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Journal of EMERGING TRENDS IN MARKETING AND MANAGEMENT

**Marketing School, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
Bucharest
2025**



Vol. I, No. 4/2025

ISSN: 2537 - 5865

ISSN-L: 2537 - 5865

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The Bucharest University of Economic Studies Publishing House

6 Romana Square, 1st district, Bucharest, Romania

Postal Code: 010374

E-mail: editura@ase.ro

Phone: 021.319.19.00 / 021.319.19.01 int. 401

Website: <https://editura.ase.ro/>

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies Publishing House

ISSN: 2537 - 5865

ISSN-L: 2537 - 5865



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There are no submission fees, publication fees or page charges for articles published in **Journal of Emerging Trends in Marketing and Management (ISSN 2537-5865)**.

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Leading for Impact: Exploration of Leadership Styles and Organizational Performance

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Article history

Received 26 June 2025 | Accepted 21 November 2025 | Published online 05 December 2025.

Abstract

Numerous studies have shown that leadership style is a crucial factor in the success and growth of an organization in an environment as volatile as the current one. This study tests how leadership styles affect organizational effectiveness in Albanian agricultural enterprises. To determine this effect in a different context, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), a previously validated instrument, was used. Furthermore, managers and staff members from three different businesses participated in qualitative interviews to gain a deeper understanding and contextualize the results. According to these interviews, transformational leadership fosters an atmosphere that values creativity, strategic clarity, and employee empowerment. Individualized attention, inspired motivation, and idealized influence are among its key traits. On the other hand, stagnation, sometimes accompanied by a lack of creativity and a reduced sense of corporate responsibility, was commonly associated with passive leadership styles. In line with earlier work, this study, using both quantitative and qualitative evidence, supports the notion that transformational leadership has a positive impact on organizational effectiveness. In developing nations like Albania, where inclusive and flexible leadership is essential for sustained success, this study has ramifications for performance evaluations and leadership development.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Organizational Effectiveness, Leadership Styles, Innovation, Organizational Culture.

JEL classification: L26, M12.

Introduction

Nowadays, many organizations face challenges such as unethical business practices, high staff turnover, and slow economic growth, among others (Varma *et al.*, 2024). This could be because there aren't enough strong leaders. There are several leadership styles available, including transactional leadership, autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, participative management, and transformational management (Piwowar-Sulej and Iqbal, 2023). A leader is a person who inspires, directs, and persuades people to perform specific responsibilities in order to fulfill the organization's objectives (Varma *et al.*, 2024).

Transformational leadership is considered one of the leadership theories that has attracted the attention of numerous leadership scholars for more than two decades, even though the concepts of the transformational leadership model are not particularly new and can be found in the writings of previous management theorists (Muenjohn and Armstrong, 2008).

Employee engagement, performance, innovation, and organizational adaptability are just a few of the outcomes that are influenced by leadership, which is widely acknowledged as a critical predictor of organizational effectiveness (Yukl, 1989).

In industries like agribusiness, where businesses must deal with structural informality, scarce resources, and a heavy reliance on seasonal labor, leadership becomes more important.

Effective leadership is crucial in these situations; however, there remains a dearth of empirical research on the subject, particularly in emerging nations where institutional and organizational dynamics often diverge from those in developed markets.

Much research has provided light on the causes of employee engagement. Different leadership styles, including transformational leadership have been recognized as strong predictors of engagement (Breevaart and Bakker, 2018). Empowering leadership has also been found to influence work engagement through psychological empowerment and person-job-group fit (Mehmood and Saeed, 2021).

Transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire (or passive) leadership have become the most prevalent frameworks among the various types of leadership identified by leadership theories (Bass and Avolio, 1994). Transformational leadership encourages followers to prioritize the greater good over their interests by expressing a clear vision, stimulating intellectual curiosity, and offering targeted assistance (Bass, 1999; Podsakoff *et al.*, 1990). It has often been related to increased employee happiness, innovation, and organizational effectiveness (Judge and Piccolo, 2004).

On the other hand, transactional leadership is based on explicit interactions between the leader and followers, as well as the provision of dependent benefits. It frequently works well for completing tasks and achieving short-term objectives, but it has less impact on long-term organizational change and intrinsic motivation (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and Van Engen, 2003). Conversely, laissez-faire leadership has been linked to poor performance and job dissatisfaction, characterized by a reluctance to take on responsibility or make decisions (Skogstad *et al.*, 2007).

Although recent research has focused on entrepreneurial leadership style, progress has been hampered by a lack of conceptual development and appropriate instruments for measuring leaders' entrepreneurial attributes and activities (Renko *et al.*, 2015).

Furthermore, little is known about how leadership works in Albania's agricultural firms, which operate in a highly transitory and informal institutional environment. Albanian agribusinesses encounter distinct structural constraints, such as fragmented land ownership, restricted access to finance, seasonal employment, and a lack of structured leadership development programs, making leadership an important but underappreciated component in performance. Unlike organizations in developed countries, Albanian managers frequently rely on experience-based and relational leadership rather than established procedures or leadership training. As a result, there is a significant research gap in understanding how transformational, transactional, and passive leadership styles emerge and impact success in today's changing economic and cultural climate. By focusing on an understudied environment and merging several organizational views, the study aims to reveal insights that are both practical and academically useful for building leadership and enhancing performance in agriculture. This concept has both practical and academic implications for establishing leadership and improving performance in agriculture.

1. Literature review

The existing literature has extensively acknowledged the influence of leadership styles on organizational success, particularly in terms of how various approaches affect employee behavior and outcomes.

Transformational or charismatic leadership occupies a central place in leadership research as a style that places greater emphasis on elements such as charisma and emotions, while also emphasizing follower motivation and development (Strukan, Nikolić and Sefić, 2017).

Transformational leadership is defined by four dimensions: idealized influence,

intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration (Bass and Avolio, 1994). Leaders who display this approach choose to encourage followers to put their own interests aside for the good of the organization, and this, in many cases, increases commitment, innovation, and discretionary effort. (Judge and Piccolo, 2004; Podsakoff et al., 1990).

On the other hand, transactional leadership tends to produce results that are frequently limited to the accomplishment of short-term goals, even while it helps manage daily operations, focus on reward-punishment systems, and schedule activities restricts its ability to promote long-term innovation or staff development (Azzahra, Savandha and Syarif, 2024). Leaders who employ transactional methods, such as articulating clear expectations, offering established standards, and avoiding ambiguity, are more likely to gain the trust and obedience of their followers in uncertain or rapidly changing conditions (Vasilic and Brkovic, 2017).

While, laissez-faire or passive/avoidant leadership is distinguished by a lack of involvement and support from leaders, which is frequently regarded as inefficient or damaging (Choque et al., 2014; Tosunoglu, 2016). These leaders step in only when situations become urgent, avoid proactive decision-making, and fail to anticipate challenges (Bass and Avolio, 2004; Judge and Piccolo, 2004b).

Numerous studies have found that relationship-oriented leadership styles are associated with higher performance and satisfaction (Chen and Silverthorne, 2005). Laissez-faire leadership, characterized by its avoidance of decision-making and infrequent feedback, is likely to be associated with low organizational performance and employee dissatisfaction (Skogstad et al., 2007). For this reason, this style often signals disengagement and a leadership vacuum or absence, which can lead to poor coordination, demotivation, and unclear accountability (Bass and Avolio, 2011).

Researchers believe that leadership activities influence subordinates' behaviors, as well as their own and the organization's results, which affect outcomes such as goal achievement and group performance. Employee engagement evaluations are one of the most used approaches for measuring an organization's effectiveness. Surveys and structured questionnaires are frequently used to assess elements like as emotional involvement, dedication, and alignment with the organization's fundamental beliefs (Sundaray, 2011). Higher levels of engagement, a necessary component for attaining long-term strategic success, are typically fostered by leadership philosophies that prioritize employee support, acknowledgment, and involvement (Alhmoud and Al-Kasasbeh, 2024; Sokolic et al., 2024). Research indicates a direct correlation between higher motivation and employee-oriented leadership, suggesting that leaders who engage with their workforce experience improvements in performance and organizational resilience (Sokolic et al., 2024).

Another critical factor that is impacted by leadership style is the function of organizational culture. An organization's internal culture is largely shaped and maintained by its leaders, with a direct impact on performance results (Hariyati, 2024). Leaders who prioritize communication, inclusivity, and creativity are more likely to foster a supportive and cooperative culture that aligns with corporate objectives. Performance is further enhanced by this kind of setting, which promotes strategic alignment and shared values (Hariyati, 2024).

Numerous studies have shown that transformational leadership and organizational success are significantly positively correlated in a variety of industries, including food production and agriculture (Antonakis, 2012; Bacha, 2014).

On the other hand, transactions or agreements between the leader and the follower are the foundation of transactional leadership. It places a strong emphasis on performance monitoring, reward and punishment schemes, and explicit work assignments (Bass and Avolio, 1994). While often effective in stable environments where routines dominate, transactional

leadership has been found to produce only short-term compliance rather than long-term engagement (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and Van Engen, 2003). However, in some resource-constrained environments, such as agriculture in poor economies, transactional leadership can provide structure and clarity, increasing efficiency (Nyamota, Kiambi and Mburugu, 2024)

These results emphasize the necessity of establishing practical leadership competencies and investing in leadership development programs to improve organizational effectiveness and adapt to today's fast-paced business environment (Irianti, Syarifuddin and Haerani, 2024).

According to Azahra et al. (2024) and Alhmoud & Al-Kasa (2024) findings a strong factor in higher employee motivation and engagement, which in turn improves organizational performance, is transformational leadership. This kind of leadership fosters a feeling of purpose, encourages innovation, and motivates teams with an inspiring vision, all of which improve overall business success.

According to studies, transformational leadership is more effective than transactional leadership, even though both strategies enhance performance (Danso et al., 2019). While transformational leadership is critical for increasing organizational efficiency, other styles, like as transactional and servant leadership, can be beneficial in some situations (Irianti et al., 2024).

2. Methodology

If style measurement is plagued with uncertainty and criticism, yet this research community understands the value of psychometric rigor, what style tests do they recommend (Peterson, Rayner, and Armstrong, 2009)? To examine the correlation between leadership styles and perceived organizational effectiveness in Albania's agricultural sector, this study employed a quantitative research design.

The study was conducted at three significant Albanian agricultural firms that represent various aspects of the national food value chain.

Company 1, founded in 1993, is a joint-stock company (SHA) that leads a diverse conglomerate involved in the import and export of food and industrial items. It has a nationwide distribution network that serves both urban and rural markets, and it is regarded as one of the top firms for staff training and development.

Company 2, established in 2003 as a limited liability company, is Albania's largest domestic supermarket chain, managing a wide retail network in major cities and smaller towns with a hierarchical and operationally structured management style.

Company 3, created in 2007, is a limited liability business (SH.P.K) that produces meat and food byproducts. It has grown into a rapidly expanding meat processing company situated in Korça, combining process optimization and strategic modernization with goals to export to regional markets.

The online questionnaire was distributed to 500 employees and managers from the three companies. Of these, 325 genuine responses were collected: 110 from Company 1, 105 from Company 2, and 105 from Company 3, for a 65% total response rate. Among respondents, 56% were male and 44% female, with an average work experience of 5 years. To ensure balanced representation across departments and organizational levels, the responses came from all organizational levels, including supervisors, mid-level managers, and operational workers, ensuring a diverse perspective on leadership and performance.

Participants were told about the study's objectives and confidentiality guidelines, and their participation was fully voluntary and anonymous. Data collection adhered to the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and transparency as outlined by institutional and international research ethical guidelines.

The study utilized the use of the officially licensed version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ Form 5X-Short), which was obtained from Mind Garden, Inc., and allows

for the approved use of the instrument designed by Bass and Avolio (1994). The instrument has been widely verified in many cultural contexts and is still one of the most dependable measures for evaluating transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership styles (Bass and Avolio, 2011).

Based on Bass and Avolio's (1994) Full Range Leadership theory, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) serves as a tool to assess various leadership styles and is used in this study to evaluate leadership styles. Through several sub-dimensions, the MLQ assesses three primary leadership philosophies: transactional, transformational, and passive avoidant. Additionally, elements related to organizational outcomes, including effectiveness, satisfaction, and additional effort, were included in the instrument. The MLQ was adapted into an online questionnaire format using Google Forms, maintaining the original structure and Likert-type response scales to ensure validity and comparability with existing literature. Based on the previous literature and on the content of the MLQ questionnaire, we continue with three hypotheses:

H1: Transformational leadership style positively affects organizational effectiveness.

H2: Transactional leadership style negatively affects organizational effectiveness.

H3: Passive avoidant leadership style negatively affects organizational effectiveness.

Figure 1 below shows the hypothesis and relations that the study aims to test.

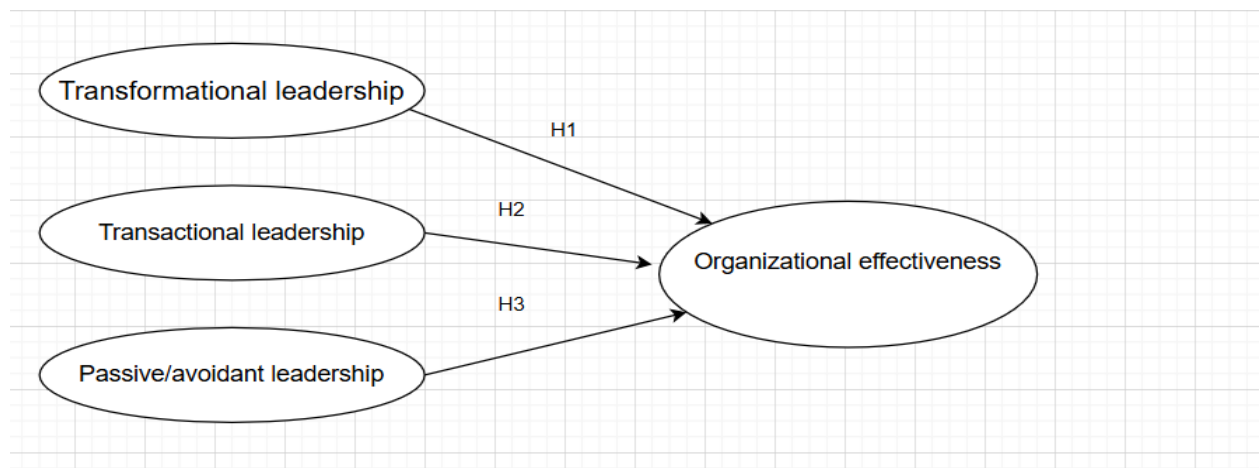


Figure 1: The Impact of Leadership Styles on Organizational Effectiveness

Source: Authors

The organizational effectiveness construct is measured by items as in Table 1.

Table 1: The composition of the organizational effectiveness construct

Construct	Sample Items
Leadership	<i>Leaders demonstrate integrity and ethical behavior. Management communicates a clear vision and direction.</i>
Strategy	<i>The organization has a well-defined strategic plan. Employees understand how their roles align with organizational goals.</i>
Culture	<i>Organizational culture promotes collaboration and innovation. Diversity and inclusion are valued and practiced.</i>
Innovation	<i>Employees are encouraged to propose new ideas. The organization invests in research and development.</i>
Structures, Systems, and Processes	<i>Processes are streamlined and efficient. Organizational structure supports effective communication.</i>

Skills and Competencies	<i>Employees have access to necessary training and development. Skill gaps are identified and addressed promptly.</i>
Performance Measures and Reward Systems	<i>Performance metrics are clearly defined and communicated. Reward systems are aligned with performance outcomes.</i>
Environmental, Sustainability, and Responsibility	<i>The organization actively engages in sustainable practices. Corporate social responsibility initiatives are in place.</i>

3. Results and discussion

The statistical analysis attempted to investigate the relationship between three Albanian agricultural firms perceived organizational success and their respective transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership styles. The data were examined in SPSS using multiple linear regression to assess how well each leadership style predicted differences in perceived effectiveness. Before analysis, the MLQ dimensions' reliability was checked, as well as the normality and multicollinearity assumptions.

Descriptive data showed that all three organizations had moderate to high levels of transformational leadership behaviors, whereas transactional and passive-avoidant tendencies were relatively low. The regression models provided in Table 2 below summarize the predicted impacts of each leadership dimension on organizational success for the three participating companies.

Table 2: Results from regression analyses for three companies

Company 1

Factors	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
const	0.1529	0.3317	0.4608	0.6459
transformational	1.0509	0.0959	10.9628	0
transactional	-0.016	0.084	-0.1909	0.849
passive_avoidant	-0.1046	0.0747	-1.4005	0.1643

Company 2

Factors	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
const	0.9557	0.2968	3.2203	0.0017
transformational	0.7286	0.0888	8.2041	0
transactional	0.1812	0.0821	2.2075	0.0295
passive avoidant	-0.1847	0.0562	-3.2837	0.0014

Company 3

Factors	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
const	-0.0203	0.2474	-0.0821	0.9348
transformational	1.0095	0.0806	12.5243	0
transactional	0.0621	0.09	0.6909	0.4912
passive avoidant	-0.1008	0.0416	-2.421	0.0172

Source: Authors, processed in SPSS

Regression analysis results from three Albanian agriculture enterprises provide essential information about the impact of transformative, transactional, and passive/avoidant leadership styles on perceived organizational effectiveness. A substantial and statistically significant predictor of organizational performance in Company 1 is transformational leadership ($B = 1.051$, $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that workers are more likely to assess their company as effective if they believe its executives are motivating, forward-thinking, and encouraging. It appears that typical exchange-based leadership or a lack of leadership is not linked to perceived effectiveness in this situation, as neither transactional leadership ($B = -0.016$, $p = 0.849$) nor

passive/avoidant leadership ($B = -0.105$, $p = 0.164$) has a significant impact.

Although they differ in strength and direction, Company 2's three leadership ideologies all show statistically significant relationships. Again, transformational leadership displays a substantial and favorable impact ($B = 0.729$, $p < 0.001$), confirming its position as a crucial factor in effectiveness. It's interesting to note that there is a positive and substantial correlation between transactional leadership and transformational behaviors in this business ($B = 0.181$, $p = 0.030$). This suggests that transformational behaviors may be enhanced by a more structured, reward-based leadership style. However, effectiveness and avoidant or passive leadership are negatively correlated ($B = -0.185$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting that disengaged or absentee leadership seriously impairs perceptions of organizational performance.

Consistent with results from the other two firms, transformational leadership remains a strong and significant predictor of effectiveness in Company 3 ($B = 1.010$, $p < 0.001$). However, passive/avoidant leadership has a substantial adverse effect ($B = -0.101$, $p = 0.017$) and transactional leadership has no meaningful influence ($B = 0.062$, $p = 0.491$), indicating once more that ineffective or absent leadership behaviors negatively impact organizational outcomes.

Transformational leadership consistently demonstrates the most significant impact on organizational effectiveness across all three businesses, underscoring the importance of inspiration, vision, and tailored support in enhancing performance in the agricultural industry. Only Company 2 has demonstrated a notable beneficial impact, suggesting that the function of transactional leadership is context-dependent.

In the meantime, organizational effectiveness is continuously harmed by inactive or avoidant leadership, particularly in Companies 2 and 3. These results underscore the importance for firms to develop leaders who are emotionally intelligent, engaged, and goal-oriented.

Conclusions

This study examines how leadership styles affect organizational effectiveness in the Albanian agricultural sector. This study combines quantitative data from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews to emphasize the importance of transformational leadership in fostering innovation and increasing employee engagement. Transformational leadership was consistently connected with increased perceived organizational success, particularly through its sub-dimensions of Inspirational Motivation, Idealized Influence, and Individualized Consideration. Passive leadership styles, on the other hand, were seen as contributing to organizational stagnation and disengagement, whereas transactional leadership had no impact on long-term strategic objectives.

These findings underscore the importance of agriculture enterprises in emerging economies investing in leadership development programs that foster transformative competencies. Furthermore, the study reveals that contextual characteristics such as organizational culture and structural informality influence leadership effectiveness, emphasizing the significance of adaptable and inclusive leadership approaches. This study makes a significant contribution to the ongoing discussion on leadership effectiveness, filling a gap in the literature on leadership in transitional economies. Future research could build on these findings by using longitudinal designs and investigating the mediating influence of corporate atmosphere or employee perceptions.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study expands the application of Full Range Leadership Theory (Bass and Avolio, 2011) to the setting of transitional and emerging economies, notably the Albanian agriculture sector, where empirical evidence has been scarce. By combining quantitative MLQ results with qualitative insights, the study validates

transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership aspects in an underexplored environment. The findings show that transformational leadership consistently predicts organizational effectiveness, even in the presence of institutional informality and little administrative structure, demonstrating the theory's universal validity.

The study also has practical implications for leaders, managers, and policymakers in Albania's agriculture sector. First, it emphasizes the importance of structured leadership development programs that improve transformational qualities, including individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation. Second, it implies that organizations in emerging markets can improve organizational performance not simply through technological modernization, but also by cultivating a culture of empowerment and trust. Finally, the findings might help HR departments and training institutes develop evidence-based leadership programs that address the unique difficulties of agricultural firms in transitional economies.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contribution, this study has several limitations. First, the study included only three agricultural enterprises in Albania, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other sectors or countries. Second, the data's cross-sectional character limits its capacity to draw causal inferences regarding the relationship between leadership styles and organizational performance. Third, primary data collected through surveys and interviews, which are based on participants' perceptions, may be subject to bias.

Future study could examine broadening the sample to include a broader range of businesses from various industries and areas. Longitudinal research would also provide a more complete picture of how leadership styles affect organizational outcomes over time. Furthermore, investigating moderating or mediating variables, such as organizational culture, psychological empowerment, or employee well-being, may enhance the theoretical foundation and practical applicability of future studies.

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Navigating the Digital Marketplace: A Qualitative Study of Generation Y's Retail and Social Commerce Preferences in South Africa

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Article history

Received 04 July 2025 | Accepted 21 November 2025 | Published online 05 December 2025.

Abstract

This study explores Generation Y's social commerce and retail preferences in South Africa, including online behaviors, product types, social commerce platforms, and optimal retail formats. Using qualitative focus groups comprised of participants selected via purposive sampling, the study determines a strong preference of Generation Y consumers for the convenience of online shopping as opposed to shopping at traditional brick-and-mortar stores. Instagram and Facebook Marketplace emerge as the dominant social commerce platforms, backed by their visual nature and influencer culture. Electronics, fashion, beauty products, books and homeware are the most popular product categories. Trustworthiness and reliability emerged as major concerns among participants, playing a decisive role in their purchase intention. This study addresses a significant literature void by placing these behaviors in South Africa's unique digital landscape, which is defined by economic disparity and varying levels of digital accessibility. The outcomes provide practical insights for retailers that want to develop and enhance their operations on social commerce platforms and drive plans to increase sales by attracting Generation Y within the rapidly growing digital market.

Keywords: Generation Y, e-commerce, social commerce, South Africa.

JEL classification: M31, L81, O33.

Introduction

The digital era has profoundly transformed consumer behavior, particularly among Generation Y, the first cohort to grow up with the internet and mobile technology as integral parts of their lives (Turner, 2015). Born between 1986 and 2005, Generation Y constitutes a significant segment of the global population and wields substantial purchasing power (Markert, 2004). Similarly, Generation Y has unique characteristics that developed due to the continuous exposure to digital environments which have led to different shopping behaviors compared to previous generations (Seemiller and Grace, 2019).

This is especially true in South Africa where Generation Y is progressively influencing the retail landscape as they come to expect the seamless integration of online and offline experiences and are heavily influenced by social media (Williams and Page, 2011). Consequently, the rapid acceptance of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Snapchat has distorted the borders amongst social interaction and commerce which is transforming these platforms into powerful tools for e-commerce through user-generated content and influencer marketing (Gentina et al., 2018; Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Given a retail environment with modern shopping centers and informal markets in a country with economic inequality and internet access issues like South Africa (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020), these patterns of change in consumers are difficult to explain outside the nature of the retail environment that exists. This study attempts to fill that gap by exploring

Generation Y's retail and social commerce behavior in South Africa.

Accordingly, this study seeks to explore Generation Y's retail and social commerce preferences in South Africa. The study aims to understand the preferred retail format of Generation Y consumers in South Africa, which social commerce platforms they prefer and why, the product categories they most frequently purchase through these platforms, and the challenges and concerns they experience when engaging in social commerce transactions.

This provides businesses with the necessary knowledge to be competitive in an ever-changing retail environment. This study contributes to the larger collection of research on how digital natives are changing commerce in the 21st century by establishing preferred retail channels and social commerce platforms, as well as preference drivers.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review, Section 3 outlines the research methodology, Section 4 discusses the findings, and Section 5 concludes with implications, limitations and recommendations for future research.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Generation Y: A Digital-First Mindset

Generation Y (Millennials and older Generation Z, born 1986 to 2005) are best known as the first to grow up immersed in digital technology, effectively shaping their attitudes and behaviors (Markert, 2004; Seemiller and Grace, 2019; Turner, 2015). Their natively digital mindset is evidenced through a strong preference for easy-to-use, real-time digital experiences and multitasking on many devices and platforms (Prensky, 2012).

Recent research highlights Generation Y's demand for personalization, immediacy, and interactive digital content (Smith, 2021). They expect brands to be present and responsive across digital channels, and value brands that offer integrated, omnichannel experiences (Priporas et al., 2017; Williams and Page, 2011).

While some scholars argue that Generation Y's digital immersion leads to higher digital literacy and adoption of innovation (Turner, 2015), others caution that digital fatigue and privacy concerns are increasingly influencing their online behaviors (Zhang et al., 2020). There is also debate regarding the extent to which digital-first preferences override the desire for in-person, tactile retail experiences, suggesting a continued need for hybrid retail models (Verhoef et al., 2015).

Despite extensive global research, there is limited empirical work on how socio-economic factors and digital divides within emerging markets, such as South Africa, moderate these digital-first behaviors (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020).

1.2 Social Commerce: From Social Networks to Shopping Ecosystems

Social commerce has rapidly evolved, with Generation Y at the forefront of this shift (Gentina et al., 2018; Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become critical for product discovery, peer validation and direct purchasing. Social commerce leverages peer-to-peer interactions, user-generated content, and influencer endorsements to drive engagement and sales (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Visual and video-based platforms are particularly effective, as they align with Generation Y's preference for immersive, interactive content (Smith, 2021). Furthermore, the integration of shopping features such as the new Instagram shops, Facebook Marketplace, as well as TikTok shopping has blurred the lines between social interaction and commerce (Sahu & Bhamboo, 2023).

While research emphasizes the democratizing effect of social commerce in enabling smaller brands and micro-entrepreneurs to reach large audiences (Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016), there are other studies that concentrate on the risks of fraud, misinformation, privacy intrusions, and the potential for social commerce to reinforce existing inequalities (Ezeji, 2024;

Govindankutty & Gopalan, 2023). Further context-specific research on the effectiveness of social commerce strategies in emerging markets where digital infrastructure and consumer confidence vary significantly is needed (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020).

1.3 Omnichannel Retail: Integrating Physical and Digital Touchpoints

Omnichannel retailing being the convenient joining up of online and offline shopping channels is increasingly important for engaging Generation Y (Priporas et al., 2017; Verhoef et al., 2015). Generation Y consumers also follow the "webrooming" (research online, buy offline) and "showrooming" (research offline, buy online) activities, expecting to receive the same product information, price and service quality across all touchpoints (Priporas et al., 2017; Verhoef et al., 2015). Mobile devices are at the pivot of this experience, both as research and buying tools (Google, 2016).

While omnichannel strategies are widely advocated, there are researchers who argue that the cost and complexity of integration may not yield commensurate returns in all markets, particularly where digital adoption is skewed (Herhausen et al., 2015). Others note that the success of omnichannel retailing depends on whether the retailer can offer an integrated experience, which for many remains an aspiration (Verhoef et al., 2015).

There is limited empirical research exploring how omnichannel strategies are received and adopted within developing economies like South Africa, particularly how economic disparities and infrastructural limitations shape consumer experiences (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020).

1.4 Influencer Marketing and Social Proof: Trust and Community in the Digital World

When it comes to consumption in Generation Y, influencer marketing and social proof demonstrate prevalence in this generation's consumption. Influencers, especially micro-influencers, are seen as authentic and relatable, allowing their endorsements to be strong motivators (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019). Moreover, Generation Y has more faith in word-of-mouth or user-generated content over traditional advertising (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015). Social proof, in the form of reviews, likes, and shares, also help to significantly enhance product credibility and purchase intention (Kim and Park, 2013).

The rise of micro-influencers reflects a shift toward authenticity and niche community engagement (De Veirman et al., 2017). There is ongoing debate about the long-term effectiveness of influencer marketing, with some studies suggesting diminishing returns as consumers become more aware of paid partnerships (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Others argue that the key to sustained influence lies in maintaining authenticity and transparency (De Veirman et al., 2017). Little is known about the specific impact of local influencers in South Africa, or how cultural and socio-economic factors shape perceptions of authenticity and trust in influencer marketing (Goldberg and Kotze, 2022).

1.5 Visual and Interactive Content as Key Drivers

Visual and interactive content is a key driver of engagement for Generation Y, who respond more favorably to images, videos, and interactive features than to static, text-based content (Smith, 2021). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok and YouTube have popularized short-form video, AR filters, and shoppable posts, creating immersive environments for product discovery and purchase (Smith, 2021). Interactive content such as polls, quizzes, and virtual try-ons enhance engagement and deepens the consumer-brand relationship (Nawaz et al., 2025).

While the effectiveness of visual content is widely recognized, some researchers caution that oversaturation and declining attention spans may reduce its impact over time (Smith,

2021). Others highlight that the success of interactive content depends on its relevance and integration with the overall brand narrative (Nawaz et al. 2025). There is a lack of research on the adoption and effectiveness of advanced visual technologies in South African social commerce, particularly among Generation Y (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020).

1.6 Social Commerce in the South African Context: Opportunities and Barriers

South Africa's social commerce landscape is shaped by unique socio-economic and infrastructural challenges, including a pronounced digital divide and concerns about privacy and security (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020; Goldberg and Kotze, 2022).

Generation Y consumers are increasingly engaged on social commerce sites which they use for product exploration, peer-to-peer engagement and purchase (Kemp, 2020). Smartphone penetration and availability of mobile data are increasing social commerce activity particularly among the youth (Kemp, 2020). Even though social commerce's potential to facilitate economic empowerment and entrepreneurship in developing economies is recognized (Gibreel et al., 2018), issues like unequal access to stable internet, digital illiteracy and high incidences of online fraud persist (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020; Goldberg and Kotze, 2022).

It is essential to engage in context-specific research that examines how challenges and opportunities change, more specifically how local retailers can develop social commerce activities that address different needs of distinct segments of Generation Y in South Africa (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020).

2. Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the social commerce and retail format preferences of Generation Y consumers in South Africa. This study adopted a neo-positivist inductive paradigm as it focused on understanding human behavior by employing a qualitative descriptive design (Ayeni et al., 2019; Sandelowski, 2010). Qualitative research can provide a more profound understanding of consumer intentions, motivations and perceptions, providing reasons for their decisions and preferences in the marketplace (Branthwaite and Patterson, 2011).

A non-probability purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants in South Africa who form part of the Generation Y cohort and who have purchased a product on a social commerce platform in the past six months to ensure participants have recent and relevant experiences. An invitation to the study was posted on social commerce platforms including Facebook and Instagram. Three focus group sessions ensued, culminating in a total of 26 participants. Across all three focus groups, participants represented a reasonably balanced gender distribution and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants were primarily urban-based consumers within the Generation Y cohort, all of whom had purchased at least one product via a social commerce platform in the past six months. Focus groups enable a deeper understanding of how consumers think and behave (Mishra, 2016).

A six-phase thematic analysis process devised by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the data, including familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition and reporting. The method allowed the researchers to identify, describe and interpret patterns within the data (Vaismoradi and Snelgrove, 2019). Four major themes were identified explaining Generation Y's retail format and social commerce platform preferences in South Africa and provided insights into the product categories sought and challenges experienced.

To ensure coding reliability, two independent qualitative researchers reviewed the preliminary codes and theme structure to ensure consistency and to confirm alignment between the data and the coding framework. Discrepancies were discussed collaboratively until consensus was reached, ensuring that codes accurately represented participants' perspectives.

This process enhanced inter-coder reliability and minimized researcher bias.

Trustworthiness was ensured by considering four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was achieved via prolonged engagement, member checking and persistent observation, while purposeful sampling and thick descriptions ensured transferability. Dependability and confirmability were enhanced by performing an audit trail, peer debriefing and recording and transcribing focus group discussions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Strict ethical guidelines were adhered to when conducting the study. Participants provided informed consent to partake in the study and were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were assigned numbers that were used in the reporting of results to protect personal identities. The study was reviewed and approved by the scientific and ethics committees of the affiliated institution, ensuring compliance with ethical standards involved when conducting research on human subjects (Wiles, 2012).

3. Results and Discussion

Four key themes emerged by analyzing the data concerning Generation Y's preference and use of social commerce platforms:

Theme 1: Preferred Retail Format

The study found that most participants prefer to shop online rather than frequent brick-and-mortar stores. Their preference is predominantly due to the convenience offered by online shopping. In addition, participants mentioned that online shopping enables them to compare prices and product alternatives from several different stores without having to physically travel between them. As such, some participants perceive online shopping to be cheaper compared to shopping at physical stores. Participants stated that when shopping online, they can view all the products available for sale in a particular product category, even if those products are out of stock. On the contrary, when shopping at a physical store, one is not always able to see which products are available for sale that might be out of stock at that particular moment.

Participant 8 said: *"I definitely prefer shopping online more than in store...it provides quite a broad platform to compare products"*. Participant 10 noted: *"I don't think I will ever go into a store again to buy a gadget, not even after Covid"*. Participant 12 stated: *"It is more convenient to shop online than to go into a physical store"*. Participant 3 said: *"It makes it easier to see everything instead of in a shop where you go and don't always notice where it is"*. Participant 18 noted: *"If I go to the shop and spend money on petrol and everything and time and going out and I get there and it's not in stock, wasting a lot of time"*.

Recent studies support these findings, indicating that an increasing number of consumers prefer shopping online due to ease of use, convenience and product choice and availability (Priporas et al. 2017; Rahman et al., 2018). A study conducted by Lo et al. (2014) confirms that consumers perceive the price of products from an online retailer to be significantly lower than that of a brick-and-mortar store. Ives et al. (2019) are of the opinion that the convenience, efficiency and perceived economic value of online shopping could disrupt the broader retail industry. Traditional retailers are therefore responding to online competition by offering more discounts and promotions (Grewal et al., 2017). A recent study conducted by Goldberg and Mostert (2025) found that some consumers prefer to shop at physical stores mainly due to more promotions and sales specials offered by these stores.

Theme 2: Preferred Social Commerce Platforms

The results of the study indicate that most participants prefer to shop on Instagram. Users find the platform to be visually appealing, allowing them to see multiple images and videos of the product for sale and allows them the opportunity to see how other consumers on Instagram demonstrate how the product can be used. Some participants commented on the efficiency and

practicality of Instagram's user interface, stating how easy it is to search for products and to complete transactions online.

Participant 3 said: *"I prefer Instagram – I'm addicted to that app"*. Participant 2 noted: *"I prefer Instagram for the mere fact that it is a visually appealing platform, and you can see the pricing upfront – and it's also mobile-friendly"*. Participant 6 stated: *"I definitely prefer Instagram because I usually see people wearing stuff and then I look who they've tagged or I get a sponsored ad and it's so easy to just click on it, confirm your details – because Instagram have most of your details so you can just click on autofill and there you go"*.

The results of this study align with those of Herzallah et al. (2022) who found that ease of use, especially amongst younger consumers, contributes to Instagram being the preferred social commerce platform. A study conducted by Djafarova and Bowes (2021) further support these findings by affirming that advertisements, influencers and user-generated content have a positive influence on the purchase intention of consumers who shop on Instagram. User-generated content has been found to have a positive significant influence on perceived trust, which in turn has a positive significance on purchase intention within the social commerce context (Zakaria et al., 2024).

Another popular social commerce platform among participants on which to browse and shop is Facebook Marketplace. The reason for the platform's popularity is more economic in nature as participants perceive Facebook Marketplace to offer better prices, attractive deals on products and services, and the option to negotiate prices is deemed an added advantage. Participants find it particularly useful to have direct and immediate contact with the seller by using the Facebook Messenger function. Participants also noted that the wider availability of cheaper second-hand products is an appealing factor.

Participant 2 said: *"You really get good deals on Facebook Marketplace"*. Participant 7 echoed this by stating: *"I really enjoy the deals that you can get on Marketplace"*. Participant 5 said: *"It is much easier to negotiate the price on Facebook"*.

The findings of a study conducted by Hajli et al. (2017) affirm that Facebook Marketplace is one of the more popular social commerce platforms among consumers and that the familiarity and social presence of the platform increases purchase intentions. Furthermore, the results of this study align with the findings of Sharma et al. (2024) that confirm economic motivation significantly impacts consumers' decision to purchase products on Facebook Marketplace, specifically due to the availability of lower-priced second-hand clothing items and the opportunity to bargain with sellers. Furthermore, the results of this study are consistent with previous research conducted by Guo and Li (2022), asserting that consumers find value in their ability to obtain feedback and interact with the seller via the direct messaging functions on social commerce platforms, which in turn has a positive impact in repurchase intention.

Theme 3: Product Categories

Electronics, fashion, beauty products, books and homeware emerged as the top product categories purchased by participants on social commerce platforms. Participants noted that these products are clearly displayed online with user-generated content showing how products are used by fellow consumers. In addition, reviews provided by consumers who have tested or used such products previously provide additional information and support purchase decisions. Very few participants indicated that they purchase jewelry or food items on social commerce platforms. Most participants stated that they prefer to purchase lower-priced products on social commerce platforms, while opting to purchase more expensive or complex products, as well as perishable items from reputable and more established e-commerce sites or physical stores, as most of these channels allow them to test or evaluate the product beforehand.

Participant 15 noted: *"I sometimes find face-to-face stores more trustworthy when it comes to expensive purchases"*. Participant 16 said: *"I can also touch and feel the product and*

then I feel more comfortable spending money like that". Participant 18 stated: *"Things like food products I'd rather buy in a physical shop than in an online store"*. Participant 2 noted: *"On social commerce I'd buy gadgets as well as other electronics, which is really helpful, especially if you can't get it in a small town like Potchefstroom"*. Participant 17 added: *"Mostly electronics because it's more reliable for me as a consumer to purchase these online"*. Participant 21 said: *"I have mostly bought clothes on social media"*. Participant 10 noted that they would not buy expensive products on social commerce by stating: *"Second-hand items; not products that are extremely expensive"*.

These findings are congruent with a study conducted by Maia et al. (2018) affirming that electronics and books are amongst the top product categories purchased on social commerce platforms. Furthermore, Van Tran et al. (2023) found that social commerce platforms have become a dominant source of fashion items where reference groups like friends, celebrities and influencers inspire various styles.

However, Yusuf et al. (2024) found that consumers are apprehensive to purchase beauty products and fashion items online due to information asymmetry and the inability to touch, smell and test the product prior to purchase.

Theme 4: Challenges in Social Commerce

The two dominant challenges that emerged from analyzing the data are trustworthiness and reliability. Participants seldom trust sellers on social commerce platforms due to past experiences in which they were scammed. In addition, participants stated that they do not always receive the product advertised, and that at times, a different product will be delivered, or the product will be fake or riddled with defects. A logistical issue then ensues trying to return the product to the seller and to request a refund. At this stage, sellers often disappear or do not respond to buyers' complaints or refund requests.

A few participants mentioned that user-generated content, product reviews and commentary on social commerce platforms cannot always be reliable, as companies sponsor consumers to promote products and services, and as such, a true and reliable review is not reflected.

Participant 9 said: *"Some companies, kick-starter companies or companies that just started, sometimes they buy their commentary and reviews, which means that in the beginning, if it's something new, you can't really rely on those comments and reviews"*. Participant 20 added: *"...with Facebook Marketplace, some people scam you"*. Participant 3 noted: *"People can be very unreliable on Facebook Marketplace"*. Participant 11 said: *"On Facebook Marketplace and Gumtree, you are only shown what you want to see, but not everything about the product for sale"*. Participant 5 echoed this sentiment by saying: *"You can't always trust the picture that is shown"*.

The results of this study are aligned with previous studies indicating that trust plays a critical role in consumers' purchase intentions and word-of-mouth referrals (Hajli et al., 2017; Kim and Park, 2013). A study conducted by Acoba et al. (2023) confirmed that consumers frequently encounter fraudulent activities when shopping online including the delivery of defective products, sellers who disappear once the transaction has been concluded and misleading or false information provided by the seller concerning the product or service on offer, customer reviews, and contact details of the business or seller themselves. In their study Pour et al. (2022) emphasizes the importance of businesses to effectively manage challenges prevalent on social commerce platforms to ensure positive customer experience, and by so doing, increasing purchase intention.

Conclusions, limitations and future directions of research

This study provides insight into the retail and social commerce preferences of Generation

Y in South Africa. The findings suggest that participants choose to shop online as opposed to shopping at traditional brick-and-mortar stores. This decision can primarily be attributed to the convenience offered by online shopping, the ability to compare prices and products across a wide spectrum of online stores from the comfort of their homes, and the shared perception that products and services are offered at cheaper prices online than in physical stores.

The study underscores the importance of retailers in South Africa offering a seamless online shopping experience by ensuring that consumers can search for, evaluate and pay for products quickly and easily on intuitive, user-friendly social commerce platforms. Retailers should also recognize that Generation Y actively compare products and prices online and should therefore clearly display product prices and product details to facilitate comparison. Goldberg and Mostert (2025) found that some consumers prefer to shop at brick-and-mortar stores due to the perception of such stores offering more promotions and bargains. As such, retailers selling on social commerce platforms may choose to offer price-matching guarantees, as this would increase purchase intention among Generation Y consumers who are promotion focused (Verma et al., 2019).

Retailers targeting Generation Y consumers should ensure their presence on Instagram and Facebook Marketplace to effectively reach and communicate with this cohort. For Instagram, retailers should invest in high-quality visual content including photos and videos of products offered. Influencer collaboration and user-generated content campaigns could increase sales, brand awareness and customer engagement (Agustian et al., 2023). When advertising on Facebook Marketplace, retailers should emphasize low pricing and present the option to negotiate price using Facebook Messenger with the aim of building rapport with potential buyers. Casimiro et al. (2022) found that Facebook Messenger is a preferred means of communication, and that the information, assurance and empathy received via messages have a positive impact on purchase intention.

Retailers selling higher-priced or complex products on social commerce platforms should offer features that would allow consumers to test the product prior to purchase, for example, a virtual try-on function. In addition, detailed product specifications should be offered, as well as generous return policies offer low levels of return effort. This will enhance Generation Y's confidence and improve purchase intention (Jeng, 2017).

Trust and perceived risk are significant concerns shared among consumers when shopping online, which in turn affects purchase and repurchase intention (Lazaroiu et al., 2020). To improve consumer confidence, build trust and ensure sustained growth in social commerce, businesses must ensure that various trust-building strategies are put in place. Consumers should feel safe when payments are made online and should be offered fair and transparent return policies. In addition, retailers should provide in-depth and accurate product descriptions, highlighting any possible damage or defects to products, specifically when selling second-hand items. Customer complaints should be handled effectively and efficiently to maintain credibility and to foster long-term consumer trust.

Some limitations of this study were identified. Firstly, considering the qualitative nature of the study, a relatively small sample size was realized using purposive sampling. Even though rich insights were obtained, the findings may not be extrapolated to a wider population of Generation Y consumers across South Africa and other parts of the world. Secondly, the study focused on understanding consumer perspectives, failing to explore the viewpoints of retailers on social commerce platforms. Such insight could have provided a more holistic understanding of social commerce behavior and challenges. Thirdly, the study investigated Generation Y's preferences and perceived challenges, but did not quantify purchase frequency, transaction values, or conversion rates. This limits the study's ability to offer more predictive insights.

It is recommended that future studies implement a quantitative approach, including larger

and more representative samples across different countries and demographic groups, as this would enable greater generalization of results. Furthermore, future research could focus on exploring the perspectives of retailers and social commerce managers to better understand different operations challenges and opportunities in providing a safe and enjoyable online shopping environment.

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Implementation Models of Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education Marketing

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Article history

Received 15 June 2025 | Accepted 02 December 2025 | Published online 05 December 2025.

Abstract

As a result of increasing global competition and rapid technological progress, higher education institutions are adopting innovative strategies to increase their visibility and attract potential students. This paper aims to explore how artificial intelligence (AI) is shaping university marketing through an integrative analysis of the practices used and the academic literature. The research uses a qualitative methodology based on a comprehensive review of the specialized literature that analyzes the implementation of AI in higher education marketing. Chatbots, predictive analytics and personalized content delivery systems are among the most widely used AI technologies, and the benefits they offer are numerous: they significantly increase student engagement, improve administrative processes and provide institutional branding strategies. At the same time, generative AI manages to provide personalized educational experiences, thus supporting inclusion and facilitating access to high-quality education, even in the case of universities with limited resources. The study identifies key indicators for assessing the adoption of artificial intelligence in higher education, such as student satisfaction, academic performance, and international collaboration. The paper addresses an important gap in the specialized literature, namely the absence of a systematic and integrated set of indicators that would allow for the objective assessment of how prestigious universities adopt artificial intelligence. The conclusions highlight the transformative potential of AI in educational marketing and recommend a balanced integration between digital innovation and traditional methods to ensure the relevance and competitiveness of institutions. The original contribution consists in proposing a synthetic framework for understanding university marketing based on AI, offering practical solutions.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, university marketing, digital, higher education branding, personalized communication, social media.

JEL classification: I23, M31, O33.

Introduction

Currently, higher education marketing is increasingly oriented towards digitalization, personalization and strategic relationships with prospective students. In a global environment marked by increased competition, higher education institutions are implementing innovative promotional methods to attract both national and international students. These efforts are supported by the extensive use of digital platforms and tools, emphasizing the need to consolidate a solid institutional brand and direct and effective communication with the target audience.

Hence, in the field of university education, as in other fields of activity, brand marketing can create a good reputation and image of the institution, so that it is recognized by beneficiaries as a provider of quality products and services (Liu & Chen, 2021). From an academic point of view, innovation in education is an important component in university management, which is reflected in the implementation of work models capable of integrating new trends in the various fields of knowledge, so that the university responds to social demands (Rodríguez-Hoyos et al., 2021).

In this context, the rapid progress of artificial intelligence has revolutionized the labor market and society, having significant applications in various sectors such as health, industry, but also education (Qian, et al., 2024). Moreover, generative artificial intelligence finds its

utility in various ways, including in the generation of text, images, videos, codes, sound, as well as other types of created content. (Banh and Strobel, 2023).

The paper examines the opportunity for integrating artificial intelligence at the university level, considering the multiple components of academic activities, from teaching and research to administrative support processes. The present research brings together essential indicators regarding the adoption of AI in prestigious higher education institutions and provides an overview of how these emerging technologies are integrated into the academic environment.

1. Review of the literature

1.1. Branches of Artificial Intelligence

According to Ulloa (2024), Artificial Intelligence can be divided into two main branches, depending on the size of the data sets and the purpose pursued:

- ***Predictive Artificial Intelligence***, based on algorithms that analyze historical data from small or medium sets to predict future outcomes and which includes technologies such as machine learning, deep learning and cognitive learning.
- ***Generative Artificial Intelligence***, based on large linguistic models (LLM) and massive data sets, mainly unlabeled, to create new content (texts, images, music, code, etc.) based on learned patterns.

Artificial intelligence, both predictive and generative, is changing the way marketers understand consumer behavior and target their audiences. The influence of digital marketing is growing, and the analysis of big data is possible thanks to technological advances, while also offering new solutions for achieving sustainability goals (Grewal et al., 2024).

Due to AI's ability to deeply analyze consumer behavior and preferences, brands can increase their engagement levels and create personalized marketing campaigns tailored to each individual customer (Labib, 2024). Blending predictive AI with generative AI enables the rapid creation of optimized options, models, and concepts in areas such as marketing and design: generative AI produces variants, while predictive AI evaluates them based on cost, performance, or consumer behavior. But at the beginning and end of the process, humans set the constraints and make the final decision on the best solution (Ulloa, 2024).

1.2. The role of branding and innovation in higher education

According to Bolshakova et al. (2020), university marketing involves a strategic approach, which involves the application of marketing principles in the management of higher education institutions. Moreover, the addition of the term “educational” to the term “marketing” generates a specialized field, which involves the application of marketing methods, policies and strategies in the field of education (Manea & Purcaru, 2017).

Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown (2012) argue that, currently, educational marketing represents an indispensable side for competitive educational institutions, which must be efficient in relation to the interests of all beneficiaries of their services. The marketing strategies used by educational institutions are based on elements of social marketing and service marketing, given that higher education is shaped by the dynamics of social demands (Schidolski et al, 2023) and education is presented as a marketable service. In addition, higher education institutions apply elements of consumer psychology by capitalizing on the university brand they own (Liang, 2022).

From a social marketing perspective, the objectives include increasing the level of education, acquiring fundamental knowledge and developing the skills necessary for social integration and adapting to the standards required by the labor market (Schidolski et al, 2023). Although educational marketing focuses on identifying competitive advantages, meeting student needs and adapting to demographic changes, the finality is represented by the planning

of educational products, implementing flexible pricing strategies and developing effective communication channels with various stakeholders (Bolshakova et al., 2020). Thus, artificial intelligence offers educational institutions valuable tools to strengthen their positioning in the educational market and facilitate their organizational processes (Bhardwaj et al., 2024). The development of artificial intelligence (AI) in recent years has reshaped educational marketing, so that educational institutions can address potential students through marketing strategies integrated with AI, while ensuring their competence, responsibility and adaptability in the digital environment (Richter et al., 2024). Moreover, generative artificial intelligence has the potential to revolutionize educational marketing by both improving the learning experience and empowering institutions with limited resources to provide the highest quality education, all these benefits, however, also impose a series of measures capable of mitigating the implicit risks of integrating AI into university marketing (Acar, 2024).

1.3. Current trends in university marketing

In an increasingly competitive and constantly changing academic environment, universities must align their strategies with new directions in branding and digital marketing (Gómez-Bayona et al., 2024). Accordingly, the main trends in university marketing can be summarized as follows:

a. Digital and social media marketing. Universities are making intensive use of social media platforms. Almost all higher education institutions in the US are integrating them into their promotional strategies. Among the methods used are collaboration with influencers, video marketing, and user-generated content, to increase engagement and expand reach (Pawar, 2024; Karpova & Burukina, 2019).

b. Personalization and data-driven strategies. Email marketing continues to be an effective tool, especially through list segmentation and message personalization, which contributes to the creation of individualized experiences for candidates (Karpova & Burukina, 2019). Data analysis and decision-making based on this data are becoming essential for evaluating the effectiveness of campaigns and optimizing them (Na et al., 2025; Karpova & Burukina, 2019).

c. Innovative content and active engagement. Video content, especially on platforms such as YouTube, is increasingly having an impact on prospective students' decisions regarding their study choices. Creative social media campaigns and mobile-centric approaches are being used to attract young people in an innovative way (Karpova & Burukina, 2019).

d. Strategic positioning and brand building. Higher education institutions are increasingly paying attention to developing a strong brand through well-defined marketing strategies, often coordinated by executive-level specialists (Zinkan, 2017). The use of new media and digital networks is becoming an essential contemporary tool for positioning universities in a competitive environment (Buyanza-Mwidima & Nkeni, 2021).

e. Marketing and differentiation. Universities are adopting commercial practices to differentiate themselves and attract students. This process involves highlighting the particularities of the study conditions (programs, partnerships, modern campus,) and the purpose of the educational process, which resides both in the employability of graduate students and in the student experience (Chapleo & O'Sullivan, 2017; Kovalchuk et al., 2021).

f. Integrated marketing strategies. Institutions develop long-term marketing strategies that integrate systematic analysis and careful planning, aiming to adapt to the constantly changing needs of students and ensure sustainable and competitive growth (Kovalchuk et al., 2021).

g. Digital and innovative marketing tools. The use of digital marketing tools is becoming indispensable, offering increased opportunities for student engagement and developing the skills needed for their future careers (Choez et al., 2024; Mammadova, 2023). Emerging

strategies include the use of new media, student lifecycle management, and academic networking (Buyanza-Mwidima & Nkeni, 2021).

h. Globalization and internationalization. Internationalization strategies aim to attract international students, while balancing commercial objectives with sustainable educational development (Zhou et al., 2024). In a context where higher education is perceived as a global product, universities are looking for creative ways to respond to the diversity of student demands (Buyanza-Mwidima & Nkeni, 2021).

i. Brand and reputation management. Universities invest in strengthening brand equity both nationally and internationally, which requires a clear understanding of the target market and effective communication with it (Mammadova, 2023).

Hence, in the spirit of increasing the efficiency of universities from different perspectives of specific activities, marketing practice proposes a new approach to it from the perspective of integrating artificial intelligence, highlighting the fact that educational services should focus more on managing consumer needs than on directly satisfying these needs (Grandinetti, 2020).

2. Methodology

A systematic literature analysis was applied using the Rayyan platform, through a rigorous search in academic databases (Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest, Google Scholar) with terms such as “Artificial Intelligence” or “AI” and “university marketing” or “higher education marketing”. For the systematic analysis of the specialized literature on the use of AI in university marketing, two research questions were formulated: how is AI used in university marketing strategies and which AI technologies are most frequently used in academic marketing.

The article selection strategy included five stages:

1. *Initial search in databases (Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest, SpringerLink, IEEE Xplore, etc.) using Boolean operators – and, or*
2. *Elimination of duplicates and screening of the title/abstract.*
3. *Full text review based on inclusion/exclusion criteria.*
4. *Evaluation of the quality of the articles using the CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme-checklist for critical evaluation of different types of studies: qualitative, randomized, observational, etc.) technique, with the help of which the quality of the research questions, the methodology, and the possibility of generalizing the results were assessed.*

For the selection and evaluation of the quality of the studies, a PRISMA flow was built in which the following were included (**Figure 1**): Number of initial articles from each database; Number of articles eliminated after screening of the title and abstract; Number of articles excluded after full reading; Number of studies included in the final analysis.

5. Data extraction and analysis

Thematic synthesis and narrative analysis techniques were used to structure the data into relevant categories:

- Types of AI used (chatbots, machine learning, data analysis).
- Areas of application (branding, social media marketing, personalization).
- Impact on academic institutions (increasing enrollment, improving student experience).

In addition, AI-assisted documentation was used, through the Gemini platform (a large-scale linguistic model developed by Google). Gemini (Google, 2025) was used as a support tool for identifying and organizing information on the applicability of AI in universities, contributing to the generation of thematic syntheses and preliminary hypotheses. The data generated by artificial intelligence was verified by comparing key statements with academic sources and adjusting the results to ensure accuracy and methodological consistency. It is

emphasized that the data generated by artificial intelligence was verified, supplemented and adapted to meet academic requirements.

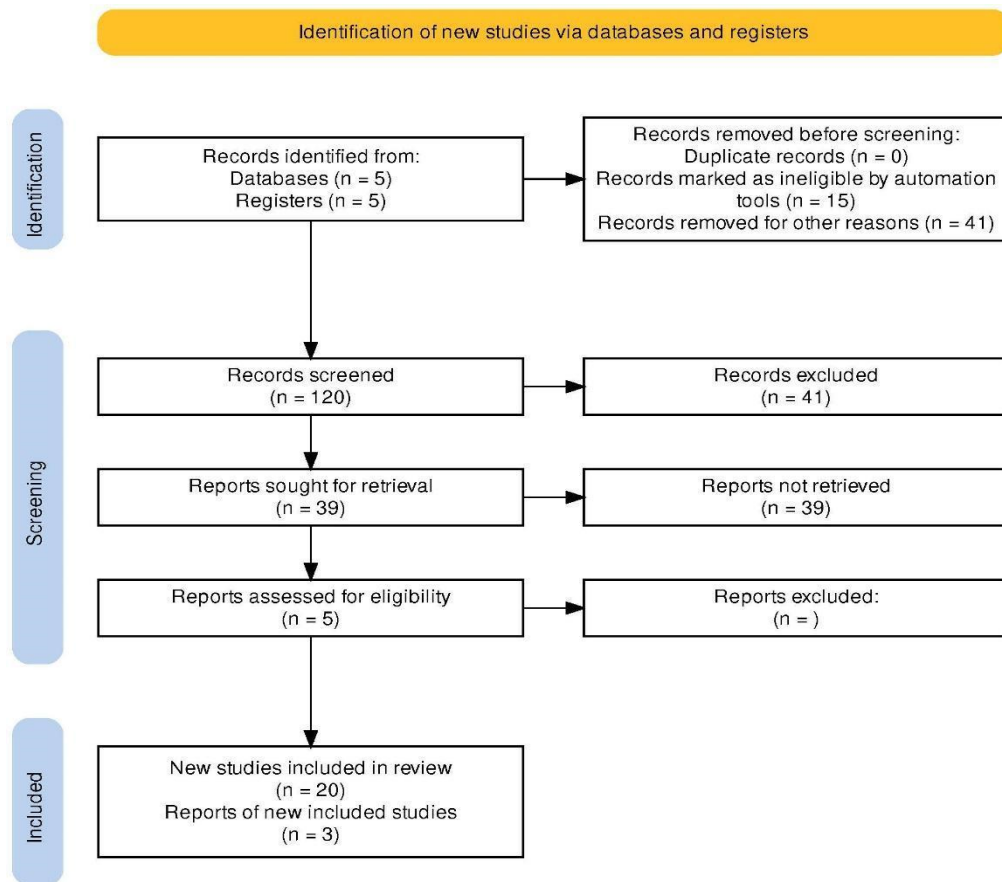


Figure.1. Identification of articles related to the topic in databases

3. AI Implementation Models in University Marketing

AI technologies, such as chatbots, predictive analytics, and personalized content delivery, are being used to improve the reach and resonance of marketing strategies in the university environment. Owoc et al. (2021) reveals a substantial increase in student inquiries, application rates, and enrollment numbers after implementing AI tools in higher education institutions. Moreover, AI has the potential to revolutionize the learning process by making it more efficient, personalized, and accessible (Chervona et al., 2023). Thus, artificial intelligence offers the opportunity to overcome the traditional constraints of education related to time and space, not only by developing students' digital skills, but also by stimulating their creativity and collaboration, and a recent study (Akinwalere & Ivanov, 2022) analyzed how universities use this technology, as shown in the table below (*Table 1*).

Table 1. Applications of AI in the university environment

University name	Applications of artificial intelligence (AI)
MIP Politecnico di Milano Graduate School of Business	Development of the FLEXA platform for assessing students' professional skills and providing personalized content
University of New South Wales (UNSW)	Implementation of a chatbot (QBot) to answer students' questions, create a knowledge base and use facial recognition technology to monitor course attendance

Pearson Group	Developing AI-powered language learning apps, such as LongWen Xiaoying, that offer personalized learning and automated assessment
Washington State University	Using the Cialfo platform to attract international students and ease the enrollment process
Georgia State University	Implementing the Pounce chatbot to answer students' frequently asked questions and reduce dropout rates after enrollment.
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute	Using a 360-degree immersive language learning lab and monitoring student participation through facial recognition

Source: Akinwalere & Ivanov, 2022.

Leaving the realm of scientific research and specialized literature, we generated with the help of Gemini, a multimodal artificial intelligence model developed by Google AI, a list of educational institutions that use such tools, as we can see in the table below (**Table 2**), addressing the following request: *Give me some university websites that use AI, specifying also the ways of use for each educational institution.*

Table 2. AI applications in educational institutions

University	Official Website	Use of AI
University of Oxford, UK	www.ox.ac.uk	Uses AI chatbots to assist students and personalize the experience on the website
Georgia State University, SUA	www.gsu.edu	Uses the “Pounce” chatbot for information about courses and financial aid
University of Edinburgh, UK	www.ed.ac.uk	Integrates AI for personalized recommendations based on users' behavior on the website.
Technical University of Munich (TUM), Germany	www.tum.de	Uses AI algorithms to analyze student data and personalize available information.
Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania	www.ubbcluj.ro	Implemented AI solutions to support administrative processes and course management.
Imperial College London, UK	www.imperial.ac.uk	Uses AI to analyze student feedback and improve educational programs.

Source: Google, 2025

Also, with the help of the artificial intelligence model developed by Google AI, Gemini, we requested a centralization of indicators that allow for the objective assessment of trends in the integration of artificial intelligence in prestigious universities. In a recent analysis, specialists from the renowned audit firm Deloitte, guide higher education leaders to cultivate a culture of change and embrace the transformative power of generative artificial intelligence in academia, presenting the advantages of this new technology. They highlight the major advantages of new technologies, and the merged results are shown in the table below (**Table 3**).

Table 3. AI Integration Metrics and Application Domains in Higher Education

Domain/ Indicator	Category/ Description	Examples of AI Uses/ Purpose
Extent of AI Utilization	Percentage of university programs and services that integrate AI (e.g. chatbots, data analytics).	Measuring the adoption of AI technologies in the institution.
Student satisfaction	Evaluating student feedback on the use of AI technologies in educational processes.	Determining the efficiency and impact of AI on students.
Academic performance	Comparing the academic results of students who use AI resources with those who do not.	Assessing the effect of AI on educational performance.
Number of research projects	Number of research projects that use AI, including international collaborations.	Measuring involvement in advanced research in the field of AI.
Investments in technology	Amounts invested in the development and implementation of AI solutions in the university.	Assessing the institution's commitment to innovation.
External collaborations	Number of partnerships with industry or other institutions for the development of AI technologies.	Measuring inter-institutional and industrial collaboration. IT infrastructure Assessment of IT infrastructure required to implement AI solutions (e.g. servers, software).
IT infrastructure	Assessment of IT infrastructure required to implement AI solutions (e.g. servers, software).	Ensuring technical support for AI integration.
Training programs	Number of courses or workshops dedicated to training staff and students in the use of AI	Promoting the skills required for the use of AI.
Operational excellence	Streamlining Administration Transforming the Employee Experience Accelerating Financial Perspectives	Automate document processing for expense reporting and procurement management. Conduct initial screening of job candidates, assist with onboarding, skills inventory, and sourced training. Verify financial policy compliance, improve forecasting and budgeting.
Student Success	Personalizing Learning Supporting Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Improving Financial Accessibility	Improving the admissions process, creating virtual tutors to provide individualized learning plans and personalized career guidance. Translating teaching materials, recruiting students from diverse backgrounds, using sign language and AAC systems, creating accessible campus maps. Automating FAFSA renewal notifications, matching students with scholarships and financial aid, personalizing loan repayment processes.
Research	Identifying opportunities Accelerate grant responses Support research administration	Identifying research trends and synthesizing emerging insights to uncover research opportunities and improve collaboration. Reduce the workload for literature reviews

		and generate faster grant responses, increasing their quality and quantity. Accelerate policy reviews and responses, by using virtual assistants
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Source: Google Gemini & Deloitte analysis, 2024.

In order to achieve its purpose for which it was created, ARACIS - Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education has as its main mission the external evaluation of the quality of education offered by higher education institutions and other organizations providing specific higher education study programs, operating in Romania. Thus, ARACIS annually develops a methodology through which it establishes performance indicators in the higher education system, as found in **Table 4**.

Table 4. ARACIS 2024 Performance Indicators

Indicator	Description
Quality of study programs	Evaluation of the content, structure and updating of study programs according to market requirements.
Student satisfaction	Measuring the degree of student satisfaction with the quality of teaching, available resources and academic support.
Academic performance	Analyzing the academic results of students, including the promotion and completion rate of studies.
Research and innovation	Evaluation of research activities carried out by faculties, including publications, projects and international collaborations.
Human resources	Analysis of the qualifications and experience of teaching staff, including the proportion of staff with advanced academic titles.
Infrastructure	Evaluation of the physical and technological facilities available to students and teaching staff, including laboratories and libraries.
Internationalization	Measuring the degree of internationalization of programs, including international partnerships and academic mobility.
Community involvement	Evaluation of collaboration with the local socio-economic environment, including community projects and internships for students.

Source: ARACIS, 2024.

Conclusions, limits and future directions

University marketing is evolving towards a strategic, digitalized and internationalized approach, with a focus on differentiation, student engagement and effective brand management. These trends reflect institutions' response to global competition and the need for sustainable development in an ever-changing educational environment.

While digital marketing and personalization are the main directions in promoting higher education, institutions still face challenges such as budget constraints, the difficulty of demonstrating return on investment (ROI) and the effective management of digital platforms. At the same time, the emphasis on local SEO (search engine optimization helps universities to be easily found online by potential students) and adapting to new market conditions highlight the need for universities to remain flexible and responsive to changes in the educational environment.

Applying artificial intelligence (AI) to university marketing can significantly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of promotional strategies by leveraging advanced technologies to better understand and interact with potential students. AI-based tools can analyze large volumes of data, personalize marketing messages, and optimize campaigns, thus contributing to increasing student recruitment and retention rates. The role of AI in university marketing is complex, including data analysis, personalization, and automation, all of which support more targeted and sustainable communication. The thematic analysis also shows that AI-based tools can improve analysis and measurement capabilities in university marketing.

While AI offers multiple advantages in the field of academic marketing, it also raises a number of challenges. These include ensuring data protection and confidentiality, managing possible algorithmic biases, and maintaining a balance between automation and the human component in marketing communication. It is also essential that higher education institutions consider the ethical implications of using AI, especially regarding transparency and fairness in the process of targeting and formulating messages.

As university marketing continues to transform, it is essential for institutions to find a balance between innovative digital strategies and traditional methods of engagement, in order to reach their target audiences effectively and sustainably.

In conclusion, AI has the potential to transform university marketing by providing deeper insights, increasing personalization, and optimizing campaigns. However, to fully benefit from these benefits, universities must adopt a strategic approach to implementing AI, considering both the opportunities and challenges associated with it. This way, they can build more effective and sustainable marketing strategies that resonate with the expectations and needs of future students.

Acknowledgments

The author acknowledges the use of Gemini (Google, 2025) in carrying out this research, the artificial intelligence model developed by Google AI, as a support tool in the analysis of artificial intelligence models implemented in university marketing. Responsibility for the scientific research, the literature review and the conclusions of this article lies solely with the author.

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Consumer Behavior in the Cruise Industry: A Qualitative Perspective on First-Time and Repeat Cruisers in the Romanian Market

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Article history

Received 30 April 2025 | Accepted 19 December 2025 | Published online 15 January 2026.

Abstract

This paper explores consumer behavior in the cruise industry, focusing on the behavioral differences between first-time and repeat passengers in the Romanian market - an emerging market rarely addressed in existing international literature. Cruising is a complex leisure product that integrates accommodation, transportation, dining, entertainment, and destination experiences into a single bundled offering. Such complexity leads to longer decision journeys and a strong reliance on travel advisors, particularly among first-time cruisers. In Romania, cruises compete directly with well-established land-based substitutes such as all-inclusive vacations. However, industry evidence confirms that cruises continue to generate some of the highest levels of satisfaction and loyalty in the leisure sector. The research applied a qualitative design, analyzing 47 narrative responses to a semi-structured questionnaire (24 first-time, 23 repeat cruisers) and complementary influencer content through thematic content analysis. As an exploratory qualitative study, it examines whether globally established patterns of cruise consumer behavior also apply to Romania's emerging market, seeking depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. Findings reveal distinct behavioral patterns: first-time cruisers prioritize price, safety, and informational clarity, whereas repeat passengers emphasize brand loyalty, service quality, and itinerary depth. Both groups view travel advisors as key mediators of trust and experience personalization. Post-cruise advocacy and emotional attachment further transform initial skepticism into long-term loyalty, illustrating the consumer lifecycle specific to cruise tourism. The study contributes theoretically by extending segmentation insights to an underexplored Eastern European market and practically by guiding travel advisors and cruise operators toward differentiated onboarding and retention strategies. While limited by its qualitative scope, the research provides grounded insights and outlines directions for future quantitative and cross-cultural validation.

Keywords: Cruise marketing, consumer behavior, first-time vs. repeat cruisers, segmentation.

JEL classification: M31, L83, Z32, D91.

Introduction

The cruise industry has evolved significantly over the past decade, including a full recovery from the global Covid-19 pandemic. CLIA (2024; 2025) reports that passenger volumes in 2023-2024 have surpassed pre-pandemic levels, marking a renewed phase of consumer confidence and operational expansion. Once seen as a niche product for older travelers (Wondirad, Wu, Teshome, and Lee, 2023; Thornhill, 2025), cruising now appeals to a broader demographic, including Millennials and Generation Z (CLIA, 2025), who find cruise vacations increasingly attractive, particularly due to the personalized, tech-enabled and experience-rich nature of cruise offerings. The average age of cruise passengers has dropped to 46 years globally, with more than a third now under 40. Internal market insights from cruise operators in Central and Eastern Europe suggest that, in specific years and markets such as Romania, the average age of cruise passengers for some cruise brands may have reached as low as 41, indicating a notable demographic shift toward younger consumers.

In emerging markets such as Romania (Anton, 2019), these global trends intersect with particular national consumption patterns. Romanian travellers exhibit a strong last-minute booking behavior (Vola, 2024; Bursa, 2023) and a persistent preference for all-inclusive

vacation packages (Hendrick, 2024), making the cruise product an attractive alternative that combines similar convenience with higher perceived value. Within Porter's (1979) competitive framework, cruises can thus be viewed as strategic substitutes for land-based vacations in the broader leisure market. Industry reports consistently show that cruises outperform traditional all-inclusive vacations in customer satisfaction and loyalty, owing to their comprehensive service offer and experiential diversity. Their perceived value, simplicity once experimented, as well as inclusivity of services, explain their growing appeal to Romanian travelers.

Romania has recorded one of the highest growth rates in passenger numbers across Eastern Europe, while regional data indicate increasing consumer awareness, online search interest, and the rise of specialized cruise agencies that have performed remarkably well. These new entrants illustrate a strengthening competitive environment and an institutional shift toward cruise specialization among major tour operators. CLIA's *State of the Cruise Industry Report* (2025) further confirms that cruises have registered the fastest growth among leisure travel products, with over half of travel advisors reporting a surge in demand. Together, these developments confirm Romania's status as an emerging and dynamic cruise market within Central and Eastern Europe.

However, despite this growth, the Romanian cruise segment remains largely under-researched. Most existing studies on cruise consumer behavior have been developed in mature markets, where travel culture, income structures and distribution channels differ substantially. Therefore, little is known about how far these global behavioral patterns apply to younger markets characterized by last-minute decisions, lower familiarity with cruising and varying degrees of reliance on travel advisors.

Addressing this gap, the present study builds on international literature in cruise marketing and consumer behavior to explore whether the segmentation patterns identified globally - particularly between first-time and repeat passengers - are also observable in Romania. By adopting an exploratory qualitative design, the research tests the contextual relevance of existing models while providing grounded insights into how emerging-market consumers perceive, evaluate and repurchase cruise experiences.

1. Literature review

1.1. Cruise booking journey and decision complexity

Cruising is widely regarded as a complex tourism product that includes transportation, accommodation, dining, entertainment, and destination exploration. As such, the decision-making and booking process is considerably more complex than in other leisure segments. Based on models proposed by Zhang (2020) and Reichheld, McGlone Russell and Teegarden (2018), the cruise customer journey can be structured into six key phases: inspiration, research, booking, preparation, onboard experience, and post-cruise engagement. Each of these stages involves distinct touchpoints, decisions, and emotional thresholds, especially for first-time cruisers, who often perceive the process as overwhelming due to the diversity of itineraries, ship configurations and additional services.

Cruise purchase decisions are influenced by multiple factors, including perceived value for money, brand reputation, loyalty programs and the recommendations of travel advisors or peers. Industry outlook reports emphasize the dual importance of professional and interpersonal influence - travel agents for guidance and reassurance, and friends and family for credibility and trust - highlighting the social dimension of the cruise decision-making process.

In emerging markets such as Romania, where cruising remains relatively new, this decision complexity is likely amplified by lower consumer familiarity and limited prior experience with cruise products.

1.2. Role of travel advisors in cruise decision-making

Cruises are predominantly booked through travel advisors, recent industry data and studies reporting that around 73% of passengers rely on agents for information, reassurance, and decision-making support. This percentage rises to nearly 80% in the luxury segment, where the product is even more nuanced and personalized consultation becomes decisive. Such reliance reflects both the complexity of the cruise product and the emotional commitment consumers make when purchasing these experiences. Personalized consultation plays a vital role in matching customers with the right itinerary, ship, and cabin type, given the variety of brands, ship sizes, and onboard offerings.

In the Romanian market, where the cruise industry is still consolidating, internal market insights suggest that travel advisors maintain a key role in assisting first-time cruisers throughout an unfamiliar and information-intensive decision process.

1.3. Generational differences and emerging consumer profiles

Deloitte (2020) and CLIA (2023; 2024) both note a generational shift in cruise perception: Generation Y and Z travelers increasingly view cruising as a customizable and tech-enabled experience. These segments respond positively to personalization, brand transparency, and digital engagement, traits that must be addressed through targeted segmentation and CRM strategies.

Similar generational dynamics appear to be emerging in Romania, where internal market observations and digital analytics indicate that younger travelers, often first-time cruisers, discover cruise experiences primarily through online channels and influencer content rather than traditional travel advertising.

1.4. Behavioral segmentation: first-time vs. repeat cruisers

Cruise consumer behavior is influenced by a complex interplay of psychological, social, and situational factors. Among leisure products, cruises consistently generate some of the highest levels of customer satisfaction and repeat customers, often surpassing all-inclusive land vacations (CLIA, 2019; Huseyin, Mehmet and Hasan, 2020; Deloitte, 2020; CLIA, 2025). The multidimensional nature of the cruise experience, combining accommodation, transportation, entertainment, and superior service, enhances perceived value and contributes to high Net Promoter Scores and long-term loyalty.

Segmentation is therefore a critical tool for understanding cruise consumers, allowing providers to tailor marketing strategies and product design to specific subgroups, thus improving cost-effectiveness and customer satisfaction. In the cruise context, the distinction between first-time and repeat passengers has been extensively documented (Sun, Kwornik and Gauri, 2018; Han, 2017; Petrick, 2004; Georgsdottir and Oskarsson, 2017). Thus, first-time cruisers are typically more price-sensitive, prefer shorter itineraries and standard cabins, and rely heavily on promotional communication. In contrast, repeat cruisers demonstrate stronger brand loyalty, greater willingness to pay for upgrades and a preference for longer voyages. Han (2017) found that repeaters show higher affective satisfaction, perceived value, and behavioral loyalty than first-time travelers, while Petrick (2004) identified service quality as the best predictor of repurchase for first-timers and perceived value for repeaters.

Recent industry reports indicate that up to 31% of all cruise passengers in the past two years were first-timers, up from 24% in 2019 - a clear sign of growing interest from new segments. This evolution underscores the need for differentiated onboarding strategies, simplified communication and reassurance to convert new customers into loyal repeaters.

In emerging markets such as Romania, where the cruise sector is still expanding and the customer base remains relatively new, a large share of passengers are first-time cruisers. These

segmentation insights help explain consumer decision patterns and can inform future communication approaches aimed at building trust and encouraging repeat travel. Nevertheless, internal market analyses indicate that awareness of this distinction among Romanian travel agencies is still limited. In practice, marketing communication tends to address both first-time and repeat cruisers in similar ways, without targeted differentiation, as most agencies primarily translate or adapt promotional materials provided by global cruise companies rather than developing locally tailored strategies.

2. Research objectives and methodology

2.1. Research Objectives

The primary aim of this exploratory qualitative study is to investigate the behavioral distinctions between first-time and repeat cruise passengers in the Romanian market - an emerging leisure segment characterized by late booking habits and strong all-inclusive preferences. Building on prior work (e.g., Sun, Kwortnik and Gauri, 2018) and recent industry reports, the study seeks to contextualize these differences within a developing Eastern European market, contributing both to theoretical understanding and to practical applications in travel marketing.

Specifically, this study aims to:

- Identify the key motivations and decision-making factors distinguishing first-time from repeat cruise travelers in the Romanian market, including trust, safety, value-for-money and itinerary design.
- Examine how prior cruise experience influences booking behavior, channel preference (e.g., reliance on travel agents versus online self-service) and willingness to upgrade or plan in advance.
- Explore differences in consumer expectations and post-trip engagement, focusing on satisfaction, loyalty and advocacy behavior.
- Triangulate academic insights with market trends, particularly the growing share of new-to-cruise passengers and the influence of travel agents and word-of-mouth in shaping purchase decisions.

2.2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative design to investigate behavioral distinctions between first-time and repeat cruise passengers within the Romanian market. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the objective of capturing authentic consumer perspectives, an open-ended, semi-structured questionnaire was developed using the Tally.so platform. The instrument was designed to replicate the flow of a qualitative interview and contained 23 questions, organized into three thematic blocks:

- (1) General travel profile - demographic information and preferred vacation types;
- (2) Cruise experience - motivations, decision-making, booking behavior, satisfaction, and post-cruise perceptions;
- (3) Comparative and reflective dimensions - attitudes toward all-inclusive holidays, emotional highlights, spending and loyalty intentions.

Midway through the questionnaire, respondents were asked “*How many cruises have you taken so far?*” to divide the sample into first-time cruisers (one cruise) and repeat cruisers (two or more cruises). This split ensured a clear analytical distinction between initiation and repetition behaviors within the same instrument.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling among Romanian travelers who had previously taken at least one cruise. To ensure authenticity and data validity, the survey was disseminated through several cruise-specialized travel agents and recognized cruise

community representatives with verified travel experience, which shared it directly with their clients and peers. This recruitment channel significantly enhanced the credibility of the data, as respondents were verified cruise travelers with real booking experience. A total of 47 valid responses were obtained: 24 from first-time cruisers and 23 from repeat cruisers. The questionnaire required approximately 10 minutes to complete and remained active for 2 weeks in May 2025.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality. No personally identifiable data were collected, in full compliance with ethical standards for qualitative research.

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic content analysis. Responses were manually coded in multiple iterative rounds and grouped into higher-order themes such as motivations, decision-making factors, booking behavior, perceived value, satisfaction, and post-cruise advocacy. Repeated readings and internal cross-validation were used to ensure coding consistency and analytical rigor.

In parallel, secondary qualitative material was examined through a directed content analysis of three publicly available blog articles authored by Romanian lifestyle journalist Diana Cosmin (FineSociety.ro, 2018-2022). While the author has published several texts on cruise travel, three were purposively selected for their explicit focus on the cruise experience and their chronological relevance to the study. The researchers maintained long-term familiarity with the author's published work, following her media narratives from her initial, invitation-based debut cruise coverage to her later personal travel accounts. This longitudinal familiarity provided contextual understanding of the authors' perspective and ensured accurate thematic interpretation of her evolving attitudes toward cruise travel.

The selected texts were chosen for their explicit focus on cruise experiences, illustrating the author's transformation from a first-time passenger to a repeat cruiser. Each article was coded using the same thematic framework applied to participant responses - motivations, perceived barriers, emotional reactions, perceived value, and advocacy behaviors. This procedure enabled cross-validation between primary (survey) and secondary (media) data, highlighting convergent patterns and subtle variations in tone, expectations and experiential framing.

While the influencer's perspective cannot be generalized, her public narratives served as cultural anchors, illustrating how cruise travel is represented and normalized within Romanian lifestyle media. This triangulation strengthened contextual interpretation and contributed to a more layered understanding of passenger perceptions.

Although the sample size ($n = 47$) may appear modest, it is consistent with qualitative saturation theory (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006; Fusch and Ness, 2015), according to which data collection becomes redundant once additional responses no longer produce new insights. In this study, thematic convergence was observed after approximately thirty responses, confirming the adequacy and analytical depth of the dataset.

The selection of Tally.so as the data-collection platform was deliberate: its interactive and mobile-friendly design increased respondent engagement and reduced response fatigue. Compared with more traditional tools such as Google Forms, which are often less adaptive on mobile devices, the chosen platform provides a smoother user experience. This aspect significantly reduce early abandonment rates and enhance completion accuracy, maximizing response validity. This proved essential, as most participants accessed the form via mobile devices. Moreover, the platform's adaptive design minimized incomplete responses or fraudulent behavior - a known issue in online data collection (Revilla and Ochoa, 2017). Considering the general tendency of respondents to avoid lengthy or impersonal questionnaires

(Fricker, 2017; Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2014), this format ensured concise, authentic and context-rich narrative data.

While the qualitative nature of this study limits statistical generalization, its design provides rich, grounded insights into consumer motivations, perceptions, and loyalty mechanisms within an emerging European cruise market. Future research may expand on these findings through mixed-method or cross-country comparative approaches.

3. Results and discussion

Building on the qualitative dataset, the analysis draws on 47 valid responses from Romanian cruise passengers: 24 first-time cruisers and 23 repeat cruisers (defined as having completed two or more cruises). Most respondents had taken their most recent cruise within the past two to three years, ensuring that the insights reflect current consumer attitudes and post-pandemic travel behavior. Participants ranged in age from early 30s to mid-70s and were primarily urban, with extensive international travel experience. Besides cruises, their preferred holiday types included all-inclusive resorts, city breaks and organized tours.

3.1. Sample profile.

The respondent pool ($n = 47$) was demographically diverse, ranging in age from 34 to 75 years (average ≈ 44), with most participants residing in major urban centers such as Bucharest, Iași, Cluj. The majority were active travelers with prior international experience, predominantly favoring structured vacation formats such as all-inclusive packages, city breaks, and road trips. Most cruises had taken place between 2022 and 2025, reflecting post-pandemic travel recovery. European itineraries dominated, while a few participants reported Caribbean routes. Over 80 % of respondents booked through travel agencies, confirming the central role of intermediaries in the Romanian cruise market.

Table 1. Profile of respondents participating in the qualitative study

Characteristic	Observation ($n = 47$)
Age range	34 – 75 years (avg. ≈ 44)
Residence	Mainly urban (Bucharest, Cluj, Chișinău, Alba Iulia, Cugir)
Preferred vacation types	All-inclusive, city breaks, road trips, organized tours
Last cruise taken	2022 - 2025 (few “earlier”)
Main destinations	Europe > 90 %, Caribbean < 10 %
Booking channel	Travel agencies ≈ 80 %, direct/company < 20 %

Source: Authors’ analysis, 2025

Although not statistically representative, the purposive sampling offers meaningful insight into behavioral patterns among emerging-market cruise consumers. Given the exploratory nature of the study, results are discussed thematically, highlighting key contrasts and commonalities between first-time and repeat cruisers. Each theme reflects one of the main motivational or behavioral dimensions identified through inductive coding:

- (1) motivations and decision-making factors,
- (2) information sources and booking behavior,
- (3) perceptions of cruise value and comparisons with alternative vacation types, and
- (4) post-experience advocacy and social influence.

Where relevant, the analysis is further triangulated with secondary qualitative data derived from Romanian lifestyle journalist Diana Cosmin’s public blog narratives. This comparison helps validate the thematic interpretation and situates individual responses within the broader cultural discourse surrounding cruise travel in Romania.

Table 2. Comparative summary of key behavioral distinctions between first-time and repeat cruisers

Dimension	First-time cruisers (new-to-cruise)	Repeat cruisers
Motivations	Curiosity; perceived similarity to all-inclusive resorts; value-for-money; safety reassurance.	Desire to upgrade and optimize previous experiences; interest in longer itineraries and premium services.
Information sources	Heavy reliance on travel agents and advice from friends/family with cruise experience.	Mix of travel agents and self-directed online research; prior knowledge reduces perceived complexity.
Booking behavior	Tend to book late and delegate logistics to agents; rely on personal reassurance.	Plan earlier; compare brands & itinerary; seek loyalty benefits and cabin upgrades.
Perception of value	Initially skeptical; surprised by service quality and overall satisfaction.	Focus on comfort, convenience, and value optimization rather than price sensitivity.
Alternative comparison	Often compare cruising to land-based all-inclusive resorts.	View cruising as the preferred and superior vacation format.
Post-experience attitudes	Express enthusiasm and recommend cruising to peers; act as “new advocates”.	Strong brand attachment; repeat booking intent; serve as credible promoters.

Source: Authors' analysis, 2025

3.2. Motivations and Decision-Making Factors

As summarized in Table 2, motivations differed considerably between first-time and repeat cruisers. First-time respondents were primarily drawn by the idea of a vacation format similar to all-inclusive resorts, yet offering the added appeal of multiple destinations within a single journey. Many described a mix of curiosity and initial hesitation, particularly concerning safety or unfamiliar logistics - concerns that were largely dispelled by the actual experience. This pattern echoes Cosmin's debut narrative (2018), where early skepticism gave way to enthusiasm once on board.

In contrast, repeat cruisers in this study emphasized more pragmatic factors: itinerary length, quality of service, ship features and size as well as the existence of premium services and features. Their decisions tend to be shaped by their previous cruise experience and a desire to optimize future cruises, resonating with the evolution described in Cosmin's later writings (2019; 2022) and reflected in CLIA's (2025) findings that returning passengers increasingly opt for longer itineraries, book earlier, and prioritize enhanced experiences over price.

Despite these differences, both groups placed strong importance on the cruise itinerary as a central factor in their decision-making process - confirming that route design remains an important criterion in cruise selection, regardless of experience level. Moreover, CLIA (2025) confirms that destination variety and perceived value-for-money are the leading motivators among cruise passengers, alongside the reassurance provided by travel advisors and peer recommendations.

These findings support the necessity of differentiated marketing strategies. For first-time cruisers, communication should focus on building trust and reducing perceived complexity, emphasizing safety, ease of access, and the all-inclusive nature of cruise experiences. Parallels with traditional resort vacations can help close familiarity gaps. For repeat cruisers, by contrast, efforts should concentrate on brand loyalty and product knowledge, highlighting exclusive benefits such as upgrades, ship-specific amenities, loyalty rewards, as well as early booking advantages and distinctive itineraries.

As over 30% of passengers in 2024 were first-time cruisers, tailoring acquisition strategies to address their specific motivations presents a valuable growth opportunity, especially in emerging markets like Romania. Overall, first-time cruisers can be described as experience-seekers driven by curiosity and reassurance needs, whereas repeat cruisers are value optimizers guided by familiarity, brand trust, and experiential depth. This distinction reinforces both the theoretical segmentation logic and the practical need for adaptive communication in cruise marketing.

3.3. Information Sources and Booking Behavior

As illustrated in Table 2, both first-time and repeat cruisers relied heavily on intermediaries and social influence when planning their trips, yet the depth and form of this reliance varied substantially. Across the board, respondents relied primarily on travel agents for cruise-related information and booking support. Among first-time cruisers, agent guidance was often complemented by input from friends or family with previous cruise experience - confirming CLIA's (2025) findings that 79 % of passengers value travel advisors and 87 % are influenced by personal recommendations.

Social media rarely initiated the purchase journey, but it did inspire several novices and became highly relevant after the trip, when most respondents reported posting photos, answering queries, and encouraging others to cruise - behavior mirrored in Cosmin's trajectory from newcomer to informal advisor through social engagement.

Booking behavior followed a parallel pattern: first-time passengers typically booked later and invested full trust in agents or travel planners to manage logistics. Repeat cruisers, by contrast, demonstrated a more strategic approach, researching early-booking deals, comparing brands, itineraries and prices, and selecting cabin upgrades based on prior knowledge and expectations of value for money (distinct from price sensitivity). Industry data reconfirm this shift, noting a trend toward longer itineraries and earlier planning among experienced passengers.

From a marketing perspective, the findings confirm the critical role of travel advisors. While digital channels serve as useful entry points for inspiration and awareness, conversion relies heavily on human interaction and consultative sales. According to informal validation interviews with several Romanian cruise-specialized travel agents, their digital investments are not aimed at automating the booking process, but at attracting potential customers - especially first-time cruisers - into high-touch, personalized consultations.

While online promotion plays a vital role in raising awareness and generating leads, cruise bookings remain largely dependent on expert human guidance. This is particularly true in emerging markets like Romania, where cruises are still perceived as complex travel products requiring reassurance and tailored advice. Post-cruise, however, the digital dynamic shifts: many guests become vocal ambassadors within their peer networks, answering questions and sharing impressions.

In summary, first-time cruisers rely on mediated trust and interpersonal reassurance, building confidence through travel advisors and peer experience, whereas repeat cruisers rely on self-knowledge and proactive research, supported by loyalty programs and accumulated familiarity with cruise brands. For marketers, this confirms the dual importance of human mediation and digital storytelling - where consultative selling remains essential for conversion, and post-cruise peer engagement fuels organic advocacy.

3.4. Perceptions of Cruise Value and Alternative Options

As also shown in Table 2, perceptions of value and satisfaction evolved differently between first-time and repeat cruisers. Initial expectations, especially among first-time cruisers, were often shaped by stereotypes associating cruises with high costs and an older clientele. As reflected in Cosmin's (2018) early writings, these assumptions contributed to a perception of cruising as a luxury, niche product. However, post-cruise evaluations shifted dramatically: respondents consistently praised the organization, service quality, and overall experience, with many describing the journey as "worth every euro".

First-time cruisers frequently used emotionally charged language such as "captivating" or "magical", whereas repeat cruisers adopted a more rational vocabulary, focusing on "completeness", comfort, and value optimization. A key point of comparison for both groups

was the all-inclusive land resort. Yet, many concluded that cruises provided broader experiential variety, higher service standards, and a better overall satisfaction.

This is strongly supported by CLIA's 2025 *State of the Cruise Industry Report*, which notes that cruise satisfaction scores now surpass those of both all-inclusive packages (3.7) and resort holidays (3.4), with ocean cruises reaching up to 4.2 of 5 points.

Marketing strategies should therefore actively address outdated assumptions, particularly those linking cruises exclusively to older demographics or luxury pricing. While industry reports show that the luxury cruise segment has tripled in the past decade, the broader market has evolved to offer a wide range of accessible and diverse experiences.

In this respect, first-time cruisers tend to interpret value emotionally - through novelty, surprise, and enjoyment - whereas repeat cruisers interpret it functionally, through service consistency, familiarity, and optimization of comfort and cost.

These findings have direct implications for communication: in emerging markets like Romania, positioning cruises as both emotionally rewarding and practically convenient can bridge perception gaps and attract first-time travelers without alienating loyal passengers.

3.5. Post-experience advocacy and social influence

As reflected in Table 2, both first-time and repeat cruisers demonstrated a pronounced tendency to talk about their cruise experiences with others. One of the most striking and recurrent themes emerging from both groups is their strong inclination to share impressions, spontaneously in conversation or in response to questions, during or after returning from their trip. Over 90% of respondents stated that they had spoken about their cruise to peers, confirming that social interaction and storytelling are integral parts of the post-travel phase.

Social media played a secondary role during the decision phase, but became much more relevant post-cruise, serving as a space for sharing, validation, and indirect promotion. This dynamic illustrates the rise of "natural influencers" whose credibility stems not from follower counts but from authentic experience. This finding mirrors the trajectory described in Cosmin's public narrative, as she evolved from skeptical first-timer to vocal advocate through blogs and social media. It also aligns with the latest industry data, which confirms that friends and family are the top influence in cruise decision-making and that Net Promoter Scores are significantly increasing, indicating deeper trust and satisfaction.

While trust in advertising is declining globally, peer-to-peer advocacy is increasingly valued and becomes a strategic asset. Cruise brands and cruise-specialized travel agents should treat post-experience enthusiasm as a key stage in the consumer lifecycle that fuels organic growth.

In this context, first-time cruisers tend to act as spontaneous storytellers who normalize cruising for new audiences, while repeat cruisers evolve into deliberate brand advocates who reinforce trust and continuity within their networks. These dual dynamic underscores the growing importance of authentic, experience-based communication as both a behavioral outcome and a marketing mechanism in the Romanian cruise market.

Summary of key insights

Overall, the findings confirm that while global behavioral patterns identified in previous literature largely apply to the Romanian context, their manifestation is shaped by specific market characteristics such as lower familiarity with cruising, high reliance on travel advisors and the influence of peer narratives. The analysis reveals distinct motivational and behavioral contrasts between first-time and repeat passengers: newcomers approach cruising with curiosity, caution, and emotional intensity, whereas repeat travelers demonstrate confidence, brand commitment, and a focus on optimizing value. Despite these differences, both groups

share an appreciation for itinerary design, service quality and social validation, highlighting the experiential and relational nature of cruise travel.

These results illustrate how trust, familiarity and post-cruise advocacy form an interconnected behavioral cycle that defines cruise consumption in emerging markets. The insights derived from this qualitative analysis contribute to a better theoretical understanding of consumer segmentation in cruise marketing and offer practical implications for designing differentiated acquisition and retention strategies in contexts where cruising is still a developing travel product.

Conclusions

This study explored the behavioral distinctions between first-time and repeat cruise passengers in the Romanian market, providing an exploratory qualitative perspective that contextualizes global theories of cruise consumer behavior within an emerging European setting. In line with existing literature and industry outlooks, the findings confirm that the cruise experience generates exceptional satisfaction, with both rational and emotional value exceeding expectations - particularly among first-time passengers. While initial perceptions are often shaped by stereotypes related to luxury, age, or safety, the actual experience consistently overturns these assumptions, reinforcing the transformative and emotional nature of cruise travel.

In Romania, a market still dominated by all-inclusive land vacations, cruising is increasingly perceived as a superior alternative that offers diversity, structure and excellent service. While consumers are familiar with self-service tools for simpler travel products such as flights or hotel bookings, the complexity and higher value of cruises make human guidance more desirable, especially for first-timers. This reinforces the importance of high-touch, personalized marketing, as customers investing in premium experiences expect expert reassurance, reliable service and tailored support throughout the decision journey.

From a business and marketing perspective, the study confirms that cruising represents a high-loyalty, high-lifetime-value niche. CLIA (2025) reports that over 82% of surveyed passengers intend to cruise again, making the sector one of the most retention-oriented segments in the travel industry. Moreover, post-cruise advocacy acts as a powerful acquisition channel: satisfied guests often become informal brand ambassadors, influencing peers and family. This dual dynamic: strong repeat behavior and active word-of-mouth, justifies higher customer acquisition costs, given the long-term return on investment and potential for organic growth.

Effective marketing strategies should therefore be segment-specific: reassurance, onboarding support and simplification for first-time cruisers; recognition, personalization, and loyalty reinforcement for experienced travelers. Advocacy can be amplified through referral programs, user-generated content and community-based storytelling. In this context, cruise tourism is not merely a niche but a scalable and resilient growth opportunity, particularly in emerging markets where strategic segmentation and experience design can determine long-term adoption.

Although the qualitative design and modest sample size limit generalizability, the study offers grounded insights into an under-researched market and provides a foundation for future mixed-method and cross-country studies on cruise consumer behavior in Central and Eastern Europe. Future research should continue to explore the Romanian cruise market through larger-scale collaborations with specialized travel agencies, aiming to map both consumer motivations and structural barriers. Additional studies could also focus on the perceptions of individuals who have never cruised, including those who currently choose land-based substitutes such as all-inclusive resorts, in order to identify the psychological and informational barriers that

prevent trial and adoption. Together, these directions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how cruise consumption develops in emerging economies and how marketing communication can facilitate market growth.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the cruise passengers who generously shared their time, experiences and reflections for this research. We also extend special thanks to the Romanian cruise-specialized travel agents who supported the dissemination of the questionnaire and provided valuable insights into the dynamics of the Romanian cruise market.

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Emotional & Experiential Marketing: Campaign Analysis in Romania

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Article history

Received 27 May 2025 | Accepted 22 December 2025 | Published online 15 January 2026.

Abstract

This paper investigates the strategic integration of emotional and experiential marketing in brand communication, focusing on how these approaches reshape traditional rational strategies within the Romanian market. The purpose of this study is to understand when and how emotional and experiential marketing become effective tools for enhancing consumer engagement and brand loyalty, even in highly technical industries such as banking. The research combines a theoretical framework with applied analysis. First, a literature review was conducted to define the conceptual differences and intersections between emotional and experiential marketing, both offline and online, and to identify key success factors in their implementation. Second, a qualitative case study was developed on Banca Comercială Română (BCR), examining its transition from rational and technical communication to emotion-driven and experience-centered strategies, both in traditional campaigns and through its digital ecosystem, George. BCR's campaigns illustrate how emotional storytelling, personalization, and user experience design can humanize a technical service and foster brand trust. This study contributes to marketing practice by offering insights into the applicability of emotional and experiential strategies beyond lifestyle industries, demonstrating their relevance in complex, data-driven contexts. It also proposes directions for future research, suggesting that quantitative studies should further explore the direct correlation between these strategies and measurable outcomes such as brand perception, satisfaction, and long-term trust..

Keywords: Emotional marketing, experiential marketing, consumer experience, Romanian banking market, online banking.

JEL classification: M31.

Introduction

According to both the academic literature and the practitioners, the transition from transactional to relationship marketing has implied a shift from marketing messages focused on selling, presetting solely informational and technical aspects, to a way of communication that is closer to the psychological and social needs of the customers. Gradually, products were no longer only tested for their core or expected benefits (Dimitriadisa & Koritosb, 2014), but they started attributing importance also to augmented and potential ones, emphasizing the need to promote the reliability of the brands to the audiences.

Simultaneously, the latest changes in terms of psychological needs and the social influences or pressures that audiences are exposed to, proved to influence the consumption and the consumer behavior patterns (Palmatier, 2008; Dimitriadisa & Koritosb, 2014). Among the adapted marketing practices regarding these changes, are emotional and experiential marketing – two directions for which research efforts are continuing to exhibit valuable insights about customers. Through these practices, brands pursued reducing competition and achieving a better positioning in the minds of customers, through adapted and customized marketing actions/messages. This way, emotional reactions are sought so that brand trust and loyalty would be amplified.

Besides client's interpretation of the external economic environment, the online environment should also be included in this investigation. Online marketing with activities such as the creation of data bases, SEO, Google analytics, customer clusters according to CRM,

are powerful and successful practices when considered as tools, rather than an overall strategy. Behind these practical tools and methods, a comprehensive strategy is required, especially as even in the online environment, customers are not looking for informational surpass, but for emotional connection and the feeling of being understood, their needs & desires being met. Therefore, emotional and experiential marketing have extended their implications from physical or media advertising, delivering solid results also in the online environment – from search engines, to blogs or forums, email marketing, and above all, social media platforms.

Taking these aspects into consideration, the present research explores both the concepts of emotional and experiential marketing, offering an updated perspective on their current comprehension. During this investigation, a clear distinction between the two, as concepts and practices, is constructed; this is by their connection and complementarity, with a focus on generating insight to the marketing specialists when strategizing the marketing messages. Additionally, it is pursued the consideration of a perspective that facilitates the integration of emotional and experiential marketing practices in the marketing strategies, making these more effective. Beyond the conceptual and physical implications, the research continues with a closer look on their implications and results in the online environment: emotional and experiential marketing are illustrated as an extension to the technical online marketing practices, for a more integrative marketing strategy. Last, but not least, for a practical look on these concepts, a case study investigating the shift from rational to emotional communication and experiential marketing, both in the off-line and online environment, is depicted for the banking industry – BCR's case of this transition.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Emotional marketing

In the research *Emotional Marketing: Sharing The Heart Of Consumers* (Deshwal, 2015) it is presented how emotions are a core aspect of each individual's life, representing a powerful motivational mechanism – either for daily activities, or for purchasing decisions. Similarly, emotions play an important role in the perception of the external environment, and the relationship with the physical world is described as *emotional*.

The rather emergent concept of emotional marketing highlights the importance of emotional connection between the company and the consumer. Emotional marketing is an updated and more pragmatic paradigm that considers redirecting the marketing efforts towards creating an emotional link between the company and the consumer, this becoming *the key exchange-stimulating feature*. The nowadays consumption culture is represented by high competition amongst companies, capitalized on the use of a great amount of emotional symbols for creating additional value for the customers, thus *replacing rationally determined exchange attributes with emotional ones*. In this business environment, customers are unconsciously searching for symbols that can facilitate the process of attributing meaning to their purchasing experience. Brands also become *suppliers of emotional energy* through the created relationships, and are expected to *tell stories that excite* (emotional brands) and *integrate communication, quality, tradition, identity (brand sensitivity)* (Deshwal, 2015; Khuong, 2015; Kaushik, et al., 2024). Thus, it becomes a priority for the companies to precisely examine the transfer of their message, through these symbols, in the consumer's consciousness. This represents the core of emotional marketing research, highlighting the importance of emotional aspects in contemporary market exchange (Khuong & Tram, 2015).

It is also described in the academic literature (Consoli, 2010) that certain smells or music represent powerful stimuli in creating long-term memory associations in consumers' minds. In other words, these environmental manifestations are seen as practical ways of incorporating the general marketing message, so the clients can feel more relaxed in filtering the external

information. The familiarization feeling facilitates the perceptive process of the key marketing messages created by companies, thus reaching audiences more easily and effectively. Consequently, a key effort in emotional marketing is to first identify what type of experience can best highlight the product, followed by the development of empathy between the company/brand and the customer – this action brings both emotional involvement of the customer and the perceived differentiation.

Customer emotions as a concept itself can also offer a more comprehensive look on its implications in the purchasing process (Deshwal, 2015). A consumer now looks further than simply meeting both the needs and rational processes; the clients are unconsciously searching for an *object that becomes a center of symbolic meanings, psychological and cultural, a source of feelings, relationships, and emotions*. Therefore, the purchase decisions of customers nowadays are correlated with two types of needs: *functional needs* addressed by the product's functional attributes, and *emotional needs*, corresponding with the psychological aspects of product ownership.

1.2. Experiential marketing

Experiential marketing can be viewed and investigated through different areas of its emergence: consumer, product and service, off-line and online consumption, brand experiences, etc. (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013; Smilansky, 2018; Smith & Hanove, 2016).

A significant aspect to consider on experiential marketing is represented by the findings of Same & Larimo (2012), citing from Carù & Cova (2003), an article which proposes the following idea: *romanticism → experiential consumption → emotional responses → pleasure*, where romanticism refers to one of today's consumer trends in which clients tend to choose products/services/brands with which they have emotional compatibility and a self-identification feeling. On one hand, the research exposed that according to the experiential approach, sensations prevail over consumer's rational thoughts. On the other hand, it can be highlighted that during an experiential marketing approach, the expected effects correspond to the emotional spectrum, thus being in correlation with the theories proposed by emotional marketing.

Consumer experience is presented in the academic literature as the most researched approach of experiential marketing and focuses on generating general frameworks and ways of categorizing the experience processes. According to Schmitt & Zarantonello (2013) citing from Arnould & Price (1993) consumer experience can be divided corresponding to the different phases of clients' interaction with marketing objects: (1) *anticipated consumption*, (2) *purchase experience*, (3) *consumption experiences, which regards sensory experiences, satiation, satisfaction/dissatisfaction, arousal/flow, and transformation*; and (4) *remembered consumption which is related to reliving past experiences, often in nostalgic ways* (Batat, 2019).

Regarding consumption experience, *researchers have developed multiple models, one of them being more famous: TEAV model* (Thoughts, Emotions, Activities, Values). According to this approach, the relation between the person (motivation) and the environment (information) generates and is generated by consumption processes. Thus, these processes can be categorized as Thoughts (mental activity), Emotions (responding, interpreting, expressing, and feeling), Activities (actions and reactions), and Values (economic, social, hedonic, and deontological).

1.3. The connection between Emotional & Experiential Marketing

From the information above, each concept has been illustrated, with its theoretical aspects: the implications of emotional marketing and the implementation expected effects of experiential marketing. However, at the same time, when describing each marketing approach,

there are numerous similarities or interconnections, therefore raising the question of the complementarity principle between them. A general observational conclusion can be described as following: the objective of experiential marketing is to stimulate the generation of emotions, emotional associations with the brand, thus facilitating the perceptive process of marketing messages & campaigns; vice versa, targeted emotions in emotional marketing are ensured only through delivering an experience to the customers.

A first direction regarding the interconnection between the two marketing approaches, is represented by the topic of emotional value. According to (Li & Tang, 2024), a research analyzing the luxury goods industry on the Chinese market *emotional value describes the emotional and psychological satisfaction consumers derive from purchasing and using products or services. This satisfaction is not only based on the functional aspects of the product but also encompasses intangible elements such as brand identity, service quality, and overall consumer experience.*

To continue this comparative analysis and searching for the connection points between the two marketing approaches, in research *The Effect of Experiential Marketing and Emotional Marketing on Customer Satisfaction* (Muheril & Tamin, 2024), the authors describe experiential marketing as a strategy to build customer loyalty through the generation of emotions, followed by an eventual creation of an overall positive experience. Experiential marketing is seen as an approach that integrates consumer emotions and feelings, through the delivery of positive experiences so that consumers become linked to those experiences (Chang, 2020).

According to (García & Suárez, 2018), the experience a consumer encounter is based on the feelings he or she has – what consumers feel from the consumed attributes. In addition, *moods are a subset of feelings considered less intense than emotions and often occur without a specific event as a stimulus*; an experiential marketing action should, therefore, consider both the concepts of emotions and the mood. Then, a consumer's mental motion is an intense feeling towards an object caused by a specific event – particularly significant to pursue in experiential marketing. All these concepts have the background of emotional marketing, but their implications bring important insight for creating comprehensive experiential marketing activities.

The interconnected examination of experiential and emotional marketing would not be complete without the integration of the online environment. Experiential marketing on the digital platforms has been proving, according to the academic literature, to be an important strategy for sustaining many businesses, regardless of their sector of activity. Both researchers and practitioners focused on topics such as *online customer behavior, the factors influencing online shopping experience, the way of developing online shopping experiences, and the value of experiential marketing in online shopping* (Urdea, et al., 2021). Nevertheless, a significant aspect that is less investigated and integrated is experiential marketing in relation to sustainable customer relationships. As previously illustrated, in general, an important strategy for customer relationship sustainability relies on the created emotional value, through the delivered experiences.

Considering experiential and emotional marketing within the online environment, a specific paradigm can be mentioned: even in the online environment, customers are not looking for informational surpass, but for emotional connection and the feeling of being understood, their needs & desires being met. This paradigm can be better explained through the insight brought by two online relationship marketing theories:

1) Uses and gratification theory. According to this theory, online users pursue different kinds of gratifications from companies, either as entertainment or information. Customers often

expect enjoyment and a feeling of connectedness in searching for information online (Thaichon, et al., 2020).

2) Social influence theory. According to this theory, a person's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors can be impacted and shifted by three theoretical processes: compliance process (meaning the expectation of others to gain reward or avoid punishment), internalization process (the way group norms and values match with individual goals and values) and identification process (the acceptance and implementation of a behavior to develop a good relationship with a social group).

To sum up, emotional and experiential marketing are not only significant domains by themselves, but they are also interconnected, and when perceived in this manner, the effectiveness of the marketing efforts is better sustained. Furthermore, this can be applied both to the off-line and online environment. A synergy of these actions is therefore required for a successful and complete marketing strategy, that simultaneously is adapted to the updated needs and desires of the customers.

2. Methodology

The case-study investigation below explores the transition from rational to integrated emotional & experiential marketing practices and how the Commercial Bank of Romania (BCR) simultaneously used emotional and experiential marketing strategies to respond to Romanian consumer's real emotional and cognitive needs. This study uses a qualitative case study methodology combined with secondary quantitative data analysis. Secondary Data Sources: BCR's official reports, press releases, and campaign materials (2000–2025), market research reports on Romanian financial literacy and banking trends.

The purpose of this case study is to investigate if there is a significant the transition of BCR's marketing communication strategy from a primarily rational approach to an integrated emotional and experiential marketing strategy. On one hand, there is a content analysis in regards to messages and visual materials from comparative campaigns, to categorize messaging as rational, emotional, or experiential. This qualitative interpretation is then followed by a trend analysis of the experiential marketing integration, through the online app called George. Finally, it is integrated a cross-referencing analysis for consumer financial literacy data with campaign effectiveness indicators to interpret audience responsiveness.

Objectives:

1. To identify if there is a transition from rational to emotional and experiential marketing according to the key stages in BCR's marketing communication evolution between 2000 and 2025.
2. To evaluate the measure in which emotional and experiential marketing were integrated into BCR's overall strategy.
3. To contextualize the findings within Romania's financial literacy environment.

Hypotheses:

H1: There is a significant transition between 2000 and 2025 from rational to emotional and experiential marketing, regarding BCR's communication strategy.

H2: Emotional and experiential marketing strategies, both offline and online, are now significantly integrated in BCR's communication campaigns.

H3: The adoption of emotional and experiential marketing approaches also corresponds with a low financial literacy level present in Romania.

3. Results and discussion

Until rather recent years, the banking industry had communication strategies based on rational arguments: institutional stability, interest rates, commissions. Some of the greatest and most well-known banks, including the Commercial Bank of Romania (BCR) focused on building trust through transmitting to the audience the message of financial reliability and different product advantages, according to the economic and social background of that time. However, simultaneously with this communication approach, the journey of financial literacy in Romania has been rather sluggish: only approx. 21% of Romanians understand financial products adequately compared to (approx. 52% EU average) (Sîrbulescu, et al., 2024) (European Union; Eurobarometer, 2023). This discrepancy between the rational offer communication and the socio-demographic context of their audience, showed less good final results in terms of customer acquisition and retention.

In the article “Be rational or be emotional: advertising appeals, service types, and consumer responses” (Zhang, et al., 2014) it is presented how the personalization of advertising in the banking industry is used to activate cognitive, emotional and behavioral processes. Thus, the banks have started to pay more attention to adapting their offer messages to the psychological and educational disposition of their customers, investigating how they need to be communicated to and what kind of communication actually promotes trust and openness.

Adapting its marketing strategy to the shift of consumer expectations and the rise of digitalization, BCR chose an **integrated strategy combining emotional and experiential marketing** (BCR Bank, 2025).

Between 2000 and 2015, the Commercial Bank of Romania focused on communicating product attributes, being highly rational. Among the slogans used are *Banca ta de încredere* (*Your trusted bank*), which whose purpose was to promote stability. Meanwhile, the marketing campaigns mainly contained technical information about interest rates, competitive fees, and a large branch network. The marketing visual materials were illustrating ATM's figures, and card designs, with very little appearance of real people or stories.

This communication strategy reflected a traditional marketing approach: product-centric messages comprised of rational arguments and numbers were thought as facilitators to credibility and customer trust.

Simultaneously, even though there was a high focus on rational communication, financial education remained a challenge, even to the present decade. A list of figures below illustrates this social aspect:

- According to Nițoi, et al. (2022), in this year 92% of the Romanian population was still financially illiterate
- Only approx. 8% answered all *Big Three* financial literacy questions correctly (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2011)
- Banking access in Romania is 69.1%, compared to 95.3% EU average (European Union; Eurobarometer, 2023; Sîrbulescu, et al., 2024)

According to this social context of the financial literacy, but also corresponding with a shift in the psychological needs of the consumers, the audience transmitted the expectation of a way of brand communication that is more humanized, accessible, and personalized. At the same time, consumers began to expect more human, accessible, and personalized communication, partly influenced by digital services and global branding trends.

When including new approaches such as emotional and experiential marketing, BCR's transformation consisted of an integrated strategy. Offline & later online as well (emotional marketing): campaigns like “Școala de Bani”, financial workshops, and storytelling. This built empathy and helped people feel guided (Stoica, et al., 2015).



Figure 1 - BCR' Official Campaign Archive – The card that makes you feel like you're at the Olympics, (BCR Bank, 2025)

Other emotional campaign during 2025: “Trust yourself” – *the campaign comes as an extension of BCR's mission to support Romanians not only through financial solutions, but also through education programs, support, and authentic dialogue* (BCR, 2025).

Online (experiential marketing): launching George, the pioneer intelligent digital platform for banking in Romania, that offered not only functionality but also intuitive UX, personalization, and community features (BCR Bank, 2025). A significant aspect to mention here is that experiential marketing still targeted emotions: Romanians wanted banking to feel simpler, clearer, and less intimidating. Therefore, George's design and features have considered and accordingly communicated *the feeling* of being helped, reducing anxiety about money, and restoring confidence. This aspect comes to support the aspects identified in the theoretical part, about the interconnection and complementarity of emotional and experiential marketing, including in the online environment.

Experiential marketing in George and the generation of customer emotions

Even though the online platform has a competitive advantage of being the initial intelligent digital tool for the banking industry, its differentiation has been built on a list of significant features (BCR Bank, 2025), such as:

- Simplicity: easy initial registration, minimal design, few steps.
- Personalization: George Tips and FinCoach, providing customized advice.
- Rewards and gamification: cashback programmers, special vouchers, and surprise events.
- Community integration: partnerships with cultural events, reinforcing the sense of belonging.

These identified features are less focused on rationality, but on emotional value creation, according to the information presented in the chapter on *The connection between Emotional & Experiential Marketing*: relief from financial stress, clarity in decision-making, and trust in modern digital tools.

According to the business reports archive and the latest press release of BCR (BCR Bank, 2025), among some of the most significant results over the recent years, when analyzing the experiential communication in the online environment, there are the followings:

- Over 1.8 million active George users by 2023.
- Approximately 300 new features launched since 2018.
- Approximately 75% of product sales handled digitally (80% increase vs. 2022).

Final verification of hypotheses

H1: The content analysis and different examples of campaigns (from ration to emotional, between 2000 and 2025) confirms H1.

H2: The examples of emotional campaigns integration, the emotional features of George's content, the experience personalization based on clients' psychological needs, the figures on active users and digital product sales (both increases), together with the official declarations on the investments' purpose for George, confirm H2.

H3: Emotional and experiential marketing strategies contributed to higher customer retention rates compared to the previous rational-only marketing approach. The relationship between low financial literacy and the adoption of emotional marketing, together with the shown strategy's effectiveness support H3.

Conclusion

This case study highlights the considerable contribution of emotional and experiential marketing practices to the evolution of BCR's communication strategy, illustrating how such approaches can generate value even within highly technical and rational industries, such as banking. The findings reveal that the shift from a traditional, information-driven discourse to a more human-centered, emotion-based narrative, has been progressively implemented.

The integration of emotional elements within campaigns, alongside experiential activations both online and offline, were also present in reframing the brand–consumer relationship. The example of the George App, positioned not solely as a banking tool but as a personal, empowering experience, illustrates how emotional connection and user experience personalization can drive customer loyalty and digital adoption.

The study also provides practitioners with relevant insights into how emotional and experiential marketing can be successfully implemented beyond rather intuitive industries – it raises the question of a further investigation for using these practices in more technical industries.

However, this research is limited by its qualitative and exploratory nature. While it provides a conceptual and descriptive overview of emotional and experiential strategies and their perceived outcomes, further quantitative research is required to measure the direct correlation between these marketing practices and variables such as brand perception, customer satisfaction, or behavioral loyalty. Future investigations may also explore comparative analyses across industries to better understand how emotional and experiential approaches can be adapted to different organizational contexts. Additionally, the assumed correlation between low financial literacy and BCR's strategic shift may only partially explain the change, as other factors, such as evolving social dynamics, customer expectations, and market competitiveness, may also be correlation factors. Future research could explore these interrelations more systematically.

In conclusion, this case study stands as an initial step toward a deeper academic and practical understanding of the role emotional and experiential marketing play in transforming communication within technical sectors.

Acknowledgement

The explicit use of BCR's brand name in this article has been formally authorized by the institution's executive management responsible for marketing and communication.

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Brand Revitalization through Social Media Management in the Music Industry: The Case of a Country Singer in the USA

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Article history

Received 27 June 2025 | Accepted 30 December 2025 | Published online 15 January 2026.

Abstract

Brand revitalization refers to the strategic process of reclaiming lost brand value to reverse declining trends and restore competitive advantage. While widely discussed in business and management literature, its application within the music industry remains underexplored. This qualitative study addresses this gap by examining the social media strategies used to revitalize the brand of a U.S.-based country music artist, following the seven-step framework proposed by Dev and Keller (2014). Drawing on insider access to the artist's management team, the research employs an in-depth single case study to analyze a rebranding process implemented across multiple digital platforms, supported by structured brand management and content strategies. The revitalization effort combined the restoration of legacy materials with the creation of emotionally engaging content - including photos, videos, and narrative storytelling - aimed at expanding the fanbase and reinforcing the artist's authenticity. The findings illustrate how a multidimensional, data-informed approach - integrating brand positioning, storytelling-based marketing, systematic digital optimization, and the careful sequencing of social media initiatives - can successfully reposition an artist's brand, generating renewed visibility, stronger engagement, and cross-media outcomes such as increased streaming, radio play, and traditional media attention. The study further highlights the transient and adaptive nature of social media-driven brand revitalization, which demands sustained strategic management to ensure long-term effectiveness. Overall, this research contributes theoretical and practical insights into how legacy music brands can be revitalized through integrated, multidimensional brand strategies.

Keywords: Brand Revitalization, Social Media Management, Music Industry, Country Music.

JEL classification: M31.

Introduction

Brand revitalization refers to the strategic process of reclaiming lost brand value and reversing declining trends to regain and bolster competitive advantage (Keller, 1999). Within business and management research, brand revitalization has garnered considerable attention, especially for organizations confronting market shifts or challenges to relevance (Kotler & Keller, 2016). However, a recent literature review (Tripathi et al., 2020) reveals a distinct gap: relatively few studies address brand revitalization from a robust managerial or strategic perspective, particularly those that provide actionable frameworks or empirical evidence relevant to real-world decision-making. The authors emphasize that much of the extant literature remains conceptual or focused on case-based narratives, lacking comprehensive, practice-oriented models. This consideration looks applicable within sectors like the music industry, where brand identities are complex and dynamic.

In the music industry, artists face unique pressures, such as rapid changes in consumer trends, digital disruption, and evolving media platforms, which make brand revitalization both critically important and methodologically distinct (Passman, 2021). Despite its importance, the topic has received scant dedicated research, with the existing literature primarily focusing on established acts or paradigmatic cases, rather than offering systematic, empirically grounded insights, especially related to specific genres such as country music (Negus, 2019). In addition, the role of fan engagement and community participation in the co-construction of artist brands remains under-theorized, despite emerging contributions that highlight the value of participatory labor in shaping music branding (Baym & Burnett, 2009). Similarly, strategic brand building rooted in core values - an approach well-established in corporate contexts (Urde, 2003) - has yet to be fully explored in the context of individual artists navigating genre-specific markets like country music.

A particularly relevant dimension for contemporary brand revitalization is the role of integrated social media management. Social media channels now operate as interconnected ecosystems where content curation, timing, and cross-platform synergy play central roles in shaping audience perception and engagement. Scholars have highlighted that effective social media management requires a strategic combination of audience targeting, content personalization, and the alignment of brand storytelling with platform-specific affordances (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Gensler et al., 2013). In the context of music branding, this entails not only frequent content posting but also the deliberate orchestration of formats - short-form viral clips on TikTok, visual storytelling on Instagram, long-form video on YouTube, and community-building posts on Facebook. By leveraging the unique strengths of each platform in a coordinated manner, artists can enhance their visibility, stimulate participatory engagement, and ultimately reinforce brand loyalty across diverse audience segments.

The objective of this study is to contribute to the understanding of brand revitalization within the country music industry through the strategic management of social media, as applied to a real-world case study. The study is guided by the following research question: What are the key strategic drivers for revitalizing the brand of a country music artist? Unlike previous research, this study adopts a dual perspective: the external viewpoint of academic scholars and the internal viewpoint of a professional practitioner due to the fact that our research team is composed of two academics and a digital social media analyst who worked as part of the communication staff of the United States country singer featured in the case study. The inclusion of a practitioner from the artist's communication staff as part of the research team constitutes a further strength, as it allowed for a hybrid perspective combining academic interpretation with insider knowledge.

The study is structured into three main parts: 1) a review of the scientific literature on brand revitalization through social media and traditional communication channels within the country music industry; 2) the qualitative methodology employed in the research; and 3) the analysis of findings and discussion. Finally, the conclusion outlines the main results achieved, the study's distinctive scientific contribution, the critical issues encountered, and future directions for further investigation.

1. Brand revitalization and social media: Theoretical foundations

1.1. Meanings and approaches in brand revitalization

Brand revitalization is a strategic response to the erosion of brand equity, often initiated to restore a brand's competitive advantage and cultural relevance in a saturated or evolving marketplace (Keller, 1999; Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). It refers to efforts made by organizations to reenergize brands that have lost their market traction due to shifts in consumer behavior, technological disruption, or internal misalignment. Some scholars have stressed the

necessity of aligning revitalization strategies with emerging cultural and technological trends, advocating for an integrated approach leveraging both digital and traditional media (Gensler et al., 2013).

Different approaches are adopted by organizations to revitalize their brands depending on the specific contexts they operate - strategic intent, health of the brand and product category (Tripathi et al., 2020). These approaches can be grouped into two main branches: managerial and market approaches.

1) Managerial approach. This dimension examines the role of leadership in initiating and steering the revitalization process, for instance by showing managerial efforts in transforming a brand into a heritage brand (Dion & Mazzalovo, 2016). This is especially true for artists seeking to modernize their brand without alienating long-standing fans. Entrepreneurial ventures such as licensing deals, brand partnerships, or even buy-back of rights can represent strategic moves to reclaim brand control and refresh market perception. Some scholars discuss strategic and tactical opportunities for managers to revitalize brands, such as acquiring favorable perception towards brand-refresh, association with relevant goals, and new usage situations (Wanink & Huffman, 2001). In corporate contexts, revitalization often arises from a strategic vision promoted by brand managers or entrepreneurs (Ikeda, 2001).

2) Market approach. This dimension focuses on consumer attitude toward brand revitalization and product/service rejuvenation. Consumer attitudes can be influenced by socio-cultural perspective and depending on consumer collectives (Närvänen & Goulding, 2016); nostalgic advertisements impact participation of customers in bringing dead brands alive (Gilal et al., 2020). In the music industry, combining the past and present for a retro brand has an effect on customer behavior, with nostalgia proneness acting as a moderating factor in the relationship between retro branding and consumer behavioral intentions (Hallegatte et al., 2018). Product extensions, genre fusions, and strategic collaborations (e.g., with mainstream or indie artists) can serve to reposition the artist within broader market segments (Chektan & Keller, 2014; Cooper et al., 2015). Some authors (Merlo & Perugini, 2015) discuss how innovation in content (e.g., concept albums, acoustic reworks) plays a pivotal role in brand renewal.

While brand revitalization has been widely discussed predominantly in marketing literature (Tripathi et al., 2020), a significant gap exists concerning its application within the creative and entertainment industries, particularly in music (Porto & Borges, 2024).

Some researchers and consultants have proposed and applied various brand revitalization processes (e.g., Light & Kiddon, 2009; Murane, 2012, quoted by Dev & Keller, 2014). By encompassing previous research, Dev & Keller (2014) articulate a comprehensive seven-step model for brand rejuvenation that will also serve as the analytical backbone for the case study in this paper. These seven steps include: 1) conduct a brand audit - recognize the need for revitalization and evaluate whether the problem is rooted in brand awareness, brand image, or product relevance; 2) determine the brand positioning - redefine the brand's value proposition and audience; 3) establish the brand platform - compare value proposition with competitors and implement Key Performance Indicators; 4) brand beliefs - identify the beliefs that lead the new brand; 5) evoke the brand experience - develop target customers to match their needs/expectations; 6) develop the brand voice - create the language and tone to target customers; 7) launch the brand - tactics and tools chosen for brand revitalization, measure and adjust to monitor performance and adapt. This structured roadmap provides both theoretical clarity and managerial applicability, especially in dynamic environments like the music industry where brand trajectories are increasingly volatile.

1.2. Artist as brand: A shift in the music industry

In the music sector, artists function not merely as entertainers but as brand identities (Kerrigan et al., 2011). These identities encompass values, aesthetics, and storytelling elements that audiences recognize and emotionally invest in (Click et al., 2013; Labrecque et al., 2011). The move toward personal branding, a process of curating one's public image, has further intensified under the influence of digital media (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). Nowadays, the artist is no longer simply a promoter of music releases but is positioned as a multi-dimensional "brand persona" whose personal story, authenticity, and interactions become the primary vehicle for engagement (Marshall, 2015; Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). In this model, successful revitalization is less about reintroducing a specific album or single and more about cultivating sustained interest in the artist's broader identity - musical, personal, and even ideological (Gensler et al., 2013).

For country artists, leveraging narratives around authenticity, community, and resilience - core values of the genre - has proven effective in re-engaging audiences, as well as building cultural relevance in increasingly diverse and fragmented markets (Watson, 2014). Social media has enabled artists to project these values directly, bypassing gatekeepers and fostering deep, direct connections with fans (Baym, 2018). In particular, the cultural expectations of authenticity, narrative, and locality expected by country music artists require that branding and rebranding efforts preserve the emotional and cultural bonds established with fans (Peterson, 1997; Fox, 2004).

1.3. Social media and brand revitalization

The communication layer represents a critical vector of brand revitalization. Studies have underscored the role of platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) in rebuilding brand loyalty (Ali, 2019; Li et al., 2019). These tools facilitate not just broadcasting, but interaction, dialogue, and co-creation. Real-time fan feedback, participatory content (e.g., duets, challenges), and live sessions humanize the brand and deepen emotional resonance (Gensler et al., 2013; Jenkins, 2006). For example, releasing "behind-the-scenes" footage or "day-in-the-life" vlogs can position the artist as relatable and transparent-key drivers in perceived authenticity (Marwick, 2013).

In other words, social media platforms are not only dissemination channels but also spaces for continuous identity construction and co-creation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The social media branding process involves creating affective value (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), in which emotional resonance with followers - achieved through intimate storytelling and behind the scenes content - revitalizes brand affinity. As Marwick & Boyd (2011) explain, artists use platforms like TikTok and Instagram to establish parasocial relationships, whereby fans feel personally connected to public figures.

In this context, visibility is algorithmically driven and temporally unstable (Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013). While a viral TikTok video can dramatically amplify an artist's exposure, this effect may be fleeting without sustained strategic engagement (Baym, 2018). Therefore, brand revitalization in digital spaces must extend beyond isolated campaigns to include content continuity, platform synergy, and audience monitoring (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Lomborg & Mortensen, 2017).

Recent studies define agile branding or marketing agility as the organizational ability to adapt swiftly across multiple communication channels - from short-form video to streaming platforms - while maintaining brand coherence (Pöhlmann et al., 2024; Kalaiganam et al., 2021). In the context of a country music artist, this means translating traditional storytelling into TikTok formats, reinforcing personal traits via Instagram aesthetics, and using YouTube for deeper long-form engagement, all aligned under a consistent brand identity.

1.4. Temporality and volatility of digital success

Porto & Borges (2024) highlight that while digital tactics offer high short-term visibility, the sustainability of this success remains precarious. Algorithmic shifts, platform fatigue, and content saturation mean that revitalization is not a one-off campaign but a continuous investment. Artists must adopt a brand stewardship approach, constantly adapting their message and aesthetics to evolving trends while safeguarding their core identity. Moreover, as pointed out by Jenkins (2006), the boundaries between digital and traditional media are increasingly porous. A well-received social media campaign can trigger cross-media effects-increased radio play, invitations to TV appearances, or features in print magazines-thus revitalizing the brand across the full media ecosystem (Napoli, 2011; Couldry, 2012).

1.5. From product-centric to persona-centric branding

Another emergent theme in the literature is the transition from product-centric to persona-centric branding (Holt, 2004; Gandini, 2016). Rather than focusing solely on individual releases, artists are now encouraged to build and promote a consistent persona, which in turn drives the success of future products. This aligns with Keller's (1999) distinction between brand image (what people associate with the artist) and brand awareness (how often the artist is top-of-mind). Strategic revitalization must work on both fronts: visibility and depth of association.

Leonard (2007) and Meier (2019) remind us that brand identity is not neutral. Gender, race, and class all influence how rebranding is perceived and whether it is embraced or rejected. For instance, a female country singer who modernizes her look or collaborates with pop artists might be praised for innovation or accused of betraying tradition. These dynamics must be carefully managed through audience listening and message calibration.

In summary, brand revitalization in the music industry is a multifaceted process, informed by managerial decisions, market adaptations, and communication strategies. Drawing on Dev & Keller's (2014) seven-step model and supported by recent contributions related to social media management, this literature review provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing real-world brand revitalization cases and to be operationalized in the case study of a U.S.-based country singer. We aim to understand how digital branding tools not only restore visibility but also reconstruct long-term audience connection, by considering that few studies have systematically investigated the communication actions of artists' brands that lead to significant results (Osorio et al., 2020). Specifically, our study is addressed to deepen the key strategic drivers for revitalizing the brand of a country music artist in the USA through social media management and to provide new insights for academics and practitioners engaged with managerial perspectives.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design and methods

The methodology adopted in this study is based on a qualitative, interpretative approach centered on an embedded case study, which is considered particularly suitable for exploring complex and context-dependent phenomena such as brand revitalization in the music industry (Yin, 2018). In fact, the case study approach enables the examination of real-life dynamics in a bounded setting and allows for the integration of multiple sources of evidence, including interviews, digital content analysis, and direct observation (Stake, 1995; Eisenhardt, 1989). Specifically, the focus of the analysis is a U.S.-based country music artist who engaged in a structured brand revitalization process through strategic social media management.

This methodological choice is motivated by the exploratory nature of the research question, which seeks to identify and understand the strategic drivers behind brand

revitalization within a specific creative and cultural context. The case study is particularly appropriate in situations where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined, and when the aim is not generalization but rather analytical insight (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Data were collected through a combination of qualitative techniques, including semi-structured interviews and dialogue with key stakeholders, content analysis of social media posts (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook), and internal documentation related to the rebranding strategy. This multi-source approach enhances the study's construct validity and provides a richer, triangulated understanding of the processes involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

We conducted six interviews with: the artist (Respondent 1, R.1), the artist's marketing manager (R.2), the artist's tour manager (R.3), and some record label executives representing labels A, B, and C (R.4, R.5 and R.6). The semi-structured interviews with the artist, the marketing manager and the tour manager served as the starting point for the data collection process, initiated in October 2018. Subsequently, interactions with these three key respondents continued until December 2022 through focused, dialogic exchanges on narrower thematic areas rather than formal interview sessions. The other three semi-structured interviews with record label executives were conducted in December 2020.

The interview protocol was focused on five main thematic areas: 1) the artist's career history and discography; 2) personal interests and creative attitudes; 3) the structure and dynamics of the country music industry; 4) the artist's relationships with record labels and radio networks; and 5) ongoing projects related to catalog reissues and artistic development.

The interview protocol was flexible rather than rigid. The increased flexibility resulted from the longitudinal continuity of the study, conducted over several years, which allowed for iterative engagement with the key respondents. Specifically, the first three interviewees addressed all five thematic areas, while the interviews with record label executives were limited to areas 1 and 5.

A distinctive feature of this research lies in the dual role of one team member, who also worked internally as the digital social media manager for the artist. This "practitioner-researcher" position provided privileged access to internal insights and data, enabling a deeper understanding of the internal dynamics and branding strategies at play. Such a collaborative research design aligns with recent developments in qualitative inquiry that advocate for co-constructed meaning and contextual depth (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Nicolini, 2009). The empirical investigation follows an inductive logic, allowing theory and data to interact iteratively, as recommended in interpretive case study research (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Additionally, the study draws on literature concerning insider research and action research methodologies, recognizing the benefits and challenges of conducting research from within the organization (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Coghlan & Brannick, 2014).

2.2. Data collection and data processing

The operational approach to this case study involved structured observation and iterative data analysis. We began with a comprehensive assessment of the artist's digital footprint, combining qualitative methods such as interviews with key respondents and quantitative data derived from key performance indicators (KPIs), including social media metrics and streaming numbers. Social media performance was closely monitored across platforms, and each managerial initiative followed a cyclical process of testing, measuring, optimizing, and re-launching, a model consistent with agile marketing frameworks (Heath & Heath, 2010). We also conducted a competitive landscape analysis of peer artists in the country music genre, identifying benchmarks in terms of follower growth, engagement rates, streaming numbers,

and cross-platform presence. This contextual study allowed us to position the artist accurately within the current market and identify underexploited opportunities.

The already mentioned key performance indicators (KPIs) guided our strategic adjustments throughout the project. These included fanbase expansion, engagement rates, content views, growth in music streaming, concert ticket sales, and merchandise revenue. Additionally, we evaluated fan responses by analyzing the quality of interactions, sentiment in user comments, and the overall effectiveness of specific communication tactics. Importantly, as already stated, the research team also included a digital analyst embedded in the artist's actual social media management team. This internal-external dual perspective enabled access to non-public data and real-time strategic adjustments, adding a layer of practitioner insight that complemented the academic analysis.

2.3. Framing the artist within the country music landscape

The artist at the center of this case study is a country music singer from the USA who rose to prominence in the 1990s, during a period of significant expansion for the genre. That decade marked the emergence of a new generation of performers who successfully captured public attention and achieved considerable success in both sales and radio play. From the outset of his career, the artist benefited from strong radio support, a critical factor in the country music landscape, where genre-specific stations continue to serve as powerful gatekeepers and promotional platforms. Radio exposure not only amplifies visibility but also drives tour attendance and album sales.

However, every artist inevitably experiences a life cycle, and their radio airplay tends to diminish over time. Once an artist falls off the radar of these stations, regaining traction becomes increasingly difficult. Many stations erect entry barriers that favor younger, trend-aligned performers, often sidelining artists perceived as 'legacy acts' or outdated. This context rendered the artist's attempted comeback especially challenging, yet also uniquely valuable for studying brand revitalization via digital platforms.

Following a highly successful phase in the 1990s, the artist entered a period of gradual decline in the early 2000s, with his last hits emerging during that time. Following the termination of the contract with the record label, there was a long period of inactivity. During these years, the artist joined social media, but with an overall limited impact. He grew a decent following on Facebook, had a rather modest presence on Instagram, a neglected YouTube channel, and was absent from TikTok.

3. Results and discussion

Following the theoretical framework, we implemented the 7 steps analysis of Dev and Keller (2014) to the case study of a US country singer addressed to clearly showcase a complete process to brand revitalization, see Figure 1.



Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

Source: Dev & Keller, 2014.

3.1. Brand audit

This initial phase focused on evaluating the health of the artist's brand. Indicators pointed to a clear decline: there had been no significant chart or radio success since the early 2000s, as stated by an executive representing record label A (R.4). Moreover, the last official music

release also dated to that decade, as pointed out by an executive representing record label C (R.6).

The marketing manager (R.2) highlighted how the majority of online content relied on outdated visuals (images and videos from the 1990s) projecting an obsolete image. Social media presence was weak, with Facebook being the only relevant channel. Other channels were significantly underperforming. The YouTube channel had a minimal following and lacked a structured content strategy; uploaded videos were of poor audio and video quality. Instagram had a modest following, but with extremely low engagement - likely affected by a previous acquisition of fake followers, which tends to hinder organic visibility (Marwick, 2013). The artist was absent from TikTok, and the overall lack of attention to Instagram and TikTok could be explained by the older demographic of the core fanbase (35+).

According to an executive representing record label B (R.5), streaming data were equally underwhelming, confirming the artist's marginal position in the current music scene. The artist and his marketing manager (R.1 and R.2) pointed out how communication was predominantly one-directional, especially via Facebook, with minimal attention to monitoring audience feedback or interaction. As Labrecque et al. (2011) argue, effective personal branding requires two-way communication and feedback mechanisms. The absence of these reduced the artist's ability to adjust messaging and strategy in line with audience expectations. Overall, brand awareness, image, and relevance were all compromised.

3.2. Determine the brand position

We analyzed the brand's perception among country music fans and defined the strategic direction for its evolution. According to the tour manager (R.3), the artist still held some brand equity, especially among long-time country music fans and nostalgic listeners (Hallegatte et al., 2018). However, he lacked relevance for younger generations raised in the digital age. The prevailing perception was that of a legacy act, a "90s country artist", as highlighted by all respondents.

The idea behind the new positioning was to present the artist as a timeless country music legend, working on two main fronts: 1) valorizing the existing repertoire while producing new music, encouraging the rediscovery of past hits as well as introducing them to new music with more contemporary sounds (Beckers et al., 2020); and 2) using social media to depict the artist's daily life in order to attract and engage fans who could relate to his lifestyle (Baym, 2018).

The objective was to reposition the artist not merely as a "legacy act" but as a culturally relevant figure capable of resonating with both longtime fans and new audiences.

3.3. Develop the brand platform

Next, we defined the strategic foundations of the revitalized brand - its core values and emotional promises to the audience. The intended positioning portrayed the artist as a genuine, hard-working country musician grounded in family, tradition, and authenticity. We aimed to humanize the artist: someone relatable, down-to-earth, and deeply connected to fans through direct interaction and social media presence. The brand identity was further enhanced by crafting a modern aesthetic that retained traditional values while appealing to younger audiences.

Insights gathered from all interviewees helped to conduct a competitive analysis, by mapping the country music scene and categorizing artists into distinct groups: leaders, legacy acts, emerging talents, and declining acts. The analysis drew on multiple indicators, including radio airplay success, touring performance, follower counts across major social platforms, and, especially, streaming data. Within this framework, four artists were identified who were

frequently associated with the case study artist: their careers had followed a broadly comparable trajectory up to 2018. At the time of the analysis, the metrics observed for these artists, particularly those pertaining to social media and streaming, showed a high degree of alignment.

3.4. Establish the brand belief

At this stage, the focus shifted to identifying the guiding values on which to build the artist's new brand identity, defining how the artist should communicate, behave, and engage with his audience.

The analysis of the artist's personality along with the perceptions already held by fans, derived by conversations with R.1, R.2 and R.3, highlighted authenticity, humility, and accessibility as key traits - qualities that distinguish engaging artist brands from distant celebrity personas (Holt, 2004).

The artist needed to project gratitude and sincerity, and position himself on an equal footing with his fans. This approach aligns with findings by Li et al. (2019), who emphasize how active audience engagement and emotional alignment foster brand loyalty.

These brand beliefs were translated into guidelines for all future communication and interactions, serving as a compass for all published content and for the artist's overall image. The goal was to ensure that every post or interaction reflected this identity, strengthening the emotional bond with fans and reinforcing the perception of an artist worthy of their support.

3.5. Evoke the brand experience

To translate the revitalization strategy into concrete audience engagement, a series of tailored interventions were defined for each platform. The primary goals were to strengthen the artist's digital presence, enhance the visibility of his musical catalog, and cultivate a more authentic connection with fans (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Gensler et al., 2013).

On YouTube, we carried out a full channel overhaul:

- Music videos and key older tracks were remastered in high definition and re-uploaded, leveraging the platform's preference for high-quality content in its algorithmic promotion.
- New content, such as live performances or acoustic covers, was strategically produced and uploaded, resulting in increased engagement and renewed audience interest (Merlo & Perugini, 2015).

On TikTok, we prioritized short-form, authentic content drawn from everyday moments: family life, life on the ranch, music rehearsals, and spontaneous performances. A central focus was fostering fan participation through features such as duets (split-screen videos with fans), video responses, and personalized comments, initiatives shown to enhance parasocial interaction and build loyalty (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Abidin, 2016).

Facebook and Instagram strategies emphasized consistency and emotional storytelling. We increased the frequency and quality of posts, highlighting both the artist's personal life and musical identity. Posts included informal acoustic sessions, behind-the-scenes clips, and promotional content for tours and streaming releases. This multi-platform integration allowed for a richer brand narrative and stronger community cohesion (Pihl, 2013).

3.6. Develop the brand voice

Establishing a tone of voice fully consistent with the brand identity previously outlined became a crucial aspect of the branding process. The communication style was intentionally crafted to reflect humility, approachability, and light humor - qualities aligned with the artist's

real image. Research shows that voice consistency enhances brand trust and fosters deeper emotional connection (Labrecque et al., 2011; Holt, 2004).

This tone was enacted through various content formats. For instance, the artist recorded reaction videos to fan covers, praised emerging creators, humorously engaged with trends or with videos using his own songs, and commented on user-generated videos. These practices not only improved the artist's accessibility and status, but also empowered fans to feel acknowledged and engaged in the artist's life (Gensler et al., 2013). The strategy successfully fostered a community-centric environment, in which fans were not just spectators but active participants in the artist's story - a dynamic consistent with theories of co-creation and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006).

3.7. Launch the new brand

The launch of the new brand was developed gradually. The first phase, initiated in 2019, prioritized the revitalization of the YouTube channel with the aim of restoring and enhancing the existing content. In subsequent phases (2020–2021), efforts expanded to Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok with targeted content strategies aimed at engaging both legacy fans and younger digital-native audiences (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

The outcomes were significant:

- YouTube subscribers increased by 2100% in four years;
- Facebook followers increased by 30% in over three years;
- Instagram followers increased by 225% in over three years;
- TikTok has become the artist's second-largest platform in terms of followers.

Beyond fanbase growth (+180% across all platforms), the strategy produced measurable gains across key performance areas:

- Streaming: the artist's most popular track experienced a 230% spike in Spotify and Apple Music streams following the viral use of the song in three user-generated TikTok videos. These findings align with Maheshwari's (2023) claim that TikTok has become a central driver of streaming, radio airplay, and chart performance. The latest music release outperformed comparable artists by 470% in terms of average streams, while YouTube views increased by over 3,100%.
- Live concerts: average attendance per concert rose by 36%;
- Merchandise: per-show merchandise revenue grew by 500%;
- Industry investment: the artist signed a contract with a leading Nashville label, accompanied by robust promotional and financial support;
- Traditional media: the artist's radio airplay increased significantly for the first time in years (+53% in 2022 compared to the previous year) and was featured in a range of print and digital music publications.

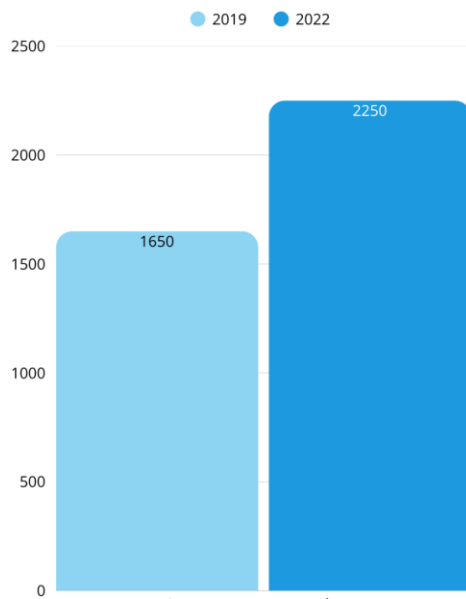


Figure 2. Average concert attendance (n° of concertgoers)
Source: Internal data provided by marketing manager

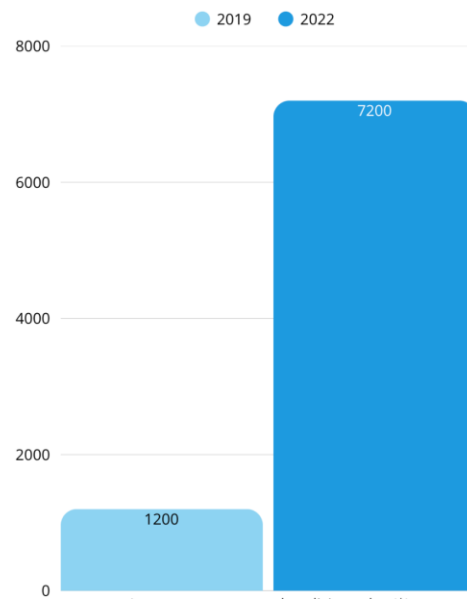


Figure 3. Average concert merchandising sales (\$)
Source: Internal data provided by marketing manager

These results presented in Figure 2 and Figure 3, demonstrate that a strategic and sustained brand revitalization process, when rooted in social media engagement and consistent brand messaging, can drive not only digital performance but also reintegration into the broader cultural and commercial landscape of the music industry (Porto & Borges, 2024; Ali, 2019).

3.8. The key drivers of brand revitalization

To address the research question that guided this study, the key strategic drivers for revitalizing the brand of the country music artist through social media can be identified as a combination of interconnected factors operating across multiple dimensions of brand management, marketing, and product strategy.

First, a brand management strategy was developed, combining a redefinition of the artist's brand positioning with a comprehensive restoration of previous content. This dual focus enabled the brand to reconnect with its historical audience while also laying the foundation for renewed cultural relevance. From a marketing perspective, the strategy placed particular emphasis on narrative management. The goal was to highlight the artist's authentic personality in order to reinforce core values such as authenticity, humility, and audience proximity - critical elements for establishing long-term emotional bonds with fans (Labrecque et al., 2011; Holt, 2004).

Another pillar of the strategy was the systematic optimization of social media platforms and digital tools. The artist's online presence was strategically restructured to maximize the unique affordances of each platform, thereby enhancing user engagement and facilitating outreach to new audiences (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Equally important was the role of sequencing and timing. The revitalization plan was executed through a clearly defined sequence of actions, ensuring consistency and coordination across platforms and content formats. The deliberate decision to begin with the restoration and promotion of existing content, before introducing new material, created a coherent and polished digital ecosystem. This allowed newly acquired users to encounter a well-organized and compelling brand narrative, encouraging deeper exploration and, for some, rediscovery of the artist.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature on brand revitalization by addressing a critical gap in research concerning its application within the music industry, and particularly in the context of country music artists. While previous studies have discussed brand rejuvenation in traditional business and marketing settings (Keller, 1999; Dev & Keller, 2014; Tripathi et al., 2020), few have provided empirical insights into how legacy music brands can be strategically revitalized through social media. Our research responds to this gap by presenting a detailed and operational case study that documents, step by step, the integrated process of rebranding an established artist whose visibility and cultural relevance had diminished.

Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative single-case design, combining academic rigor with insider access provided by the participation of a social media analyst embedded in the artist's management team. This hybrid approach allowed for the triangulation of multiple data sources, including social media metrics, content analysis, and internal strategic documentation. The methodology enabled a comprehensive understanding of both the strategic intentions and the operational practices that underpin successful brand revitalization campaigns in the digital era.

The results show that effective brand revitalization requires a multidimensional strategy that encompasses brand positioning, narrative construction, content management, and careful sequencing of social media initiatives. The study highlights the importance of restoring and optimizing past content before introducing new material, creating a cohesive and engaging digital ecosystem for both existing and new audiences. It also emphasizes the role of storytelling in conveying authenticity, humility, and audience proximity, which are essential in fostering long-term emotional connections and enhancing brand loyalty.

From a managerial perspective, the study illustrates how an integrated and data-informed social media strategy can generate tangible outcomes - including significant fanbase growth, improved streaming performance, increased concert attendance, higher merchandise revenue, and renewed attention from traditional media outlets. Beyond these results, the study highlights several key drivers for decision-makers and managers. A central factor is the coordinated and continuous involvement of marketing professionals and social media managers, whose expertise is essential not only for managing the artist's catalog and social media exposure but also for guiding the artist's individual behaviors that can directly influence fan perceptions.

The effectiveness of social media-based brand revitalization lies in its multidimensional nature - the ability to integrate multiple promotional, narrative, and commercial tools into a coherent strategy. The focus should not merely be on applying social media management techniques, but on recognizing and orchestrating the multidimensional components inherent in any brand revitalization process. Such a process requires: 1) a brand management strategy centered on the artist's positioning (or, in other cases, the product/persona); 2) a marketing strategy grounded in storytelling and emotional engagement; and 3) systematic optimization of the product or service offered across platforms.

These findings suggest that a complex set of multidimensional social media-driven activities can extend well beyond digital engagement, producing cross-media visibility and concrete commercial benefits. This represents a key managerial implication for managers, scholars, and practitioners alike: successful brand revitalization demands not only technical and analytical skills but also intuition, sensitivity, and an ability to observe and interpret emerging audience and industry dynamics. Nevertheless, the study presents some limitations. Its single-case design restricts the generalizability of the findings, and the focus on one music genre and national market may limit the applicability to other cultural or geographic contexts. Moreover, the transient nature of social media-driven success underscores the need for longitudinal analysis to evaluate the sustainability of brand revitalization strategies.

Future research could expand this investigation by conducting comparative case studies across genres or by employing mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative insights with quantitative performance modeling. Scholars might also explore the interplay between social media algorithms, fan engagement patterns, and brand equity evolution over time. By addressing these areas, future studies can build on the operational and theoretical contributions of this research, deepening our understanding of how legacy artists can successfully navigate the challenges of digital brand revitalization.

Author Contributions

This article is the result of a collaborative effort by all three authors. Specifically, Rita Cannas was responsible for writing Sections 1 (*Brand Revitalization and Social Media: Theoretical Foundations*) and 2 (*Methodology*); Lorenzo Floris authored Section 3 (*Results and discussion*); and Daniela Pettinao wrote the *Introduction* and *Conclusions*.

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