A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA BRAND CONTENT AND STRATEGY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract
COVID-19 has had a profoundly negative impact on society and the worldwide economy. Due to this severe health catastrophe, businesses and schools were closed, and the government issued lockdowns and "stay at home" advisories. As the illness spread, customers began to spend more time at home and make online purchases. The use of technology, media, and social media has increased as a result of this collective trauma. By spending more time on social media, many people attempted to overcome the effects of lockdown and social isolation. This paper aims to develop an understanding of how the social media communication strategy of companies has been changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research methodology was based on the collection of secondary data and qualitative analysis of several business practices in terms of social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results sustain that even during the COVID-19 pandemic, several companies managed to engage with their consumers through the use of social media platforms, namely Facebook and Instagram, in a creative and innovative manner.

Keywords: *brands, social media, strategy, communication, COVID-19 pandemic*

Classification JEL: *M1, L1, L2*

1. Introduction and context of the study

The COVID-19 pandemic has risen multiple challenges for any type of organization all over the world (Catană et al, 2021). This is why they have had to design and implement new corporate and business strategies in order to cope with a turbulent environment (Toma and Marinescu, 2015; Toma and Grădinaru, 2015).

Considering the changes that occurred in customer behavior due to the COVID-19 pandemic, companies had to rethink their brand strategies in order to remain relevant to their consumers. Therefore, in this context, many of them had focused especially on capturing the potential of social media platforms in order to keep in touch with their targeted audience in accordance with their marketing mix (Catană and Toma, 2021a; Catană and Toma, 2021b). This paper aims to develop an understanding of how COVID-19 has shaped the social media brand communication strategy of organizations, starting from existing literature.

The structure of the paper is as follows: the next section presents the literature review. The third section illustrates the research methodology. Results and discussion are exhibited in the fourth section. The paper ends with conclusions.

2. Literature review

The concept of strategy is nowadays analysed mostly from a business perspective (Cornescu et al, 2004; Toma, 2013; Toma et al, 2016). Facing numerous risks and high uncertainty companies worldwide are using a plethora of strategic methods and tools in their activities and processes, such as Six Sigma (Toma, 2008), quality management (Toma and Naruo, 2009) and marketing mix

(Toma and Grădinaru, 2018). They have also fully understood the need to think and act in a responsible (Toma et al, 2011; Imbrișcă and Toma, 2020), creative (Toma et al, 2013; Toma et al, 2018) and entrepreneurial manner (Grădinaru et al, 2017) in an increasingly digitalized economy (Toma and Săseanu, 2007; Tohănean et al, 2018). Social media provides a fruitful environment.

According to a study conducted by Kantar, one of the world's leading companies in data analytics and brand consulting, during the beginning of the second quarter of 2020, digital marketing importance has increased significantly as a consequence of the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Mehta et al, 2020). The lockdown period had a clear impact on media consumption, not only in penetration, but also in time spent on each media: less Out of Home (OOH), cinema, printed newspapers or magazines, experiential events or transport and more digital, social networking and TV (Mehta et al, 2020).

As individuals endeavoured to keep in touch during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the usage of WhatsApp platform has benefited from an impressive growth throughout all stages of the global pandemic of coronavirus disease. Kantar's study (2020) revealed that: "the usage of the social media application WhatsApp has increased by 40% worldwide. Moreover, in the early, middle, and late phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, WhatsApp's utilization rate increased at global level by 27%, 41%, and 51%, respectively. Singnificat changes had occurred also in terms of time spent on the social media applications. For instance, in Spain, has been registered a 76% increasement in time spent on WhatsApp. Thus, Facebook consumption worlwide has climbed by 37%. Local social media applications such as Wechat and Weibo experienced a 58% rise in usage in China" (p. 3). Additionally, Kantar (2020, p. 5) sustained that "the group of individuals within the age range of 18 to 34 has seen the largest increase in overall messaging platforms usage, while individuals under the age of 35, have contributed to a 40% growth in usage of social media applications (WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram)".

Even though social media platforms overall consumption increased outstandingly during the first year of the the global pandemic of coronavirus disease, these channels were not perceived by most of individuals as trustworthy sources. A study conducted by the global communication company Edelman revealed that the majority of the respondents, namely 52% of them, viewed traditional national news outlets (broadcast and print) as trustworthy providers of information, making them the most reliable channels (Edelman, 2020). Moreover, only 48% of the participants perceived government websites as trustworthy and narrowly 11% of individuals declared that social media platforms are reliable sources of information (Edelman, 2020).

3. Methodology

The present paper addresses a qualitative examination of several business practices in terms of social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, the authors identified and gathered articles from numerous electronic databases through desk research. Secondly, they deployed a literature review. Thirdly, the authors synthetised and analysed the most relevant information. Finally, they wrote the paper.

4. Results and discussion

Numerous organizations had changed the content of their marketing communications. Thus, several brands rapidly responded by disseminating content related to COVID-19. Initially, the created and distributed postings were entirely related to the pandemic situation. Thus, these COVID-19-related posts belonged to a different category and had nothing to do with the brands' promotional efforts.

Afterwards, brands included COVID-19-related information in their posts on social media in order to promote their products or brands. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, several

companies managed to engage with their consumers through the use of social media platform in a creative and innovative manner (for instance, live events on Facebooks; Instagram live session for stress release and other wellbeing topic; virtual tours; creating and promoting challenges on social media) (Meta, 2020) as is presented in the following study cases (Figures no. 1 and 2).

a) Study case: Old Town Books initiatives on Facebook and

The owner of the ***Old Town Books*** business, Ally Kirkpatrick, began providing ***online writing lessons***, ***virtual book clubs***, and a kids ***reading challenge*** on ***Facebook***. The store encouraged the customers to set aside time for indoor creative activities. Firstly, the owner provided various artistic challenges and art projects on Facebook, after which she made printable and shareable coloring pages of her neighborhood's well-known shop dog, Scout. To entice consumers to join the store for online creative time, online writing classes were converted to a donation-based, or "pay-what-you-can," model.

Figure no. 1. Old Town Books.

Source: Meta, 2020

b) Study case: Modo's Yoga Studio NYC initiatives on Facebook and Instagram

The ***Modo Yoga Studio NYC*** provided free online yoga lessons to assist individuals in de-stressing during COVID-19. The studio opted to webcast courses on ***Instagram Live***. The company shared a schedule of upcoming classes. As a consequence, Modo Yoga NYC's community grew and instructors were able to communicate with consumers through comments and reactions. Also, some of the participants have donated to the team and sent emails of gratitude to the studio. Along with their donation-based courses on Instagram, Modo Yoga NYC has been offering a full calendar on their website since March 2020.

Figure no. 2. Modo's Yoga Studio.

Source: Meta, 2020

During the COVID-19 pandemic, brands, regardless of the market in which they were present at that time, had to emphasize more on finding solutions for building a stronger relationship with their consumers and therefore, reassessing their communication strategy. As a result, some of them had used advertising on social media platforms in order to highlight the ways in which businesses assisted consumers in overcoming obstacles associated to the COVID-19 pandemic (Dubbelink et al, 2021).

Regarding product advertising, companies had focused on promoting their goods in a more empathic manner, demonstrating awareness of the situation and how it was been affecting individual's live (Mundel and Yang, 2021). Additionally, several studies sustain that during the

begining of the global pandemic of coronavirus disease the majority of consumers were now interested in purchasing newly launched products unless they were designed to ease their personal struggles brought on by the epidemic situation (Özsomer et al, 2022).

For instance, Nike put a lot of effort into fulfilling to their client's requirements. In order create awareness regarding the importance of safeness and healthiness, Nike urged individuals to stay active indoors with the slogan "*Play inside, play for the world*". By live broadcasting on social media platforms communal exercises that were ideal for tiny places, the marketing communication effort made by the company, allowed customers to exercise at home (Santoki and Parekh, 2020). Furtheremore, Nike developed a virtual community by providing mini-workout challenges that individuals could take part in (Figure no. 3), satiating their desire for human interaction during lockdown (Santoki and Parekh, 2020).

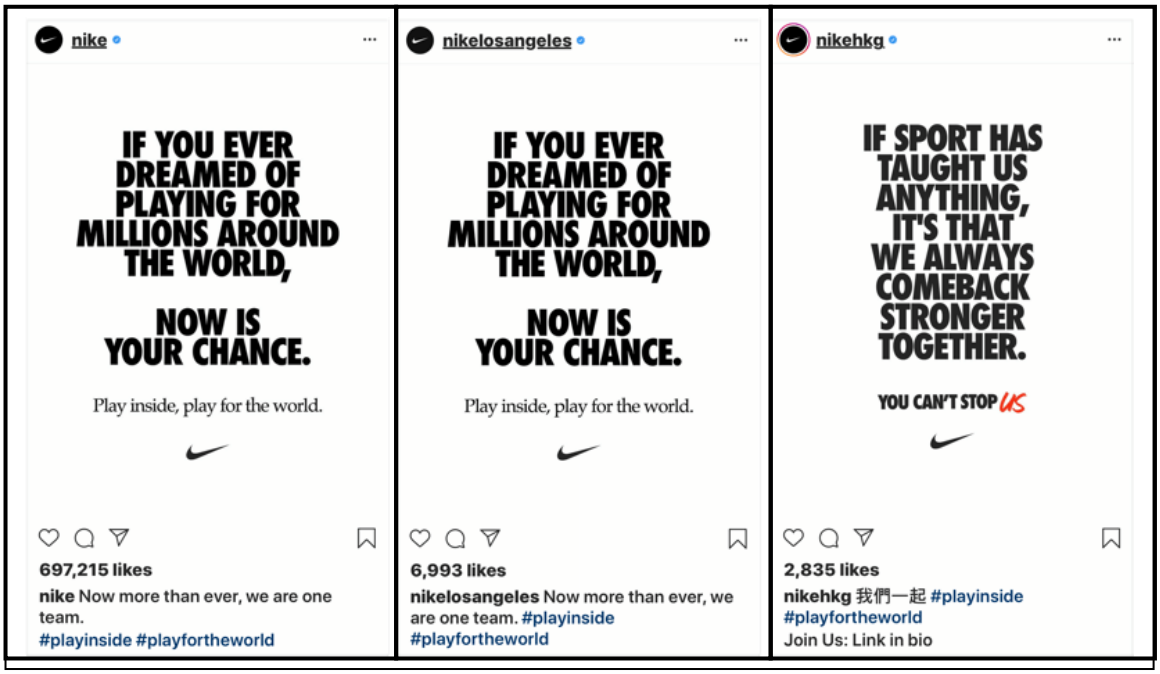

Figure no. 3. Examples of Instagram posts related to Nike's
"Play inside, play for the world" online campaign.
Source: Nike, https://www.instagram.com/nike/

Thus, an increasing number of organizations have established partnerships with medical professionals since doctors have come to be seen as reliable spokespersons for a brand's virus-related efforts (Azzahra, et al., 2021). For example, Domestos was one of the brands which initiated a collaboration, in order to promote its disinfectant product, with Mihail Pautov (Figure no. 4), rated as the doctor with the most followers on Instagram and Youtube (Romania).

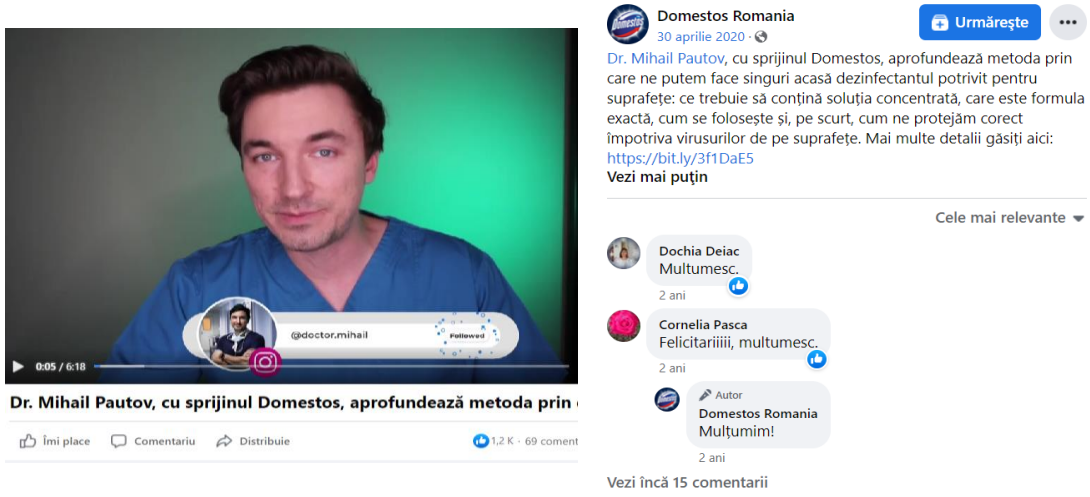

Figure no. 4. Dr. Mihail Pautov, the brand ambassador of Domestos disinfectant products in Romania during 2019-2021.

Source: Dr. Mihail's Pautov Facebook Account, https://roro.facebook.com/domestos.romania/videos/dr-mihail-pautov-cu-sprijinul-domestos-aprofundeaz%C4%83-metoda-prin-care-ne-putem-fa/237482963996896/

5. Conclusions

The majority of businesses quickly understood that in order to remain relevant for their audience during the global pandemic of coronavirus disease, it was necessary to stay connected with consumers and express compassion towards what they have been experincing due to COVID-19 pandemic.

As a consequence, companies had to adapt and change their messaging based on their client's expectations. For instance, restaurants used social media platforms to advertise curbside pickup, delivery, and daily specials in an effort to increase takeaway orders. Local shops have moved their emphasis to online sales and consumer virtual shopping. Many companies from the travel sector made the switch from promoting tourism to helping small local businesses while upholding health regulations.

Organizations aimed to contribute to the well-being of their consumers during COVID-19 pandemic by initiating discussions in a more emphatic manner, focusing on offering support and encouragement to their consumers. Thus, companies strived for creating strong online communities for their brands and clients through the use of social media platforms.

As presented in this paper, in addition to consumer-brand interactions, the pandemic situation affected how businesses market themselves. In this context, social media platforms have been used strategically by companies in order to build and consolidate brand community.

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