

DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY: INSIGHTS FROM ROMANIA

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Abstract

Digital marketing and social media have had a profound effect on the Romanian business landscape, presenting novel opportunities for businesses to engage with consumers, increase brand visibility, and drive growth. The present study explores the key stages of development by conducting an in-depth analysis, and identifies which factors influence digital marketing strategies. In addition, it investigates the role of social media in consumer behaviour and marketing trends by examining how these phenomena have been shaped by social media. Within this scope, a comprehensive review of the extant literature, as well as case studies of successful Romanian digital marketing campaigns, provides insights into the current state of digital marketing in Romania and offers recommendations for companies seeking to optimize their strategies in this dynamic digital environment. The present paper highlights the growing importance of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok in digital marketing strategies, and outlines the challenges and opportunities faced by nowadays companies.

Keywords: *social media marketing, digital marketing, digital transformation, consumer behavior*

Classification JEL: *M14, L1, L2*

1. Introduction and context of the study

Since the beginning of the millennium, digital marketing and social media have undergone substantial changes on a global scale, thereby transforming the manner in which businesses interact with consumers in the globalization era (Cornescu et al, 2004; Toma, 2005; Marinescu and Toma, 2015a). As posited by Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019), digital marketing is defined as any marketing strategy that utilizes the internet or an electronic device. It is further stated that social media marketing constitutes an essential component of this broader phenomenon (Bala and Verma, 2018). In the modern era, digital marketing and social media have evolved into indispensable elements of any comprehensive online marketing strategy.

Moreover, in the context of contemporary marketing strategies, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and LinkedIn have emerged as pivotal tools for business (Bala and Verma, 2018). In light of Romania's rapidly advancing internet penetration, which is estimated to have reached approximately 80% of the population in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024), the importance of digital marketing has increased significantly. In addition, the unique capacity of social media platforms to facilitate interaction with a vast audience, the development of brand recognition, and the generation of quantifiable returns on investment has led to a greater number of companies establishing a presence online (Tiago and Veríssimo, 2014).

The present paper aims to explore the evolution of digital marketing and social media use in Romania, with the intention of identifying the key developments, trends and factors shaping the field. It provides a comprehensive understanding of the manner in which businesses operating in Romania have employed digital marketing instruments, the evolution of consumer behaviour in the

digital domain, and the repercussions of social media on marketing strategies within the Romanian business landscape. In order to achieve this objective, the author analyzed key case studies and best practices that have emerged in Romanian digital marketing environment.

2. Literature review

2.1. The rise of digital marketing and social media

Digital marketing, defined as the use of digital channels and technologies to promote products and services, has become a key component of modern marketing strategies. A comprehensive overview of the concept is provided by Kotler et al. (2017), who describe digital marketing as encompassing a wide range of activities, including search engine optimisation (SEO), content marketing, email marketing, social media marketing, and online advertising. Social media marketing, in particular, has gained substantial importance due to the growing reliance on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube (Ibrahim and Ganeshbabu, 2018).

The extensive utilisation of social media platforms has resulted in a paradigm shift in the manner in which commercial enterprises conduct marketing activities. As Mangold and Faulds (2009) have observed, social media constitutes a hybrid communication tool, thereby empowering businesses to engage with consumers in ways that are unachievable through traditional media. It facilitates a two-way communication channel that fosters direct interaction, engagement and feedback, thereby allowing for more effective marketing strategies (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). The growth of social media platforms in Romania is significant, with nearly 13 million social media users in the country by 2024, representing over 65% of the total population (Statista, 2024).

In a manner consistent with their global counterparts, companies operating in Romania have increasingly adopted digital marketing strategies to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the internet and social media. According to a report by the Datarereportal (2024), over 70% of businesses operating in Romania now use social media as a central component of their marketing strategies, with Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn being the most popular platforms. Acting in an unpredictable business environment (Toma, 2006a; Toma, 2013; Toma and Marinescu, 2015a), these companies have to choose the right management (Toma, 2008a; Toma et al, 2014; Toma and Marinescu, 2015b; Grădinaru et al, 2020), follow strong leaders (Marinescu and Toma, 2015b; Toma et al, 2020a; Toma et al, 2020b; Toma, 2024a), possess clear strategic thinking (Toma et al, 2016a; Toma, 2024b) and effective planning (Toma et al, 2016b), implement enduring business and corporate strategies (Toma and Marinescu, 2013; Toma and Grădinaru, 2016; Toma, 2023a; Toma, 2023b), and competitive business models (Toma and Marinescu, 2012; Toma and Tohănean, 2018; Tohănean and Toma, 2018; Toma and Tohănean, 2019; Tohănean and Toma, 2024a), show an effective entrepreneurial orientation (Toma et al, 2017; Toma, 2019; Catană et al, 2020; Toma et al, 2021; Toma, 2023c), behave in a socially responsible manner (Toma, 2008b; Marinescu et al, 2010a; Toma et al, 2011a; Toma et al, 2011b; Toma, 2012). In order to stay competitive, they use, in most cases, different techniques and methods like quality (Toma, 2006b; Toma and Naruo, 2009; Toma et al, 2012) and lean management (Naruo et al, 2007; Marinescu and Toma, 2008; Toma et al, 2022), agile thinking (Toma, 2023d), organizational learning and training (Toma, 2011; Marinescu and Toma, 2013; Toma and Hudea, 2024), teleworking (Catană et al, 2021), Six Sigma (Toma, 2008c), Balanced Scorecard (Toma et al, 2010), marketing mix (Marinescu et al, 2010b; Grădinaru and Toma, 2017; Catană and Toma, 2021), customer experience (Toma and Catană, 2021a; Toma and Catană, 2021b) and encourage creativity and innovation (Toma et al, 2013; Marinescu et al, 2016; Toma et al, 2016c; Marinescu and Toma, 2017; Tohănean and Toma, 2024b).

2.2. Consumer behavior in the digital age

The rise of digital marketing and social media has had a profound impact on consumer behaviour. In the contemporary era, consumers are more informed, connected, and empowered than ever before (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). This paradigm shift has given rise to a new era of consumer behaviour, characterised by greater interactivity, personalisation, and community-building (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Consequently, digital marketing has empowered consumers with access to a wealth of information, enabling them to make more informed purchasing decisions and interact with brands in ways that were previously not possible.

In the context of the Romanian consumer market, social media platforms have become a significant source of information and influence for consumers. A study undertaken by Apostu et al. (2019) found that Romanian consumers are utilising social media for the purposes of researching products, reading reviews and engaging with brands. Consequently, companies are compelled to formulate marketing strategies that address both traditional consumer needs and the potential of social media to directly engage and influence consumer purchasing decisions (Stephen, 2016).

Social media also plays a key role in shaping brand perception and consumer trust. Research conducted by Lazar and Manolache (2020) indicates that Romanian consumers attach significant value to authenticity and transparency when engaging with brands on social media. Consequently, brands that successfully leverage social media to demonstrate their core values, products and customer experiences are better positioned to cultivate long-term relationships with their audience (Alwan and Alshurideh, 2022).

2.3. The evolution of digital marketing in Romania

An examination of the evolution of digital marketing in Romania illuminates a period that began in the early 2000s, when the country began to experience significant internet penetration and the rise of social media platforms (Onete et al., 2016). The adoption of digital marketing practices by companies operating in Romania initially occurred in a gradual fashion, with a continued reliance on conventional marketing channels such as television, print media, and radio (Bălăceanu and Bogdan, 2016). However, as internet usage grew, so too did the adoption of digital marketing tools (Androniciuc, 2016).

By the early 2010s, Romanian businesses had come to recognise the potential of social media as a marketing tool (Budac, 2018). Facebook became the predominant platform in Romania, with a substantial number of users engaging with brands through various forms of online content, including pages, posts, and advertisements. The introduction of targeted advertising on Facebook and analogous platforms enabled businesses to engage with specific demographic groups, thereby rendering social media an indispensable component of their marketing strategies (Budac, 2018).

In recent years, a notable development in the digital marketing strategy of companies operating in Romania has been the expansion of their activities beyond the Facebook platform to encompass such diverse media as Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok (Barbu et al., 2023). These platforms provide businesses with unique opportunities to engage with their target demographic, particularly younger consumers who demonstrate a high level of engagement with visual and short-form content. Following the global popularity of TikTok, companies operating in Romania began to experiment with influencer marketing, user-generated content (UGC) and viral campaigns (Jayaram et al., 2015).

3. Methodology

A comprehensive and systematic literature review formed the foundation of this research. This involved a detailed examination and synthesis of existing knowledge, identifying key themes, debates, and gaps in the current understanding of sustainable marketing. The literature review was conducted using a systematic search strategy developed to identify relevant academic publications.

To this end, the search was conducted using a range of databases including Emerald Insights, JSTOR, and Elsevier. The search terms included a combination of keywords and phrases related to digital marketing, social media, consumer behavior, brand visibility, marketing evolution, social media marketing, marketing strategies, digital transformation.

Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected publications. The search results were screened based on titles, abstracts, and keywords. The full texts of relevant publications were then reviewed to determine their suitability for inclusion. Furthermore, data from the selected publications were extracted and synthesized using a structured approach. This involved identifying key themes and concepts, analyzing the methodologies, findings, and conclusions of each publication, identifying commonalities, contradictions, and gaps in the literature, and synthesizing the findings to create a cohesive and comprehensive overview of the research topic.

4. Results and discussion

Existing literature highlights three factors as critical to the success of social media campaigns: creativity, effective targeting and the use of the right platform. Despite the application of universal principles of digital marketing, the success of such campaigns is significantly influenced by local market trends and cultural factors. The present study identified several digital marketing campaigns in Romania that were highly successful due to innovative strategies, effective use of social media and alignment with consumer preferences. A comprehensive review of Romanian digital marketing campaigns and strategies has revealed a number of key findings:

- ***The Prevalence of Facebook and Instagram***

Facebook (now with approximately 9 million active users) continues to dominate Romania's social media landscape (Statista, 2024). It has been identified as the primary platform for digital marketing campaigns, with businesses using Facebook Ads to target specific consumer segments based on demographics, interests, and behavior. Instagram, with its emphasis on visual content, has become a crucial platform for fashion, beauty and lifestyle brands. A notable instance of effective Facebook and Instagram marketing in Romania is the LIDL Romania- #CuDrag chiar ptOameni campaign. This initiative employed both platforms to highlight LIDL's commitment to supporting local communities and sustainability, leveraging user-generated content and interactive features such as polls and contests to enhance user engagement. The campaign's strategy encompassed a variety of social media marketing tools, including user-generated content, interactive features like polls, and competitions, which contributed to its success in generating significant engagement and positive brand sentiment.

- ***Influencer Marketing and Content Creators***

Influencer marketing has gained significant traction in Romania, particularly among brands targeting younger demographics. Individuals with substantial followings on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become central to digital marketing campaigns. These individuals possess a unique and authentic voice that resonates with consumers, thereby enabling brands to effectively target niche audiences. For instance, the Dacia Romania - Romania, a Story in Every Mile campaign employed influencers to showcase personal experiences with Dacia vehicles, effectively utilizing the authenticity and relatable nature of these content creators. The campaign's strategic deployment of influencers contributed to a notable shift towards a more humanised brand identity, thereby fostering a profound and sustained emotional connection with its consumers.

- ***User-Generated Content and Community Engagement***

UGC has become an integral component of digital marketing strategies employed by companies operating in Romania. Brands that encourage consumers to create and share content relevant to the company's products benefit from increased brand advocacy, as well as higher levels of user engagement. For instance, the Altex Romania - #NoiSuntemAltex campaign successfully utilised UGC to engage consumers, incentivising them to share their experiences with Altex products and win prizes. The aforementioned campaign has yielded two notable outcomes: namely, the genesis of substantial content, and the establishment of a sense of community around the Altex brand.

- ***TikTok and short-form video content***

As the popularity of TikTok grows on an international scale, a growing number of brands are establishing a presence on this platform with the aim of engaging with younger demographics. The efficacy of short-form video content in capturing attention and driving engagement has been well documented. In particular, prominent brands operating within the fashion, food, and entertainment sectors, including Kaufland Romania, have successfully utilised this platform to implement innovative marketing campaigns that resonate strongly with both Generation Z and Millennial consumers.

- ***The increasing importance of social commerce***

The integration of electronic commerce with social media platforms, otherwise known as social commerce, is an emerging trend in Romania. This innovative practice enables enterprises to offer their merchandise directly via social media channels. The integration of e-commerce into social media platforms has the potential to enhance the efficiency of the purchase process, thereby reducing the perceived barriers between the discovery and purchase of a product. Given the rising prevalence of smartphones and mobile internet usage in Romania, it is unsurprising that a growing number of companies are adopting social commerce as a pivotal sales strategy. For instance, Fashion Days Romania has implemented Facebook and Instagram shopping features, allowing users to browse and purchase directly from the platforms. This integration of e-commerce into social media platforms enables impulse purchasing. Similarly, eMAG Romania has introduced live-streaming events on Facebook, wherein hosts liaise with consumers and present deals in real time, resulting in substantial sales growth.

- ***Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) in digital campaigns***

The utilisation of AR and VR is gaining popularity in digital marketing campaigns. These technologies provide consumers with immersive and interactive experiences, enabling them to visualise products in their own environment and experience brand narratives in an innovative manner. With increasing accessibility, companies operating in Romania are leveraging these technologies to offer distinctive and memorable experiences, contributing to the evolution of modern marketing strategies. For instance, L'Oréal Romania employed AR technology to facilitate virtual make-up application trials through its Instagram filters. This innovation enabled consumers to envision how various makeup products might appear on their physiques prior to acquisition, enhancing their satisfaction and boosting conversion rates. Similarly, Nike Romania employed VR during product launches to create a virtual showroom experience, where customers could explore the latest collections without leaving their homes, thus combining digital engagement with immersive retail experiences.

- ***Influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and chatbots***

Recent technological developments, including AI and chatbots, are having a transformative effect on customer service and digital marketing strategies within the Romanian business sector. These technologies empower enterprises to deliver prompt responses to customer enquiries, automate routine tasks, and enhance the customer experience, consequently promoting higher levels of customer engagement and satisfaction. For instance, Vodafone Romania has deployed AI-powered chatbots on its website and mobile application to assist customers with billing inquiries, plan modifications, and technical support. The implementation of AI has been found to reduce response times and facilitate more efficient information access, thereby enhancing customer satisfaction. A further example is provided by eMAG Romania's implementation of AI algorithms for personalised product recommendations, based on previous searches, thus enhancing the shopping experience and driving sales.

- ***The shift toward sustainability in digital marketing***

As sustainability becomes a more significant concern for consumers in Romania, businesses are incorporating sustainability messages into their digital marketing campaigns. In this regard, brands are leveraging social media platforms to communicate their environmental commitments, ethical sourcing practices, and sustainable operations. For instance, Green Group Romania has initiated a digital marketing campaign on Facebook and Instagram with a focus on environmental conservation. The campaign promotes eco-friendly products and services, emphasizing the company's environmental commitment. A similar approach is adopted by brands including IKEA Romania, which utilise digital marketing channels to highlight their sustainable product offerings such as furniture made from recycled materials.

- ***Interactive content and gamification***

In the context of contemporary business practices, interactive content such as quizzes, polls and games has seen a marked increase in usage by businesses operating within Romania. The implementation of such content serves the dual purpose of enhancing consumer engagement and personalising the customer experience. For instance, Coca-Cola Romania utilised interactive quizzing on Facebook to solicit user beverage preference data, subsequently leveraging personalised product recommendations as an incentive. The campaign was successful in increasing user interaction and promoting product awareness. Pepsi Romania has also adopted a similar strategy through the implementation of gamification in their digital marketing campaigns. By engaging with their brand on social media, users can be rewarded with prizes through challenges and contests hosted by Pepsi Romania.

5. Conclusions

In the context of the evolving digital marketing landscape, it is imperative for companies to maintain a keen awareness of shifting consumer behaviours and the emergence of trends across social media platforms. The capacity to adjust to these shifts and devise original campaigns is crucial for businesses seeking to maintain relevance and success in Romania's competitive digital market. The present paper examined a number of the most effective digital marketing campaigns on social media in Romania, emphasising the significance of creativity, targeted messaging, and the effective utilisation of social media platforms to ensure successful brand development.

Furthermore, in order to maintain their competitive advantage in the future, it is imperative that companies operating in Romania continue to embrace innovative digital marketing techniques such as artificial intelligence, augmented reality and data-driven personalisation. The implementation of such technologies has the potential to enhance consumer engagement and provide brands with valuable insights into consumer behaviour. Alongside the adoption of

emerging technologies, companies operating within Romania must also consider the cultural and societal context in which they operate. A comprehensive understanding of local consumer preferences, values, and social dynamics is paramount to the development of efficacious digital marketing strategies that resonate with Romanian audiences. It is vital that campaigns are tailored to reflect the unique cultural nuances of Romania in order to foster stronger emotional connections with consumers. This will in turn enhance brand loyalty and trust. It is therefore recommended that companies in the field should consider ways to incorporate local trends, national holidays and culturally significant events into their campaigns, thus creating more authentic and engaging experiences for the end consumer.

Additionally, the emergence of social commerce is revolutionizing the way Romanian consumers make purchasing decisions. The prevailing social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, are now characterised not only as vehicles for brand awareness and customer engagement, but also as conduits for e-commerce activities, enabling direct transactions to be conducted through these digital interfaces. The adoption of this strategy has been found to enhance the customer journey and thereby increase sales and conversions through social media channels.

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