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Digital marketing and online consumer behavior in Romania during the COVID-19 pandemic: a case study

Elena POLEARUS[1],
Mihai TIMUŞ[1,2*]

[1] *„George Emil Palade" University, of Medicine, Pharmacy, Sciences and Technology of Târgu Mureș, 38 Gheorghe Marinescu street,, Târgu Mureș, 540139, România*
[2] *„Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava, 13 Universității street, Suceava, 720229, Romania*

Abstract: *Digital marketing is a constantly changing field in which* new *trends, new values and new* promotional tools appear *periodically* in the *online environment. Trends are given both by technological progress and by the profile and behavior of the consumer. Following the application of a structured questionnaire, this paper aims to analyze the online consumer behavior in Romania during the pandemic period. The results of our study can be used by entities from various sectors of activity that want to promote products / services in the online environment.*

Keywords: *digital marketing, consumer behaviour, Digitization, Romania, COVID-19 pandemic*

JEL Classification: M31

* *Autor indicat pentru corespondență: Mihai Timuș*
e-mail: mihai.timus@u2b.umfst.ro

1 INTRODUCTION

According to He & Harris (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic is likely one of the most important environmental changes in the history of modern marketing, which will have a weighty effect on corporate social responsibility, consumer ethics and the basic philosophy of marketing, also significantly influences consumer behavior. With repeated waves and uncertainty about its conclusion, the pandemic will have a long-lasting effect on our economic, social, political and cultural lives. According to a study conducted by MKOR (2021), 91% of the Romanian companies felt affected by the COVID-19 epidemic, with an average total impact of -10.2% on sales for 2020. Also, 95% of companies have adopted measures to survive the current crisis.

Thus, there was a forced transition to digital marketing even for companies that did well before. LaFleur (2020) mentions that given that at the beginning of the pandemic many companies were not prepared to cope with restrictions and new rules, those that survived collaborated with experienced digital suppliers and incorporated automation and digitalization into their own business plans. Eventually digitalization began to be a topic that was increasingly addressed even within companies that were not thinking about this step forward.

Social Media marketing is an online technique for promotion that involves creating and sharing content on social networks to achieve the marketing and branding goals of a company (Mărginean & Ciucan-Rusu, 2014). That is why it is imperative to research online consumer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the questionnaire, with the help of a comparative approach, it is useful to analyze the profile of online consumers by age and gender categories in order to determine the preferences of products / services in online purchases.

Following the changes that are constantly occurring in the field of digitalization and its effects on the online consumer behavior, but also the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was desired to analyze the situation on the market in the country, most of the studies being focused at a global or international level. This paper aims to analyze the current situation of online consumer behavior on the Romanian market, thus providing a topical guide for promoting the offers of entities in the virtual environment.

Further, the work is structured as follows: section 2 defines the investigated problem; section 3 shows the methodology used; in section 4 are presented the results and discussions of the paper, and in section 5 conclusions of this research.

1. DEFINING THE INVESTIGATED PROBLEM

E-commerce, or internet commerce, has gained momentum in recent decades and continues to grow sharply. Social networks have become the main marketing channels used by various entities in different sectors of activity, regardless of their size. All this is possible through the digitization of business processes.

According to the simplified definition provided by Interreg Europe (2019), digitalization represents the shift of data from the analogue to the digital level. Another definition suggested by Schallmo and Williams (2018) is "the connection between people, processes, data and things to be able to provide intelligent and practical information that leads to commercial results". When it comes to the level of digitization, Romania ranks 26th in the European Union.

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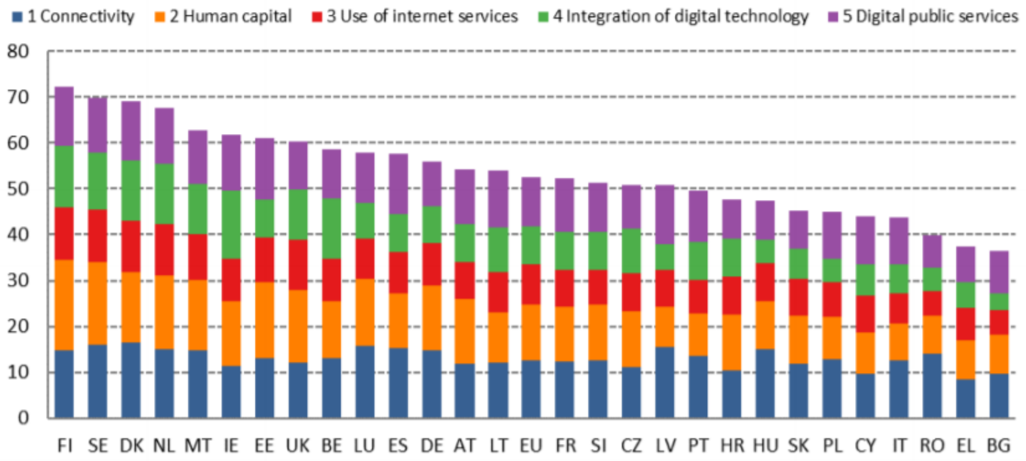
Figure 1. Romania compared to the rest of the EU countries based on the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), 2020



Source: European Commission (2020)

Improving the performance or reach of a company with the help of the new digital technology takes place in the operational processes, at the level of the customer experience and within the business model. It is a continuous and awareness-conscious process adapted to the new realities of the digital economy.

According to Schallmo & Williams (2018), the path to digitalization has 5 stages (Figure 2). The first stage is the digital reality, namely the moment when the business model is outlined, the digital reality reported to the company is analyzed and explained to the stakeholders. The second stage is digital ambition, at which point targets are defined in terms of time, costs, space, and quality. The third stage, the digital potential, is characterized by the collection and establishment of good practices and facilitators for digital transformation. In the fourth stage, digital matching, the digital elements that are best suited to the objectives of the business model are chosen and established. Finally, the fifth stage is the digital deployment, at which point the new digital business model is completed and integrated.

Figure 2. Stages of the digitalization journey

Source: Schallmo, & Williams, 2018, p. 66

Romania has a digital competitiveness level of 53.67% in 2020, compared to Denmark of 96.01% or Poland of 69.23%. According to Statista (2021), the digital competitiveness of a country is assessed based on three major criteria: knowledge, technology and preparation for a future advancement, criteria that will lead to the transformation of society in general.

According to the studies made by Deloitte (2021), the most important marketing trends arising from the pandemic are the digitization of the marketing department in order to be able to work in teams from home, empathizing with customers and therefore changing the strategy in real time, customizing digital communication by accelerating the adoption of digital channels and optimizing marketing budgets in real time according to the changes occurred.

As for consumer behavior, He & Harris (2020) note that the pandemic has affected how consumers see consumerism and how it affects not only them but also the environment. People in developed countries who believed themselves to be safe suddenly were put in situations of material uncertainty, forcing them to assess not only their consumer behavior, but also their priorities, changing their methods by which to obtain their social and self-actualization needs according to Maslow's pyramid. They also state that there has been a paradigm shift in local and international products following the disruption of the global supply chain and the emergence of geopolitical tensions. This transformation is not based strictly on the grounds of cost, quality, and availability, but also for ethical reasons. In the context of Covid-19 pandemic, all these changes affect marketing strategies, pushing companies towards a less globalized vision, directed more towards online communication and oriented for the shorter term, based on the permanent changes that occur among consumers.

In Romania, the number of users of social networks increased by 1 million (9.1%) between 2020 and 2021, reaching 12 million, or 62.5% of the population (Kemp, 2021). Among the most important social networks worldwide are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik-Tok, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Pinterest, Reddit and YouTube. In Romania, Facebook dominates the market, followed by YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn and TikTok, which is growing, especially among young people.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was applied to collect data for this case study, which was carried out between June 9-18 2021, with the help of the Google Forms tool. A questionnaire was built and offered to the public on social networks. A quantitative data analyses was applied to gain results described in the next chapters. The data collected was processed using Microsoft Excel, Google Forms and Power BI tools. The data are both quantitative and qualitative, both primary (collected by research team from consumers and representatives of companies) and secondary (obtained from official databases).

According to the statistical data provided by the World Population Review (2021), the population of Romania aged between 18 and 54 years currently counts 9,614,200 individuals. According to the specialists from Survey Monkey (Graglia, 2021), a company specialized in questionnaires and statistical processing, listed on the stock exchange at $ 1.3 billion, so that the results of a questionnaire reported per 10,000,000 people are statistically accurate, should gather 400 responses. Therefore, the questionnaire on the online behavior of the consumer had a number of 481 respondents to have a statistical value, the results having thus a degree of error of +/- 5%. Here were used five questions identifying the character of the respondents (gender, age, studies, occupation, income), two open-ended questions, a closed dichotomous question, two closed questions with simple choice, five closed multiple choice questions and a point with nine questions with semantic differentiation on the Likert scale.

Regarding the identification data of the respondents' character, 73.8% of the respondents of the questionnaire on consumer behavior were female, and 26.2% were male. Their age falls within 44.7% in the age group 25-34 years (215), 27% (130) in 35-44 years, 22.9% (110) in 18-24 years and 5.4% (26) in 45-54 years.

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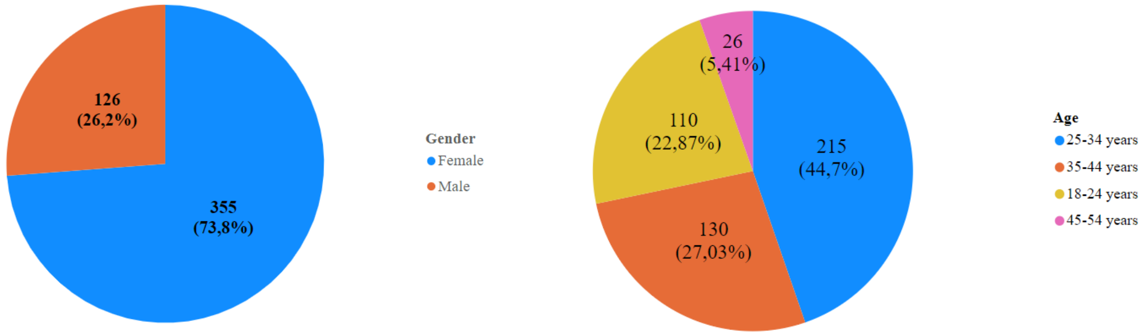
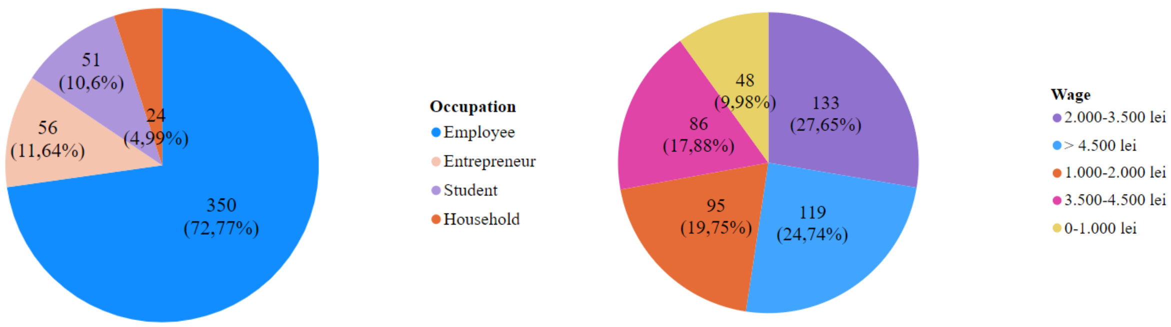
Figure 3. Identification of respondents by gender and age groups



Source: own projection

The level of education was in a percentage of 75,9% higher education, 23,3% high school and 0,8% general school. The main occupation of the respondents was: employee with a percentage of 72.77%, entrepreneurs with 11.64%, students 10.6% and householders with 5%. Last but not least, the monthly income was 27.7% in 2,000-3,500 lei, 24.74% in over 4,500 lei, 19.75% in 1,000-2,000 lei, 17.88% in 3,500-4,500 lei and 10% under 1,000 lei.

Figure 4. Identifying respondents by education, occupation and income group

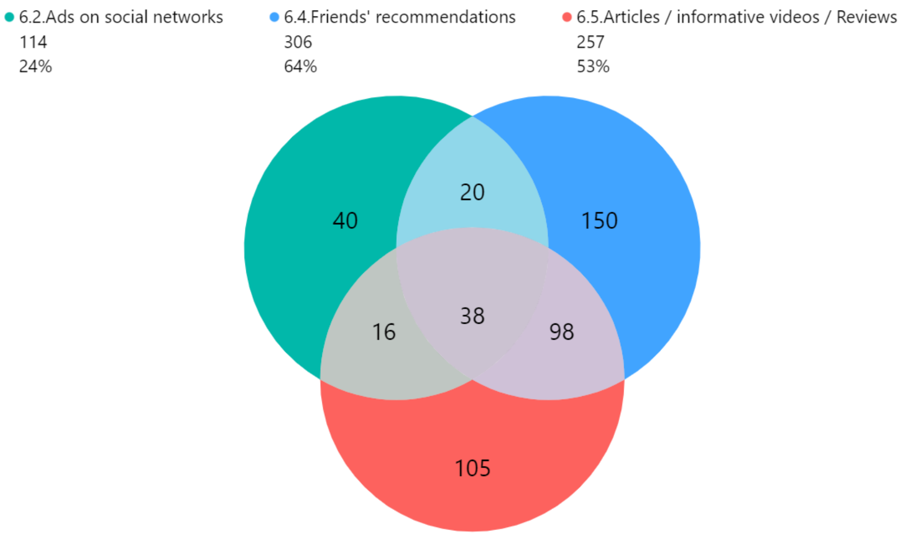


Source: own projection

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to identify the profile of the online consumer, it is necessary to analyze the decision makers of online purchases. We selected first three most popular answers of the multiple-answer question "It usually urges me to search and buy a product", 64% of respondents said that it is based on friends' recommendations, 53% on articles, informative videos and reviews, 24% on social media ads. Also, we had other, less popular answers of 8.3% on online influencers, and 7.5% on ads seen or heard on TV, radio or in the press.

Figure 5. Decision-influencers in the purchase of a product/service



Source: own projection

In the figure 5 we see that from three decision makers illustrated above, 36,8 % do not depend on just one decision maker when it comes to purchasing a product. In this context we can mention that online consumers make their most of purchasing decision based on others' people opinion (friends and reviews).

Age is an important factor in determining consumer behavior. No person over the age of 45 mentioned the influencers, and those who did it in the 35-44 age category were very few. In contrast, the advertisements in the press/TV/radio do not catch on so well in the 18-24 age category. When it comes to the gender of respondents, none of the 126 men have ticked off the "Influencers" version. Of those who ticked more than one answer, almost all of them also ticked "Informative articles/videos/Reviews" and this answer was given 44 times out of the 74 cases in which only one variant of response was chosen.

Table 1 Share of responses to decision-makers in the purchase of a product/service by age group

Variant	18-24 years old (110 pers)	25-34 years (215 pers)	35-44 years (130 pers)	45-54 years (26 pers)
Friends' recommendations	64%	64%	66%	46%
Informative Articles/Videos/Reviews	51%	57%	52%	38%
Influencers	11%	11%	3%	0%
TV/press/radio commercials	5%	7%	6%	31%
Social media ads	33%	24%	17%	15%

Source: own projection

In women, the answer "Recommendations of friends" (112) leads in the unique responses, followed by "Informative Articles/Videos/Reviews" (51) and "Ads on social networks" (28). Both influencers and press/TV/radio commercials each received 6 unique votes. And in women,

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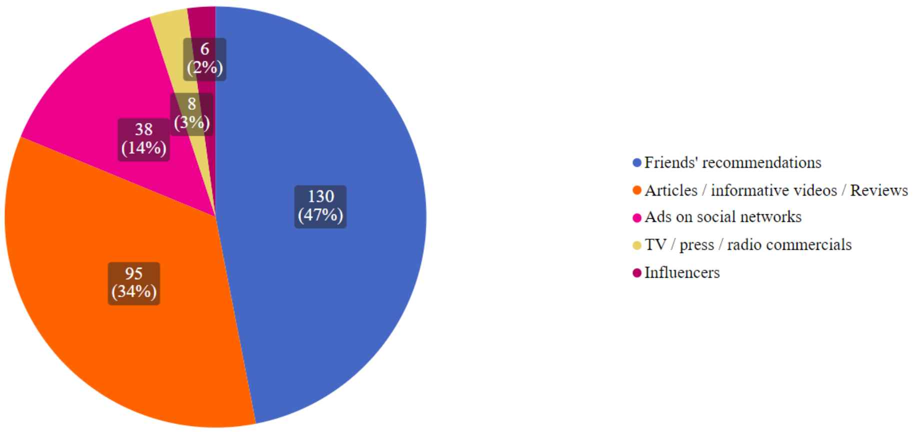
"Friends' Recommendations" are found in most multi-choice responses. People with an income of less than 1,000 lei are influenced 80% by friends' recommendations (half choosing this option as a single answer), the remaining 20% relying on ads on social networks. 67 of the 95 respondents with an income between 1,000-2,000 lei chose a combination of "Informative articles /videos/ Reviews" and "Ads on social networks", the same combination being found in those with incomes over 3,500 lei. The 2,000-3,500 lei category is based a lot on the two variants mentioned, but also on the ads seen on social networks.

Figure 6. Share of one-off answers on decision-makers in purchasing a product/service

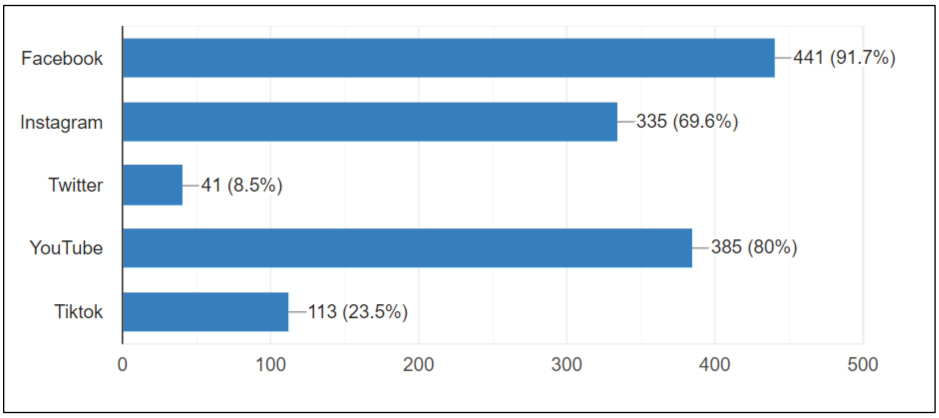


Source: own projection

Of the 277 respondents who gave a single answer to this multiple-answering question, 47% chose friends' recommendations, 34% informative articles/videos/reviews and 14% social media ads. This trend can be related to the rest of the responses, with the three choices keeping approximately the same proportions to respondents who ticked off several variants.

To the multiple question no. 7, "I use the following social networks", 91.7% of respondents use Facebook, 80% use YouTube, 69.6% use Instagram, 23.5% TikTok, and 8.5% Twitter.

Figure 7. Social networks used by respondents



Source: own projection

When it comes to age groups, those aged 18-24 are the most present on Instagram (87%), YouTube (89%) and TikTok (41%), but are the least represented on Facebook with 87% while the rest of the categories are present in proportions of over 92%. The 25-34-year-old category uses Instagram 70%, YouTube 78%, TikTok 24% and Twitter 8%, 35-44 years old Instagram 63%, YouTube 71%, TikTok 28% and Twitter 11%, and those over 45 have only 23% Instagram, 69% YouTube and 8% Twitter. Of those over the age of 45, none mentioned TikTok.

Table 2 Share of social media responses used by age group

Social network	18-24 ani (110 pers)	25-34 ani (215 pers)	35-44 ani (130 pers)	45-54 ani (26 pers)
Facebook	87%	93%	92%	92%
Instagram	87%	70%	63%	23%
YouTube	89%	78%	71%	69%
TikTok	41%	24%	28%	0%
Twitter	7%	8%	11%	8%

Source: own projection

In terms of the gender of respondents, there are no substantial differences between users by gender, with 92% of women using Facebook compared to 90% men, 76% Instagram compared to 70% men, 79% YouTube compared to 83%, 22% TikTok compared to 27% and 6% Twitter compared to 13%. Basically women are more present on Facebook and Instagram, while more men turn to YouTube, Twitter and TikTok. However, no man over the age of 45 uses Instagram, TikTok or Twitter.

Table 3 Share of responses on social networks used by gender

Social network	Female (355 pers)	Male (126 pers)
Facebook	92%	90%
Instagram	76%	70%
YouTube	79%	83%
TikTok	22%	27%
Twitter	6%	13%

Source: own projection

Only 50 respondents out of 481 use a single social network, most of which are active on at least three of them. Also, none of the responses that selected a single variant mentioned TikTok.

To the multiple question no. 8, "The most often I buy products seen on", 46.8% of respondents voted for Facebook, 32.8% Instagram, 25.2% YouTube, 4.2% TikTok, only 0.8% Twitter, and 23.1% said they do not purchase products seen on social networks (20% women and 28.5% men).

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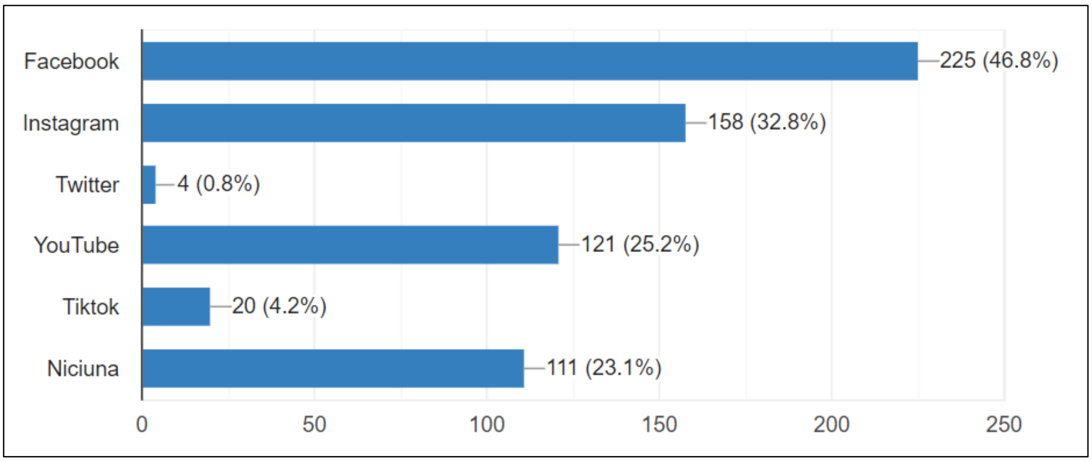
Figure 8. The most effective social networks for marketing



Source: own projection

Women are more likely to buy products seen on Instagram with a percentage of 37%, compared to men of only 20.5%. In contrast, men purchase 40% of the products seen on YouTube, compared to the much lower percentage in women of 20%. Facebook influences in a similar way in both groups, men 40% and women 49%. TikTok has not yet gained momentum when it comes to persuasion power in marketing, with 5% of women and 1.5% of men purchasing products seen on that channel.

Table 4 Share of responses on the most effective social networks for marketing used by gender

Social network	Female (355 pers)	Male(126 pers)
Facebook	49%	41%
Instagram	37%	21%
YouTube	20%	40%
TikTok	5%	2%

Source: own projection

When it comes to age categories, those between 18-24 years of age are the most prone to purchase products seen on social networks. Thus, 42% of them buy products seen on Facebook, 55% on Instagram, 42% on YouTube, 11% on TikTok and only 11% say they are not influenced by this. The 25-34-year-old category purchases products seen on Facebook at a rate of 47%, Instagram 32%, YouTube 16%, TikTok 3%, Twitter 8%, and 26% say none, 35-44 years old on Facebook 55%, Instagram 21%, YouTube 29% and 17% none, and those over 45 years old on Facebook at a rate of 23%, Instagram and YouTube 8% each, and the vast majority of 62% say they are not influenced by social networks. Of those over the age of 35, none mentioned TikTok. Twitter is insignificant in this case, with only 2% of respondents aged 18-24 to 35-44 purchasing products seen on the platform.

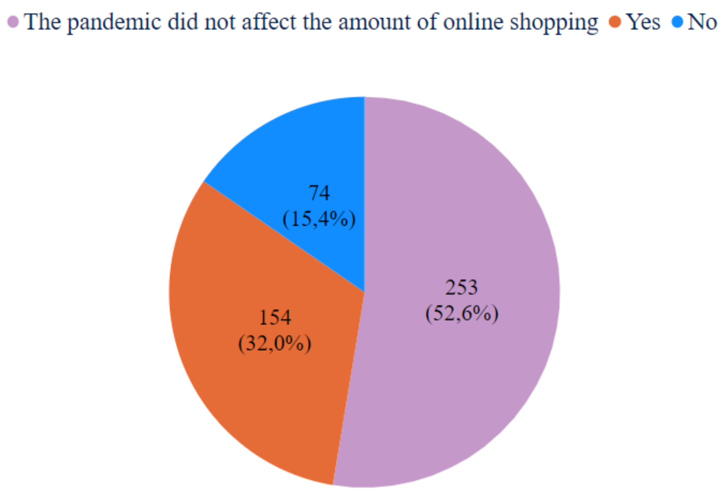
Table 5 Share of responses on the most effective social networks for marketing used by age groups

Social network	18-24 years (110 pers)	25-34 years (215 pers)	35-44 years (130 pers)	45-54 years (26 pers)
Facebook	42%	47%	55%	23%
Instagram	55%	32%	21%	8%
YouTube	42%	16%	29%	8%
TikTok	11%	3%	0%	0%
Twitter	2%	0%	2%	0%
None	11%	26%	17%	62%

Source: own projection

Question no. 9, "After the pandemic I will continue to purchase products online more often", revealed that 52.6% of consumers have not noticed any changes in behavior in this regard, 32% will continue to purchase products online, and 15.4% want to return to physical stores.

Figure 9. Percentage of respondents who will purchase products more often online after pandemic



Source: own projection

The least affected by the pandemic in terms of online shopping are people in the age group 45-54 years, and those between 25-44 years old will purchase more products online as before in the wake of the pandemic. Also, in terms of education level, those with high school education have been the least affected by the pandemic in terms of the method of shopping, unlike those with higher education who will purchase more often online. Last but not least, students are the category that will buy more online after the pandemic, unlike the rest of the occupations.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected consumer behavior in many ways. It has been observed that 32% of respondents will continue to purchase more online as a result of the pandemic. Also, as we could see from He and Harris's study in the first chapter, the questionnaire

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showed that the degree of social responsibility of a company is very important for 58.5% of respondents, especially for people of the female gender and those up to 34 years of age.

Companies that want to promote themselves online can create their marketing strategy based on the buyer profile as it was addressed in the questionnaire. Gender and age characteristics are key factors in differentiating the strategy in many cases, but educational attainment, occupation, or income also play an important role.

The customer behavior survey revealed that most of them shop online on their phones, use multiple social media platforms, enjoy different types of content that companies don't produce enough, stop buying from companies with poor customer support, are socially responsible, click on the top five Google results they see, and buy more online after the pandemic.

The limits of the research are given by the fact that the results of the questionnaire on the online behavior of the consumer have a degree of error of +/- 5%. Also, another limitation of the questionnaire method is given by the subjectivity of the method, but also by the phenomenon in which respondents want to appear better than they actually are or to provide answers that are socially acceptable, even if the questionnaires is anonymous. On the other hand, a small part does not have the patience to concentrate on giving a pertinent answer, but rushes to send it, completing only out of complacency. All of these things lead to discrepancies, such as the fact that people say they are not influenced by influencers, but they like stylized content, reviews, articles and blog posts, and many are offered by them. Finally, although the survey results are officially statistically relevant, further research can be done by interviewing multiple companies and exploring multiple customer behaviors, building different types of buyer profiles to help SMEs develop their marketing strategies.

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