected by the user is mentioned in a somehow secondary place, and extremely briefly: "without any compensation to you". The lack of compensation in mentioned at the end of the paragraph, which states:

"Permission to use your name, profile picture and information about your actions with ads and sponsored content: You give us permission to use your name and profile picture and information about actions that you have taken on Facebook next to or in connection with ads, offers and other sponsored content that we display across our Products, without any compensation to you" (Meta, 2023c)

The question is now double: how clear are the Terms, when stating: "*without any compensation*" for an average user, not having enough legal knowledge about the fair pricing of a licence. And the second question is: how clear is it for a user that Meta is generating a revenue which, at some point, could contribute to a different approach by the user? In other words, would the user agree to renounce to any compensation if he knew that, for instance, Meta would generate revenues of 100.000 USD by using his behavior, name and picture? In any case, an ethical approach would require more clarity on the fact that such use is effectively generating revenues for Meta and, under such conditions, the user could reconsider his approval for such specific use.

What is also questionable, is that Meta details the fact that the user gives for free the right to use its own profile picture. However, a couple of lines below, Meta explains a somehow contradictory statement, writing: "We don't sell your personal data to advertisers, and we don't share information that directly identifies you (such as your name, email address or other contact information) with advertisers unless you give us specific permission." (Meta, 2023c). It is quite

obvious that Meta does not mention direct sale of the profile picture to advertisers, however it is not clear for which purpose is intended the free licence of such picture to Meta, when it is stated: "you give us permission to use your name and profile picture… without any compensation to you." (Meta, 2023c).

Updates – an ethical improvement is needed

It is always difficult to improve and keep running a large platform like Meta. There are many users and, for sure, there are many things to improve. It is therefore complicated to generate one-by-one approval and it is understandable that Meta will try to obtain the most efficient way of approval of its updates. However, there might be more explanations on the fact that simple use of the Meta products could immediately imply agreement with any update of the Terms.

An ethical approach would require the making sure that the user has been offered the opportunity to review, before agreeing to the terms. For instance, blocking an access to the account, unless a check-box is ticked mentioning that the user has read and has agreed to the new version of the terms. Otherwise, the user can continue using the products, without being even aware that a new version of the Terms has just been agreed-upon by his action. This happens, for instance, when the user continues to use the Products. In this respect, the section 4 of the Tems mentions: "Once any updated Terms are in effect, you will be bound by them if you continue to use our Products." (Meta, 2023c).

Conclusions

The above analysis allowed the identification of several issues, which present several ethical concerns. It is, for instance, about vague terms used several times ("we", "we need you to give us"). It is not clear under which laws the Terms and the Data are drafted, and therefore which laws can be followed when the use of a picture by others becomes questionable. Finally, the unilateral modification of the terms is balanced in the large favor of Meta. This happens, again, due to a lack of clarity in the explanations related to the user's agreement to such modifications.

More important is the fact that the user does not understand easily, from the beginning, that his rights over the pictures uploaded on his account can be lost, and could be used by third parties without financial compensation. Although Meta explains that you can at any time withdraw and delete your content, in fact this is not effective, as long as you have agreed to sub-licence.

The financial advantage of Meta is not clearly explained. There is a sort of discrepancy between the right to sub-licence granted to Meta, for commercial use, and the renunciation to any compensation by the user, although the user can decide on the choice of a limited list of friends. It is at least difficult to say you don't sell data of users, like images, whereas you are paid by vendors to send them analytics of the relation between users' behavior and their images.

A framework for possible solutions would imply several things. First and most important, a clear explanation at the beginning of any account opening, of the fact that many terms in the agreement are technical and, for a full understanding, should be reviewed by a specialized person, with skills or experience in the intellectual property field.

Another solution is to give more explanations and examples when a legal definition is involved, for example the grant of the non-exclusive licence to Meta, or close to the mechanism of approval of the updated terms by the user.

There is a clear lack of sufficient explanation of the fact that uploaded pictures can no longer be controlled either by the user who posted them, or by Meta who allowed the users'

friends to re-share them. Here there is a real need for pointing-out this aspect, especially because many users share personal or family pictures, and are not aware of this loss of control.

A last possible solution is to warn users in a friendly way, before any upload of images, and also to think about a training quiz, in order to evaluate the understanding of the risks involved by sharing the pictures. This could be a fair and ethical way for Meta to keep its clients aware of the way pictures can be handled on the platform.

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CRM Software Adoption by Small Enterprises

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Abstract
Customer relationship management (CRM) is a business approach which can provide a competitive advantage to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). To deploy a successful CRM strategy, SMEs need to invest in a CRM software but unfortunately, the adoption rate of such software is very low compared to large companies. This study is trying to identify the main reasons for not using CRM software and how adoption rate can be improved. In-depth interviews with marketing managers and business owners were conducted to investigate the types of relationships the organizations have with various stakeholders and find out the technical solutions used to implement CRM strategies. Several reasons were mentioned for not using, or using in a limited way, CRM software: they are not trusted, they do not work, they are too complicated or they are not needed because SMEs have a limited customer base and managing customer relationships is performed using simpler tools. The main problem is that respondents do not see the strategic importance of CRM software. As long as most respondents consider only the operational role of CRM software - which can be replaced with some success by other applications they already use - the adoption rate will continue to be limited.

Keywords: customer relationship management, CRM software, small and medium sized enterprises, artificial intelligence.

JEL classification: M31, O33.

1. Introduction

Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) represent the backbone of the economy given their sheer number, their important role as employer and their potential for innovation. To survive and prosper, SMEs need to identify and exploit a set of competitive advantages. For example, market orientation can be an efficient business approach under certain conditions. It is based on customer orientation and involves gathering information about their needs and wants and using that information in value creation processes (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). For SMEs - given their characteristics such as closeness to market, deep customer knowledge, flexibility and high responsiveness (McCartan-Quinn and Carson, 2003) - customer relationship management (CRM) is an important source of competitive advantage. Effective and efficient customer relationship management is based on the business philosophy that puts customers at the heart of the business, and on the CRM technology needed to implement it.

In general, the technology adoption rate in SMEs is relatively low compared to large companies. Moreover, Romania has the lowest adoption rate of digital technologies compared to the rest of EU member states (European Commission, 2022).

A possible explanation is the high costs for purchasing and using CRM software. Although there are now cloud technology solutions that have considerably reduced the costs of installing and operating these applications, Romanian SMEs seems to not use at all cloud computing (DELab UW, 2016). Recently, CRM software have started to integrate artificial intelligence (AI) features which makes them more sophisticated in managing customer relationships and have improved their analytical capabilities allowing them to generate valuable insights that can be integrated into value creation processes.

This new generation of software has already started to be used by large companies, thus widening the gap between them and SMEs. Hence it is important to understand why SMEs do not use or – in some cases - even avoid using CRM software. Therefore, our research question is: how can we improve the adoption rate of CRM software by SMEs?

The article is organized as follows: the next section presents a systematic review of the most important papers on his topic followed by the research methodology. In the last sections we will discuss our results and conclusions together with some recommendations.

2. Literature review

CRM emerged in the late 1990s and is often used interchangeably with relationship marketing, even if these are distinct concepts. According to Payne and Frow (2013) relationship marketing is a much broader term which refers to the strategic management of relationships with all relevant stakeholders, while CRM is focusing only on customer relations involving the appropriate use of technology.

The increasing interest in CRM is explained by important trends (Payne and Frow, 2013) which have shaped the business environment: customers are considered to be now a business asset, therefore the focus has switched to relationships instead of transactions; companies are re-organized from functions to processes to act more strategically; the greater use of technology in maximizing the value of information and the benefits of using information proactively rather than reactively.

There are numerous definitions of CRM ranging from a specific technology to a general approach for managing customer relationships to create value for both company and customers (Arman, 2014). Nowadays, researchers have generally adopted the holistic definition which is about business activities and processes supported by technology and strategy designed to improve organizations performance by developing long term relationships with specific customers (Venturini and Benito, 2015; Guerola-Navarro et al., 2022; Pynadath, Rofin and Thomas, 2022).

As a business philosophy CRM is particularly relevant for entrepreneurial ventures and has proven to have a major positive impact. Collecting information in a consistent and centralized way, about the interactions with customers and using that information to design successful strategies aimed at acquiring, keeping and developing the customer base is particularly important for entrepreneurial companies (Guerola-Navarro et al., 2022). By collecting information about previous interactions through multiple contact points, companies can firstly identify the best customers and invest in building profitable relationships with them (Deszczyński and Beręsewicz, 2021) and secondly – can create and co-create value with customers through knowledge brokering (Jackson and Ahuja, 2016; Itani, Kalra and Riley, 2022).

Adopting a CRM approach is highly correlated with firms' performance in terms of sales level, sales effectiveness (Pynadath, Rofin and Thomas, 2022), higher client retention and acquisition, a better understanding of buyers' needs (Rodriguez and Honeycutt, 2011) and a way to create new customer value (Hunke, Heinz and Satzger, 2022). Obviously, CRM is not the only available successful business approach, but once companies achieved a state of

relationship maturity it will provide a sustainable competitive advantage (Deszczyński and Beręsewicz, 2021).

To implement a CRM strategy, a CRM software must be used to link the front office employees – from sales and customer service – with back-office functions such as finance, operations and logistics (Venturini and Benito, 2015). This software has a standardized structure which consists of operational and analytical modules. While the first one is used to automate selling, marketing and service processes, the last one is used to aggregate customer data and generate information and insights for business decisions. The evolution of CRM technology has been impressive (Kumar and Reinartz, 2006). In the first phase, CRM software was used for functional purposes to support the sales and customer service departments by generating leads, creating sales quotes, placing sales orders and addressing after-sales activities. Because those databases worked with customer information isolated from other systems, in the second phase the objective was to create a single view of all interactions with customers, regardless of the purpose of that interaction (pre-sales, sales transaction or post-sales service). The third stage had a more strategic focus, trying to integrate front-end with back-end systems, as well as with the systems used by business partners. The main goal achieved in this stage was to increase revenues and not only to control costs. In the fourth stage, a growing number of small companies started to adopt it due to its agility, flexibility, and low fixed costs, given that CRM technology started to provide on-demand functionality and was available on a pay-per-use basis. In the next stage CRM software was integrated with web 2.0 and social media thus allowing a better engagement of the customers and an intensive use of data driven insights to optimize customer experience. To personalize and improve the online experience of customers, data-mining features (Pynadath, Rofin and Thomas, 2022) and even chatbots were integrated into CRM software (Camilleri and Troise, 2023). During COVID -19 pandemic, CRM software started to be used intensively through mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones which enabled sales professionals – due to real time location-based services supported by mobile technology - to record customer interactions in real time and to have a more personal and interactive dialogue with prospects (Rodriguez and Boyer, 2020).

Today, a hot topic is related to the role of integrating AI in CRM software (Chatterjee et al., 2023) and how AI-CRM technology enhance relationship management with end-customers. AI is about algorithms, programs, systems and machines that demonstrate intelligence supported by key technologies such as machine learning, neural networks and robotic process automation (Wei and Pardo, 2022). Recent studies have proven the benefits of using AI embedded CRM systems in a business-to-business context: due to the fact that it can automate the analysis and recommendation process, it will increase the operational efficiency, it will improve collaboration in managing business-to-business relations and thus enhance customers' satisfaction (Chatterjee, Chaudhuri and Vrontis, 2022). Using AI-CRM-based software will increase the competitiveness of the firm which will help to protect its competitive advantage (Chatterjee et al., 2022).

As it is the case with other software adoption, initially the rate of successful implementation was low, less than 30% which cannot justify the costs with it (Reichheld, Schefter and Rigby, 2002). One of the major issues is user adoption, employees avoiding to use it due to both organizational and technical issues (Goodhue, Wixom and Watson, 2002). When a new technology is introduced, employees lack trust and perceive it as a risk to their jobs. Therefore, the role of managers is critical to encourage them to use it (Chatterjee et al., 2022). Still, this is not enough. It seems that the implementation phase is more important to CRM success. Firms with better IT infrastructure, business practices and skills are more likely to have success in this phase (Suoniemi et al., 2021). Technology readiness has a positive

impact on CRM software adoption, therefore managers should stay updated with the latest technological trends (Rahman et al., 2023).

As we have mentioned earlier, SMEs adoption rate is lower than large companies. It is important to understand why the adoption of digital technologies and cloud computing – which is highly relevant for SMES - is very low. Cloud computing is a disruptive technology which is used to avoid the need for hardware investments for expensive information technology. Low costs and flexibility are some of the major benefits (Shetty and Panda, 2021), therefore CRM technology has been growing since 2000 particularly with the emergence of cloud computing platforms (Guerola-Navarro et al., 2022). Still the adoption rate of cloud computing CRM is extremely low - in Romania being almost inexistent – therefore it is useful to understand why (DELab UW, 2016).

3. Research methodology

As we have mentioned earlier, the goal of this research is to find out how the adoption rate of CRM software by SMEs can we improved. To achieve this goal, we conducted a qualitative research between September-October 2022 under the form of in-depth interviews allowing respondents to express their own opinions using their own words. The research objectives were: (a) to investigate the types of relationships the organizations have with various stakeholders (suppliers, distributors, other business partners); (b) to explore what type of customer relationship management strategies are preferred; (c) to identify the technical solutions used by organizations to implement customer relations strategies; (d) to analyze CRM software perception and (e) to identify major functionalities needed for a CRM software.

The research sample was made of 10 companies out of which seven micro-enterprises (below 10 employees), two small companies (10-49 employees) and one medium sized company (50-249 employees). We have selected enterprises from various industries: printing services, distribution of construction materials, software development, travel agency, marketing agency, dental equipment manufacturer, educational and entertainment services.

Companies are addressing all types of markets: five are focusing on business-to-business customers, one is serving only consumers and four are addressing both types of customers. In terms of age, the sample consist of both young and old companies: three companies are younger than five years, three companies are in between five to ten years and four companies are older than 10 years.

The respondents were marketing managers responsible for customer management and entrepreneurs with a key executive role and were selected based on recommendations. The interviews lasted around 60 minutes and were audio-recorded. For the data analysis, the content analysis was applied to interviews transcripts. To reduce research bias two researchers were involved in analyzing data and comparing the findings. In order to support our conclusions we have added verbatim descriptions of participants' accounts.

4. Results and discussions

Considering the *first research objective (a) to investigate the types of relationships the organizations have with various stakeholders - suppliers, distributors, other business partners:*

In terms of number of stakeholders, most respondents estimate that they work on a regular basis with 10 - maximum 20 stakeholders. The majority of respondents considered stakeholders only the main suppliers, which limits the company's business approach. An important consequence could be the loss of valuable market opportunities (by ignoring potential stakeholders) and prolonging the scaling phase of the business. An interesting and singular response comes from a respondent who has a much broader perspective: *'I see the organization as a "cooperative" where I manage the parents' funds to give something to their*

children. It's like a community that puts resources in and I manage them - that's how we built it, that's how we operate"(educational services). On the other hand there are also respondents who deliberately reduce their number of stakeholders by choosing to work with very few key suppliers, and thus controlling the quality of the service: "*On the domestic market we have greatly reduced our collaborations with large tour operators and kept the maximum of 3-4 that we collaborate with*" (tourism agency).

Organizations prefer to develop long-term collaboration with some stakeholders and one-time or project-based collaboration with others. Therefore, the usefulness of a relationship marketing system for managing interactions with stakeholders is necessary to streamline processes. This becomes obvious given the way organizations currently manage stakeholder interactions: most mentioned non-specialized tools such as email, WhatsApp, Zoom, Skype, Google Drive.

Regarding the *second research objective (b) to explore what type of customer relationship management strategies are preferred*:

When it comes to the prevailing customer relationship strategy, industry type and customers' needs will heavily influence organizations' choices: in the construction industry the focus is on customer acquisition, in the IT&C industry the focus is on customer development by trying to sell additional services/products on top of the basic offering, while in educational services – the focus is on retention by keeping existing customers over a longer period of time. The ways in which companies collect information about customers include: direct and continuous communication with them, regular follow-up, paying attention to discussions between customers or between customers and employees and - less often - feedback questionnaires. Most respondents consider the standard forms of collecting customers feedback ineffective and prefer a rather empirical solution - through direct communication and observation - to find out what customers want and how they can serve them better.

In terms of how SMEs measure customer satisfaction, we note that only a few have standardized procedure and systems in place to track this indicator. Most rely either on spontaneous feedback received from customers or on subjective evaluation based on one-to-one discussions. In this respect, CRM systems could be useful as they can support companies by facilitating the customer review process which can then be integrated into reports and analysis.

The third research objective was (c) to identify the technical solutions used by organizations to implement customer relations strategies:

Regarding the technical solutions used for CRM activities, we divided the respondents into two categories: a) organizations that do not use CRM software - either because they do not have or they have but for various reasons do not use it, and b) organizations that have and currently use such software.

a) organisations that do not use CRM software:

The most commonly cited reasons for not using CRM software are:

- Lack of trust*: 'mistrust that's a big issue, really… to let a software control your business, control it, monitor it. Especially because that's where the money is, pricing has to be very accurate"* (printing services).
- Malfunctioning*: "We wanted to buy a CRM, but it didn't work. The supplier wasn't able to make a functional software. We made a partial payment, we tried to use it and when it didn't work we stopped running it. Initially they promised to develop a customized software for our business. They came, we met, they showed us what they could do. I didn't have a demo to see how the software works but they told me they will customize it to our company's needs. I told them what my needs were and after a few months of designing - or whatever they did – the software didn't work"* (construction materials distributor).

- The software is too complicated: *"We don't use it much because it requires a lot of data. It's a lot of data entry, it's too complex and it asks me for too much data. It's good for large companies, but it makes us uncomfortable. We would need someone who only does data-entry, with all the data it asks us for"* (travel agency).
- With new updates, the software becomes too complex: *"Any CRM platform has become more complicated as time has gone by. Monday example is the best because Monday made a huge push two or three years ago on marketing, attracted many customers and it was superb. As time has gone on, new features were added, more and more and ultimately the platform became too complicated to use it. Now I wouldn't use it if I had to take it all over again"* (marketing agency).
- A major business partner (supplier) uses CRM software*: 'We don't have our own CRM software, but our main supplier XXX has such a software. For example, they have a software where they record all the customers who asked for quotations and then transferred them to the dealers. The software allowed them to follow the sales process of the transferred customers and they called them to evaluate the satisfaction with us, with the dealers"* (construction materials dealer).
- They have a limited customer base and manage customer relationships with simpler tools (Microsoft, Google) *"Maybe if I had a larger volume of customers, but at our volume we do well with what we have"* (construction materials distributor); *"we don't want to do it in an automated way because we don't have that many. Our customers don't leave all at once, like in charter "* (travel agency).
- Lack of information: *"We didn't know about the existence of such software solutions, and the customer base is not a big one, because we operate in the B2B market"* (medical equipment).
- Negative feedback received from customers when automated solutions were used*: "we can send notifications to customers, but we don't. We prefer... well, we found - when we were sending emails with offers - that many customers unsubscribed. Of the loyal customers, many unsubscribed ... they didn't leave us, but they weren't interested in that offer* (travel agency)*;* and *" I don't like it either, and sometimes is perceived as an aggressive thing.... When we organized a child's birthday party we collected parent's name, child's name, age, contact details. In the next year - knowing that the child's birthday was coming - we send them an invitation to the park, but most of the time it was received as an aggressive thing. So, at that point I stopped"* (adventure park).

Even if some companies do not have CRM software, they use instead other software that still collects certain customer data: inventory management software, order tracking software, booking software. To manage customer relations they use Microsoft applications - such as Excel, Access - or Google tools such as - Gmail, Drive, WhatsApp. Since most respondents have a limited customer base, it is easy for them to create a chronologically organized folder for each customer in which they save contracts, orders, invoices, email communication - anything they consider relevant: *"We use Excel, we create a file organized by year, month, customer - we have a historical record. We have customers in chronological order and in the offer database we find their offers by years and months. So, it's a centralizer and each client has a chronologically organized folder attached to it. In the folder we save the quotation, the order from the supplier, the annex to the invoice with which we sold the materials, some sketches, drawings"* (construction materials distributor).

We found out that the majority of respondents know such suppliers or are confident that - should the need arise - they will identify the most suitable suppliers. The providers mentioned are: Monday, Notion, QuickBase, Odio, Relo, HubSpot, SmartBill. It is interesting to note that

the accounting firms the respondents work with, recommend billing/CRM software developers to them.

As we mentioned previously, there are also organizations that use CRM software on a regular basis.

The fourth research objective is (d) to analyze CRM software perception:

All of the respondents who mentioned that they use CRM software, are in fact utilizing the operational CRM module and only one respondent stated that they also use an analytical module. It is interesting to know that although they use the operational CRM on a regular basis, they prefer to use only some functionalities. The reasons why respondents do not use it to its full capacity are varied:

- Convenience: *"I feel we use it in a rather small capacity compared to what it can offer. That's because we just focus on keeping track of potential customers, i.e. the conversations that take place with them*."(marketing agency).
- Lack of trust/information confidentiality *"It is a complete software but I have doubts, and I don't want to put everything in there. I don't record information from parents anywhere*." (educational services).
- It is not adapted to internal processes, being "as is" software, not "custom-made": *"It has some functionalities that do a relatively good job considering what we want. It could be a bit more customized. There's another thing: No software, but none, will ever be exactly what someone is looking for. No software except custom-made software."* (marketing agency).

On a scale from 1 to 10, the majority of respondents rated the level of satisfaction as 8. This can be explained either by the fact that the choice of software was not their decision but that of the major business partner "*There is room for improvement in CRM, but it is part of the group*" or by the fact that it is impossible to be a 10 as long as it is an "as-is" software: "*No as-is software is going to be exactly what someone is looking for. I think if someone gets to use 75-80% of a software, it's already magnificent, you know*?" This is even more obvious for larger companies that have clearly defined business processes: either they adapt their processes to the software - which has its drawbacks - or they buy custom-made software - which is more expensive. As a result, satisfaction levels can never be at their highest: "*The better structured the company is and the more clearly defined its processes are, the more you end up in a situation where, when you use a software, which is not customized, you either modify, alter and adapt your processes in the company so that you manage them as the software works, or you make a custom one. There's not much else you can do. Because if you change, you fix some things, but you have other disadvantages elsewhere*."

Since companies have operational CRM software, users are those who interact with customers, such as the sales and the business development team. The analytical CRM module, however, is used by the marketing team. The sales team has two distinct needs:

- Lead management: "*Tracking the sales process and moving leads from one stage to the next until they reach the final one. That's very important, to make it as simple as possible. To do so, … they all do, but the idea is to make it a pleasant and intuitive experience. As simple as possible. As few clicks as possible, as few menus hidden and crammed in places that you need to read a book to find out where they're from.";*
- Offer management: "*It helps a lot if bidding can be managed from a CRM. That is, being able to send bids in a neat format, both web, with a link, and PDF, export and be able to send just the PDF. On the bidding side you can add attachments, files and videos".*

Respondents who also have CRM analytics module are using it to generate reports and to query the customer database for insights.

The *fifth research objective is (e) to identify major functionalities needed for a CRM software.*

Considering operational CRM, the main recommendation concerns the possibility of customizing some functionalities of an "as-is" software: *"a mechanism to create your own forms whereby - with drag and drop - you add fields according to your needs and they are then saved in the database"*. This functionality is necessary because every company is different, even if they are in the same industry and do the same thing.

The problem is that we have a paradox: the more customized and flexible, the more complex the software becomes. Or simplicity and ease of use are major user requirements: *"The more specific it is, the more complex it gets because you need as many options as you can get. The more options you have, the more complex and the harder it is to understand how to use it"*. Therefore, developing a good software is a real "art": *"The art is in finding trade-offs, in finding balance at a given moment. Seeing how you can make it customizable, but also as simple as possible"*.

Other important functionalities a CRM software should have, are:

- Easy initial set-up and speedy adoption *"on boarding should be easy. All must be fast for customers and users. And from there we get into user interface and user experience …it needs to be easy to use, easy to understand";*
- Ease of use: *"In general, when I buy software I look for it to be friendly, easy to work with, to be simple and intuitive";*
- Cloud-based (SaaS): "*To have an online account, I don't want to pay an upfront investment - server, licenses - I want to pay an acceptable annual fee";*
- Reliable and fast maintenance: *"to have a dedicated number to call and solve the issue"*.
- Quick and easy reporting *"be able to find data quickly, not get into lots of tables, lots of intermediary steps";*
- Scalable;
- Automatic notification mechanism;
- Allow multiple users to log in from different locations *"Be able to log-in, not just me, but everyone who needs to from anywhere";*
- Attractive design: *"colourful, whatever, aesthetic, beautiful"*.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

As we have mentioned, most of the companies operate predominantly in B2B markets and have a narrow customer base, probably due to the limited resources at their disposal. Also, most are micro-enterprises with a considerable tenure in the market which helped them to know their customers very well and gives respondents a high level of confidence in their expertise and quality of decisions.

The problem is that they define stakeholders in a narrow sense, limiting themselves mostly to suppliers, which gives them a limited perspective on business development. In terms of CRM strategies, these range from acquisition (construction firms), customer development (IT&C firms) and retention (educational services firms). Most find out what customers want rather empirically, using direct communication and observation. Few firms have formalized customer satisfaction tracking measures, and they rely mostly on customers feedback and proactive one-to-one discussions.

The reasons for not using CRM software are varied: they are not trusted, they do not work, they are too complicated, they have a limited customer base and managing customer relationships is performed using simpler tools or a major business partner uses a CRM software thus taking over their responsibility.

To manage customer relations they use Microsoft applications such as Excel, Access or Google tools such as Gmail, Drive, WhatsApp or even ERP software that already collects some information about customers such as inventory management software, order tracking software,

booking software. Those who have CRM software, use it in their daily operations (operational CRM module) and only one respondent indicated using analytical CRM. The reasons why respondents do not use it to its full capacity are varied: convenience, lack of trust/confidentiality of information, not adapted to internal processes, being "as is" software, not "custom-made".

Although previous research has identified cost as the main barrier to CRM software adoption (Wei and Pardo, 2022), this reason was not mentioned by any of the respondents. There are financially affordable cloud-based solutions that have already been mentioned by some respondents. The main requested functionalities are: easy initial set-up and adoption, ease of use, cloud-based (SaaS) solution, fast and reliable maintenance, quick and easy reporting, scalable solution which allow multiple users from different locations to connect, and an attractive design.

The main problem is that respondents don't see the strategic importance of CRM software. As long as most respondents only see the operational role of CRM - which can be replaced with some success by other ERP applications they already use - the adoption rate will continue to be limited. Moreover, as CRM software has started to integrate AI, this will strengthen its strategic dimension by (Wei and Pardo, 2022): generating customers knowledge and insights, increasing operational efficiency, interacting with customers anywhere and anytime more efficiently.

Unfortunately, investments in these new versions of CRM-AI will increase and SMEs are known for their limited resources. An opportunity would be to use AI platforms across an entire ecosystem of multiple stakeholders (suppliers, intermediaries, customers) instead of investing in their own CRM-AI platform (Chatterjee et al., 2023).

Therefore, the main factor that will accelerate the adoption rate is the business-owner's attitude of the added value of such a system at strategic level. Once the leadership is convinced of the usefulness of this system, it is important to encourage and incentivize employees to use it.

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