The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Social Media Promotion Strategies of Companies in Romania - Theoretical Aspects

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented challenge for the whole world, including the business environment. In the context of imposed restrictions and changes in consumer behavior, companies have had to re-evaluate their promotion strategies and adapt to the new conditions imposed by the pandemic. A key aspect of this adaptation process was the intensive use of social media platforms to promote products and services. In this paper, we aim to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ways of social media promotion used by Romanian companies. We will examine the changes in promotion strategies, the adaptations to messages and content, as well as new techniques and promotion channels adopted in the context of the pandemic.

The aim is to understand how Romanian companies have responded to the challenges of the pandemic through social media and to identify emerging trends in this field. To achieve this goal, we will use a research-based approach, combining primary and secondary data.

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1. Introduction (Times New Roman, 11 pt, Bold)

With the restrictions and isolation imposed by the pandemic, the use of social media has increased significantly. People spent more time online looking for information, entertainment and social interactions. This has given companies a major opportunity to promote their products and services through social platforms.

Companies had to adapt their promotion strategies to meet the new needs and concerns of the public in the context of the pandemic. They placed more emphasis on creating relevant and useful content related to the current situation and the interests of their public. They provided advice, information and resources to help people meet the challenges of the pandemic (Orzan et al, 2021).

The digital influencers became even more important during the pandemic. The companies have collaborated with influencers to promote their products and services in a more authentic and personal way. Because people were more connected to social media, the recommendations of the influencers had a strong impact on purchasing decisions.

Companies had to adjust their promotional messages to reflect the changes brought about by the pandemic. They conveyed an empathic tone and focused on solidarity and community support. They focused on messages related to safety, health and adaptation to the new reality. With the physical closure of many locations and restrictions on large assemblies, companies have found live streaming and virtual events an effective way to promote their products and services. These platforms allowed real-time interaction with the public and provided an alternative to traditional events.

The pandemic has accelerated the transition of many companies to the online environment and social media has become an important channel for online sales. Companies have invested more in promoting their products on social platforms and have developed stronger online sales capabilities, including order integration and direct payment on platforms.

2. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on social media networks

Al-Zaman (2021) says that the COVID-19 pandemic is considered one of the greatest scientific experiments in human history, in most academic disciplines, such as: economics, criminology, but also psychological. The pandemic has provided an opportunity for social networks to grow more and more. Communication between people has been tamed, especially due to restrictions. A study shows that internationally, during quarantine, digital consumption increased by about 75% more than in previous years. This idea is also supported by Tan and Zainon (2022) who say that this disease has negatively impacted the global economy. Government restrictions, the closure of production sectors have affected supply chains.

In the past, consumers have chosen to find out about the forms of traditional environments, such as: radio and television, but at the moment

consumers have the information at a click away. With the outbreak of COVID-19, various news circulated in social media, some were considered true, but many were false (Ahmed and Msugher, 2022). Chen et al (2022) is of the same opinion, which says that the COVID-19 pandemic did not only cause an outbreak of disease, but also an outbreak of false information transmitted online, which negatively influenced the population, creating moments of panic.

Social networks during the pandemic were the main information channels, so the user was aware of everything that is happening not only at national level, but also globally. News of this disease has appeared since January 2020, when the virus broke out and spread very quickly around the globe. There are still more than 100 million cases of infection and more than 2 million deaths have been reported by February 2021. Social networks played an important role because it allowed people to keep up to date with the latest news, provide information and find out what to do for prevention (Liu, 2021).

During the pandemic, social networks have proven to be very effective compared to traditional channels because an increasing number of people use social networks to see different news. A study found that people used social networks much more often, spending a lot on them (Chon and Kim, 2022, pp. 1-2).

Due to social restrictions related to the pandemic, much of the human interaction has been moved to the online environment. Social platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, but also instant message applications, such as WhatsApp and Facebook have become the most widely used tools for communicating with each other and not losing touch with other people (Latikka et al, 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were positive parts, such as: the platforms were used efficiently by health organizations, but also by various government institutions to provide the public with as new and accurate information as possible about how the pandemic is going, but also negative parts because they offered a place for false news, but also for various conspiracy theories (Zacharchenko et al., 2022, pp. 682-684).

Guo et al. (2022) says in a study that during quarantine there was also many news that had the role of misinforming, and the negative influence of misinformation has aroused quite increased attention in society during the pandemic. To avoid such things, corrections to false news appeared, so as not to induce the public in the era (Guo et al., 2022).

The use of social media channels increased during the pandemic, especially since people had to spend much more time at home, in isolation or quarantine, and young people relied more on the media to be able to keep in touch with their loved ones, but also to stay information about the course of the pandemic. One study shows that more than 58% of adolescents and 48% of adults spent more time on social media than before the (Vranken, et al, 2022)

3. The influence of the pandemic on Romanian companies regarding their social media activity

Increased reliance on social media: With physical distancing measures and restrictions in place, many Romanian companies turned to social media as a primary channel to engage with their audience. Social media platforms provided an opportunity to maintain communication and connection with customers when physical interactions were limited. Companies recognized the importance of maintaining an active presence on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn to stay connected and relevant.

Shift in content strategy: The pandemic prompted Romanian companies to adjust their content strategies on social media. Many businesses focused on providing informative and educational content related to COVID-19 updates, safety measures, and changes in their operations. Additionally, companies began creating more empathetic and relatable content to resonate with their audience during a challenging time. There was also an increased emphasis on storytelling and humanizing the brand to build stronger connections with customers.

Virtual events and experiences: Due to the restrictions on physical gatherings and events, Romanian companies leveraged social media platforms to host virtual events, webinars, live streaming sessions, and product launches. This allowed companies to continue engaging with their audience and reach a wider online community. Virtual events became a popular way for businesses to showcase their products, provide demonstrations, and interact with customers in real- time.

Customer support and engagement: Social media platforms became crucial channels for customer support during the pandemic. Romanian companies used social media to address customer queries, concerns, and complaints promptly. This approach helped companies maintain transparency, resolve issues effectively, and strengthen customer relationships. Companies also encouraged feedback and actively engaged with their audience through comments, direct messages, and polls.

E-commerce and online sales: The pandemic accelerated the growth of e-commerce, and Romanian companies capitalized on this trend by integrating online sales and social media marketing. Many businesses optimized their social media profiles for online shopping, enabling customers to browse and purchase products directly from their social media accounts. This shift allowed companies to reach a wider audience, expand their customer base, and drive online sales.

Influencer collaborations: In response to the pandemic, influencer marketing gained prominence in Romanian companies' social media strategies. Collaborating with influencers helped businesses tap into their established online communities and gain exposure to new audiences. Influencers played a vital role in promoting products, sharing authentic experiences, and supporting local businesses during challenging times.

4. The impact of social media on Romanian companies

The social media impact on Romanian companies is significant and has implications in various fields, including marketing, communication, customer relations and the brand image (Orzan et al, 2016, pp.141-143).

Romanian companies have started to actively use social networks to promote their business and interact with customers (Bitiktas and Tuna, 2020). This change is determined by several reasons:

a. Accessibility and popularity: Social networks are widely accessible and popular among internet users in Romania. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube have a large number of active users in the country, providing companies with a favorable environment to reach extensive audiences.

b. Precise segmentation and targeting: Social networks offer companies the opportunity to segment and target the target audience precisely. Through advanced advertising options, companies can choose demographic, geographical, interest and behavior criteria to ensure that their messages reach the right people.

c. Interaction and commitment: Social networks facilitate two-way communication between companies and customers. Companies can interact directly with customers, answer questions, support and receive real-time feedback. This active interaction contributes to creating stronger relationships and building a loyal customer base.

d. Visibility and notoriety: Through social networks, companies can obtain a higher exposure and increase brand awareness. By publishing quality content, distributing relevant information and participating in online conversations, companies can attract public attention and strengthen their brand image.

e. Reduced costs and measurable ROI: Social networks offer companies a more affordable promotion option compared to other traditional advertising methods. In addition, they provide tools for analyzing and measuring results, allowing companies to evaluate the effectiveness of their campaigns and optimize strategies based on the results obtained.

f. Influencer marketing: Another important aspect of social media promotion is influencer marketing. Companies work with popular and relevant digital influences in their industry to

1. promote their products and services. This approach allows companies to reach specific audiences and obtain authentic and influential recommendations from influential people in the online environment.

g. Research and insights: Social networks provide companies with access to a large amount of data and information about customers, their behaviour, preferences and opinions. This data can be used to conduct market research, to better understand the target audience and to adapt the marketing strategies accordingly.

According to a 2020 study, a company is more visible in the online environment, the more it can attract the attention of potential customers as well as potential investors. Lately, many businesses have migrated online to increase their public visibility (Bitiktas and Tuna, 2020).

The platforms preferred by this are Instagram and Facebook because there is a large part of the potential customers there, regardless of the field in which the company (Hassan and Wang, 2021, pp. 26-27). Social networks have become the basic tools for businesses in choosing a marketing strategy, they are labelled as hybrid elements of the promotion mix.

It is easier for companies to identify people interested in their products or services because messages are only transmitted to interesting people, being considered by much more interesting and authentic users (Virtanenm Bjork and Sjostrom, 2017, pp. 468-471). A study shows that although social networks offer many opportunities and benefits, they consider it a challenging field, considering that knowledge is needed, but also resources in this field (Zhang and Du, 2020, p. 722). There are many examples in this regard, such as: a brand may face negative information on social networks, because after purchasing a product or service, the client was not satisfied. In this situation, it must react positively and offer the customer certain compensations in order to be able to imagine (Wang, Schuetz and Cai, 2021, p. 58).

Social media development has influenced most areas of activity of companies, changing the way they interact with their own customers (Chae, Mattaney and Sheu, 2020, pp. 74-75). Some authors believe that many businesses have migrated online because it is a faster but also cheaper way to keep in touch with current customers, but also with the potentials (Yee et. al, 2021, pp. 517-519). It is true that social networks have become a necessity for customer-oriented companies, given the fierce competition in the online environment. This led company executives to re-evaluate their business strategies and actively integrate social media. Here are some relevant issues (Heller and Parasnis, 2014, pp. 31-33):

- Integration in the marketing strategy: Companies realize the importance of being on social networks and adjust their marketing strategies to include an integrated approach to social media. This involves setting clear objectives, identifying the target audience, developing relevant and adapted content, and monitoring results.
- Increasing customer engagement: Social networks offer the opportunity to involve and engage customers in an interactive and exciting way. Companies use their social media channels to create attractive content, launch interactive campaigns and seek feedback and opinions from customers. It contributes to building a loyal community and involves customers in the process of developing the business.
- Competition monitoring and adaptation: Social networks allow companies to monitor the activity and strategies of their competitors. This provides an opportunity to identify trends, learn from other players in the industry and adjust your own strategies accordingly. Therefore, social

networks are becoming a valuable tool in terms of competitive intelligence.

- Crisis management and reputation: Social networks can also be used in crisis and reputation management. Companies can respond quickly and efficiently to unforeseen situations, clarify misunderstandings and solve problems in a transparent manner.
- Innovation and emerging trends: Through social networks, companies can keep up with emerging trends and constantly innovate. Analysing customers' behaviour and preferences on social networks, companies can identify new business opportunities and adapt their products and services accordingly.

In Romania, according to a study conducted by EY Romania, approximately 78% of all Romanian companies use social networks to promote themselves, and approximately 50% of them have been using marketing for about 3 years. The study also showed that 48% of these companies post daily on platforms, and the most used platforms of these are Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn. The multinational companies present in Romania are the ones that constantly use social networks. Even if 78% of all companies at national level use social networks, the level is below the global one, which is close to 100% (Barbu, Orzan & Cânda, 2022).

Another study says that over 80% of managers believe that social networks are effective in promoting products and / or services, but about half of the companies laid the foundations of a specialized social media department (Badea, 2014, pp. 72-73).

It is important to note that every company and industry can have different approaches and strategies in promoting social media. It is essential to consider the target audience, marketing objectives and brand values to create an effective strategy for social media promotion in Romania.

Conclusions

The promotion of companies in social media has undergone some significant changes following the COVID-19 pandemic. Here is a comparison between how the promotion of social media companies looked before the pandemic and how it changed in the post-pandemic period:

Prior to the pandemic, the emphasis was on promoting offers and products: Companies focused more on the direct promotion of their products and services. The posts and content were more oriented towards information about offers, discounts, product characteristics, etc. Also, social media companies to promote offline events, such as product launches, fairs, conferences, etc. It should be mentioned that most companies focused more on attracting local customers and relied on local advertising to promote their business. Targeting was done mainly based on geographical location.

After the pandemic, the strategy was changed, and most companies began to give more importance to creating valuable and relevant content to involve and attract their audience. There was a change to educational, informative and entertainment content that would add value to users.

The companies have adapted to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and moved events and collaborations online. This involved organizing webinars, live social media events, partnerships with influences and online brands. They also understood the importance of increasing their online presence and turned to global promotion. Social media platforms have allowed companies to reach audiences around the world and expand their business more globally. Collaboration with digital influences has become even more relevant following the pandemic. With travel restrictions and social isolation, consumers have turned their attention more to the online environment, giving digital influences more importance in the purchasing decision-making process. Another important aspect is that companies have focused on building and promoting their brand in a genuine and company-based way. There was a change towards the communication of brand values, sustainability, social responsibility and transparency in social media messages and actions.

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