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THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORK CONTENT ON THE PURCHASE DECISIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

ABSTRACT: This study investigates how social media content (paid, owned, and earned media) influences the consumer decision-making process among social network users in the Republic of North Macedonia. A quantitative correlational survey was administered via Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Descriptive results show frequent use of Instagram and Facebook, low public engagement with brand posts, and limited purchase influence from influencers despite high followership. Photos and videos were perceived as the most influential content. Hypothesis testing supported differences in content influence, high reliance on company profiles for information, trust in friends/family, and higher Instagram use among Generation Z.

KEYWORDS: social media marketing; paid media; owned media; earned media; consumer decision-making; trust; influencer marketing; Instagram; Facebook; TikTok; Generation Z

INTRODUCTION

The diffusion of the internet and digital technologies has transformed how consumers access information and interact with markets, enabling rapid search, communication, and cross-border exchange (Alfaki & Alharthy, 2014). Social networks have evolved beyond leisure and interpersonal communication into commercial environments where users share experiences, opinions, and product-related information, and can directly purchase goods and services (Madhuhansi, 2019; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004). Because social networks facilitate both information availability and peer-to-peer exchange, they increasingly shape how consumers evaluate alternatives and make purchase decisions (Yogesh & Yesha, 2014). Accordingly, this study examines how content encountered on social media - paid, owned, and earned media - influences the consumer decision-making process, with implications for social media marketing and e-commerce.

1. SOCIAL NETWORKS AND MARKETING

The digital revolution has accelerated change in societies and markets, reshaping how individuals communicate and how firms engage consumers (Sheth, 2018). Within this transformation, social media has become central to the media business and has contributed to greater transparency in marketplace communication (Kaplan, 2015; Sheth, 2018). Social media can be defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These platforms enable individuals to create, discuss, and modify user-generated content, thus facilitating interactional, participatory communication rather than one-way information delivery (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011).

The meanings of social media and social networking have evolved over time. Since the term “social media” first appeared in 1994, it has become an umbrella term describing a variety of online platforms (Aichner, Grünfelder, Maurer & Jegeni, 2021). Although the terms are often used interchangeably, social networking is a subset of social media focused on connecting users through messages and multimedia exchanges (Aichner & Jacob, 2015). Social networking sites allow individuals to create profiles within bounded systems, establish and display connections, and navigate networks created by themselves and others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In this study, the term social networks refers to platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

1.1 A short overview of social networks and content distribution

Humans have a fundamental need to belong to social groups (Dijksterhuis, 2005). Social networks facilitate this belonging virtually through software applications, enabling interaction among users who may share interests and encouraging collaboration (Quesenberry, 2019; Brogan, 2010). Social networks are designed to connect large numbers of people and allow users to create profiles, add contacts, and interact through multiple content forms (Sherchan, Nepal & Paris, 2013; Berthon, Pitt, Plangger & Shapiro, 2012).

Recent data indicate that more than half of the global population uses social media, with average daily usage of approximately 2 hours and 29 minutes (Chaffey, 2022). Comparable statistics show average daily usage in 2022 at 2 hours and 27 minutes, reflecting an increase from 90 minutes in 2012 (Dixon, 2022). Social media growth is partly explained by its mass appeal (Tafesse & Wien, 2017). Facebook remains the largest social network, followed by YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok, while Meta owns several of the largest platforms (Statista, 2022; Forbes Magazine, 2022). National data from the Republic of North Macedonia also indicate intensive use of internet-based communication and social networks, alongside growing information search for goods and services and increasing online purchasing (State Statistical Office, 2021). Social networks therefore influence multiple domains of life and shape both online and offline behavior (Dixon, 2022).

Social network content commonly includes text, photos, and videos, which can be combined into original posts (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger & Shapiro, 2012). Across platforms, content is largely distributed via feeds and stories, which differ in user experience, functionality, and permanence (Mehvish, 2019). Feeds—popularized by Facebook in 2006—are algorithmically curated streams of posts and may include user-generated content and paid advertisements (Ho, 2019; DeVito, 2017). Platform differences shape feed formats: Instagram is oriented around photos and videos and integrates Reels, while TikTok’s “ForYou” feed algorithmically curates short vertical videos and differs from its “Following” feed (Instagram, n.d.; Instagram, 2020; TikTok, 2022; Gwi, 2022). Feed posts are typically persistent and remain accessible until deleted (Mehvish, 2019; Facebook, n.d.).

Stories were introduced by Snapchat in 2013 and were later adopted across major platforms (O’Connell, 2020; Menon, 2022). Stories are vertical, time-limited updates available for 24 hours and are associated with scarcity effects and fear of missing out, encouraging frequent viewing (Ho, 2019; Gotter, 2020). Their less polished nature can enhance perceived authenticity and trust, making them useful not only for interpersonal communication but also for marketing by firms, influencers, and public relations actors (Ho, 2019; Menon, 2022; Mehvish, 2019).

1.2 Motivations of social network users

Early motivations for social network participation included enjoyment, social connection, and pleasurable experiences (Lin & Lu, 2011). Over time, usage has expanded to include information search and news consumption. For example, a Pew Research Center report indicates that many adults in the United States obtain news from social media “often” or “sometimes,” while also questioning accuracy (Shearer & Mitchell, 2022). Cultural factors influence how users engage with social networks, and the type of platform content shapes interactions between consumers and brands (Pookulangara & Koesler, 2011; Chaffey, 2022). Social media engagement increased during pandemic-related lockdowns, illustrating how broader contextual factors can intensify platform use (Gwi, 2022). Motivations also differ by platform: Facebook and Messenger are commonly used for communication and news, Instagram for visual sharing and product/brand information, and TikTok for entertainment and short-form video engagement (Gwi, 2022). Consumers also use social networks to research product features, prices, and offers (Saha, Kumar, Jannat & Nahar, 2021).

1.3 Relevance of social networks in marketing

Social networks are key channels for reaching consumers and for developing marketing strategy through direct consumer insights (Pookulangara & Koesler, 2011). Brand presence on social networks creates opportunities and value, including customer acquisition, interaction, and performance measurement through analytics (Cheung & Lee, 2010; Ndiege, 2019). Unlike traditional media, social media enables two-way communication, allowing brands to engage consumers, listen, and learn (Sheth, 2018; Chopra & Gupta, 2020). This interactive structure can improve information exchange and contribute to greater information symmetry between firms and consumers (Ndiege, 2019).

However, social networks also reduce firms’ control over brand narratives. Consumers discuss brands publicly regardless of firm approval, and firms increasingly act as observers rather than controllers of conversation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Relatedly, Wikipedia discourages edits by individuals connected to a company due to conflicts of interest (Wikipedia, 2017). User-generated content can therefore shape brand image, with peer contributions often perceived as more trustworthy than firm-generated messages (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011; Pookulangara & Koesler, 2011; Kozinets, 2002). Firms are thus encouraged to participate carefully in communities, behaving in ways aligned with consumer norms and contributing value through dialogue (Cheung & Lee, 2010; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011).

Social media marketing adoption has increased substantially as firms seek to leverage platform popularity (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Social networks can provide cost-effective marketing opportunities—particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises—while enabling targeted reach and measurable outcomes (Gutiérrez Flórez, Correa Escobar, Henao Restrepo, Arango Botero & Valencia Arias, 2018; Chopra & Gupta, 2020). Brand awareness can be generated through firm posts, user posts, and viral content diffusion (Colicev, Malshe, Pauwels & O’Connor, 2018). In practice, social media often complements traditional marketing and public relations, and also supports lead generation and sales processes (Quesenberry, 2019; Brogan, 2010).

1.3.1 Segmentation, targeting and positioning

Segmentation, targeting, and positioning (STP) represent core steps in marketing strategy (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015). Segmentation guides resource allocation and becomes especially dynamic in digital contexts, where consumer characteristics and preferences shift over time (Cortez, Clarke & Freytag, 2021; Fennemore, 2020). Market segmentation divides heterogeneous markets into homogeneous groups to better align offerings with needs and demand; historically, firms relied more heavily on mass marketing before segmentation became widespread (Camilleri, 2018; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2009). Social networks support segmentation by enabling psychographic segmentation through monitoring user behavior and attitudes, while socialgraphics extend segmentation to include motivations and goals (Fennemore, 2020; Schaefer, 2017). Platform tools and user data further enable persona development and segment identification based on customer attributes (Rosenthal, 2019; An, Kwak, Jung, Salminen & Jansen, 2018).

Targeting involves designing strategies and campaigns to reach selected segments and align the marketing mix with segment needs (Dibb & Simkin, 1991). Social networks provide granular targeting options and measurable reach estimates, increasing efficiency relative to traditional media and potentially reducing marketing costs (Media Update, 2018). Yet consumers may prefer community belonging over being targeted, emphasizing the importance of relevance and segment evaluation in campaign design (Cocheo, 2009; Cortez, Clarke & Freytag, 2021). Social network targeting commonly includes location, demographics, interests, behavior, and connections, alongside remarketing tools based on prior interactions (Media Update, 2018). Platform pricing and campaign costs vary based on goals and performance models (Shaoolian, 2017).

Positioning refers to creating a distinctive brand image and place in the consumer's mind (Kotler & Keller, 2016). It reflects the brand's relative standing compared to competitors and is communicated through value propositions (Andrei, Ecaterina & Ionut, 2010; Payne, Frow & Eggert, 2017). Social networks influence positioning by enabling brands to communicate vision and values, cultivate relationships, and implement positioning strategies that affect purchase willingness (Saha, Kumar, Jannat & Nahar, 2021; Mileva, 2022). For small and medium-sized firms, social media intelligence may be particularly valuable for strategic positioning (Ndiege, 2019).

1.4 Owned, paid, and earned media via social networks

Social networks support marketing by enabling firm–consumer connection and complementing traditional marketing activities (Assaad & Gómez, 2011). Firms reach audiences through owned media (brand-controlled profiles and sites), paid media (advertising), and earned media (word-of-mouth and user-generated content) (Colicev, Malshe, Pauwels & O'Connor, 2018; Mattke, Müller & Maier, 2019). Because platforms differ in content affordances (e.g., video-exclusive vs. multi-format), the types of user-generated content also vary (Lai & To, 2015; Masciantonio, Bourguignon, Bouchat, Balty & Rimé, 2021). Firms naturally aim to reach consumers where they spend time and use social networks for advertising, customer service, data gathering, and community building (Evans, 2011; Enginkaya & Yilmaz, 2014).

Owned media refers to official brand profiles and pages where firms control content decisions, either internally or via external managers; firm websites and blogs may also be included (Penttinen & Ciuchita, 2022). Social media usage can be conceptualized as consuming, contributing, and creating behavior, with owned media

often supporting passive exposure and brand image formation (Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011; Colicev, Malshe, Pauwels & O'Connor, 2018). Platform selection depends on target demographics and content fit (Penttinen & Ciuchita, 2022; Voorveld, Van Noort, Muntinga & Bronner, 2018), and interaction data can be analyzed for deeper insights into consumer experiences (Holmlund, et al., 2020).

Paid media includes sponsored brand-related content and advertising purchased from social networks, often associated with increased engagement (Demirci, Pauwels, Srinivasan & Yildirim, 2014; Wahid, 2021). While paid media traditionally referred to offline advertising, digital environments have expanded paid media into online and social network advertising formats (Stephen & Galak, 2012). Paid media can include influencer collaborations when brands compensate creators to promote products or drive audiences toward owned media, reflecting the growing role of influencer marketing (Edelman & Salsberg, 2010; Vrontis, Makrides, Christofi & Thrassou, 2021; Chopra & Gupta, 2020). Advertising effectiveness is assessed through platform metrics such as impressions, likes, shares, and follower growth, although success indicators may vary by platform (Voorveld, Van Noort, Muntinga & Bronner, 2018). Additionally, social media advertising is often consumed on smartphones, highlighting the importance of creative design in mobile contexts (Maslowska, Ohme & Segijn, 2021).

Earned media refers to brand-related content created by users rather than the firm, including reviews, comments, influencer posts, electronic word-of-mouth, and viral content (Stephen & Galak, 2012; Mattke, Müller & Maier, 2019). Earned media is often perceived as more credible than paid media and can outperform traditional advertising, but it is also difficult for firms to control (Lawrence, Fournier & Brunel, 2013; Colicev, Malshe, Pauwels & O'Connor, 2018; Mattke, Müller & Maier, 2019). Both traditional and social network earned media can positively influence sales (Stephen & Galak, 2012). Viral marketing represents a form of electronic word-of-mouth in which content spreads rapidly through sharing, driven by consumers' tendency to distribute information perceived as useful or interesting (Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003; Akyol, 2013). Although viral diffusion is cost-effective and credible, outcomes are uncertain, and "spontaneous" viral content may still be strategically planned by companies (Akyol, 2013; Miller & Lammas, 2010).

2. SOCIAL NETWORKS AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Consumer behavior examines how individuals allocate resources (time, money, effort) when selecting products and services (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2009), and this process is increasingly shaped by social networks (Ebrahimi, et al., 2022). Social platforms have expanded beyond communication into spaces where consumers discover brands, evaluate alternatives, and purchase directly, while also expecting two-way engagement and customer service (Sridhar, 2021). Because social networks generate rich consumer data, firms can better understand needs, motivations, and preferences and use these insights for product design, marketing, and sales, including persona development based on user data (Brogan, 2010; An, Kwak, Jung, Salminen & Jansen, 2018). Social influences have always mattered, but smartphones and social media have intensified their role across the decision journey, with user-generated content often perceived as especially trustworthy (Sharma & Verma, 2018; Kotler & Keller, 2016; Gajjar, 2013).

2.1 Determinants of consumer behavior

Key determinants include cultural, social, personal, and psychological factors (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Culture shapes how consumers interpret products and use social networks for information and opinion expression (Tylor, 1871; Solomon, 2018; Pookulangara & Koesler, 2011; Sawyer & Chen, 2012), while social class influences spending patterns and information exchange (Hoyer, MacInnis & Pieters, 2008; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2009). Social factors such as reference groups and family strongly guide preferences and decisions (Park & Lessig, 1977; Moore, Wilkie & Lutz, 2002), and roles/status further structure consumption (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Personal factors (age/cohort, occupation, economic circumstances, lifestyle, personality) shape product appetites, platform preferences, and responsiveness to content (Dimock, 2022; Sproutsocial, 2021; Koç & Ceylan, 2012; Krishnan, 2011; Aaker, 1999). Psychological factors—motivation, attitudes, learning, emotions, and perception—drive how consumers process stimuli and form evaluations (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004; Hoyer, MacInnis & Pieters, 2008; Jisana, 2014; Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard & Hogg, 2015; Kotler & Keller, 2016).

2.2 The buying decision process

The buying decision process is commonly described as five stages—problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior—though consumers may skip or reorder stages (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015). Digital connectivity and computer-mediated communication have accelerated this journey by enabling rapid information access and peer-to-peer opinion exchange (Casaló, Flavian & Guinalíu, 2007; Kozinets, 2002), and social networks can substantially shorten the path from discovery to purchase (Barysevich, 2020). Social platforms can trigger needs through exposure to ads and discussions (Nolcheska, 2017; Madhuhansi, 2019), support crowdsourced information search and review reading (Kardes, Posavac & Cronley 2004; Voramontri & Klieb, 2019; Solomon, 2018; Vasic, Kilibarda & Kaurin, 2019; Kunz & Hackworth, 2011), and enable alternative evaluation through accessible paid/owned/earned content (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016; Kueh & Voon, 2007; Chen, Lee, Wu, Sung & Chen, 2017; Munthiu, 2009; Nolcheska, 2017). Post-purchase outcomes (disappointment, satisfaction, delight) are increasingly visible via reviews and social sharing, shaping earned media and influencing subsequent consumers' journeys (Donthu & Yoo, 1998; Maslowska, Ohme & Segijn, 2021; Nagamalar & Ravindran, 2019; Miranda, Rubio, Chamorro & Loureiro, 2014; Prasad, Garg & Prasad, 2019; Laruccia, 2018; Charm, Dhar, Liu, Novemsky & Teichner, 2021; Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016).

3. EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORK CONTENT ON THE PURCHASE DECISIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

3.1 Purpose and aim of the research

This study examines how social media content—paid, owned, and earned media—influences the consumer decision-making process. The findings may support brands that use social networks as marketing channels and inform practice in digital marketing and e-commerce. Specifically, the study focuses on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok and explores how different content types shape purchasing decisions,

including the role of influencers in both online and traditional shopping. The research also aims to identify which types of user-generated content encourage online purchasing among social media users in the Republic of North Macedonia and which platforms and content formats are most effective for reaching these users.

3.2 Research questions

The study addresses four research questions:

1. How do consumers respond to different types of social network content?
2. How does social network content influence social media users at different stages of the decision-making process?
3. To what extent do social media users trust content produced by brands, other users, and influencers?
4. To what extent does content produced by brands, other users, and influencers influence social media users?

3.3 Hypotheses

Building on prior research on social network use, user-generated content, information search, and platform differences (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger & Shapiro, 2012; Quesenberry, 2019; Lin & Lu, 2011; Saha, Kumar, Jannat & Nahar, 2021), the study proposes that:

PROPOSITION: "The content available on the social media affects the buying decision process."

This proposition is examined through nine hypotheses:

H1: Different types of content affect the decision to buy to a different extent (Masciantonio, Bourguignon, Bouchat, Balty & Rimé, 2021).

H2: Consumers are likely to message a company on social media to find out more information about a product (Sheth, 2018; Chopra & Gupta, 2020; Kozinets, 2002; Cheung & Lee, 2010).

H3: Most consumers comment on social media about their recent purchases (Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011; Sharma & Verma, 2018; Nagamalar & Ravindran, 2019; Miranda, Rubio, Chamorro & Loureiro, 2014).

H4: The more time users spend on social media, the more likely they are to purchase products directly from a company's profile (Dixon, 2022; State Statistical Office, 2021).

H5: Instagram users are more likely to use the social networks to find information about products than Twitter users (Nolcheska, 2017; Chen, Lee, Wu, Sung & Chen, 2017; Barysevich, 2020; Gwi, 2022).

H6: Most consumers are likely to buy a product if it is endorsed by an influencer (Menon, 2022; Zak & Hasprova, 2020).

H7: Consumers trust posts and suggestions from friends and family the most (Sheth, 2018; Kozinets, 2002; Schwartz, Luce & Ariely, 2011).

H8: Most consumers use the company's own social network profile when they want to find out more information about a certain product (Kunz & Hackworth, 2011; Colicev, Malshe, Pauwels & O'Connor, 2018).

H9: Generation Z uses Instagram more often than Facebook (Sproutsocial, 2021).

3.4 Methodology

The study used a quantitative, correlational design with an online survey

questionnaire targeted at social network users. The questionnaire (in Macedonian) contained 20 questions across three blocks: (1) social network use and content (5 items), (2) buying decision and social networks (11 items), and (3) demographics (4 items). Item formats included multiple choice, grids, checkboxes, and linear scales. Usage frequency was measured with a seven-level scale adapted from a previously validated measure (Jothi & Gaffoor, 2017). Several five-point rating scales assessed influence, informativeness, and attitudes, while nominal scales captured categories and demographics. Some content/reason lists were adapted from prior research and industry reporting (Jashari & Rustemi, 2017; Jothi & Gaffoor, 2017; Gwi, 2022).

Sample and data collection

The survey was online for five days (16–20 September 2022) and distributed via Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (with platform-specific posting constraints). Convenience sampling was used as a pilot approach. In total, 164 respondents participated; 16 non-users were excluded, leaving 148 valid cases. The sample was 52.7% female and 45.9% male (others undeclared), predominantly Macedonian ethnicity (91.2%), and concentrated in younger cohorts: Generation Z (49.3%) and Millennials (38.5%). Education levels reflected this age structure (most had bachelor's degree (42.6%) or high school (41.9%)).

Key descriptive results

Most used platforms: Instagram and Facebook; many lacked profiles on Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and TikTok (41.2% no profile). Instagram was used a few times per day by 70.9%, Facebook by 55.4%. TikTok usage was polarized, and frequent TikTok users were mostly Generation Z.

Main reasons for use: staying in touch (70.3%), fun (48.6%), watching content (37.2%), trends (36.5%), filling time (35.8%), news (35.1%). 32.4% used social networks to find product information (mostly younger users).

Content influence: photos (highest mean 3.35) and videos (mean 3.16) were most influential; contests were least influential (mean 2.64).

Engagement with company posts: most scroll/ignore, especially for disliked content; likes and sharing-to-friends were the most common positive reactions; commenting/sharing publicly was rare.

Influencers: respondents were generally unlikely to buy influencer-endorsed products (mean 2.28), even though 61.5% follow at least one influencer.

Ads and purchase: many had bought due to social media ads (majority “up to a few times”), and 83.1% had ordered directly from a company profile at least sometimes.

Information sources: most used company profiles (68.2%), then ratings/reviews (57.4%), then other users' posts/comments (47.3%).

Trust: highest trust in ratings/reviews (mean 3.45) and friends/family (mean 3.34); influencers were least trusted (mean 2.30).

Hypotheses testing summary

H1 Supported: content types differ in their influence on purchase decisions (paired samples t-tests significant).

H2 Not supported: likelihood of messaging companies was not significantly different from neutral (one-sample t-test not significant).

H3 Not supported: most respondents do not comment after purchase (chi-square significant; direction opposite to hypothesis).

H4 Not supported: no significant association between maximum social media use frequency and buying directly from company profiles (chi-square not significant).

H5 Not testable: too few Twitter-only users to run the planned chi-square comparison.

H6 Not supported: responses show consumers are not likely to buy due to influencer endorsement (chi-square significant; direction opposite).

H7 Supported: friends/family are among the most trusted sources; differences vs. other top sources were not significant (paired samples tests).

H8 Supported: company profiles are the most-used information source (chi-square significant).

H9 Supported: Generation Z uses Instagram more often than Facebook (Wilcoxon signed-rank test significant).

Overall proposal ("The content available on social media affects the buying decision process") was examined through nine hypotheses: 4 supported, 4 not supported, 1 untested.

4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Interpretation of findings

With the analysis of the results of the nine hypotheses, it was confirmed that the content (published by companies and other social network users) influences different stages of the buying decision process of social network users. According to Chaffey (2022) more than half of the world population (59%) uses social media, and the average daily social media usage has been increasing throughout the years (Dixon, 2022). The analysis led to a conclusion that most respondents are frequent social network users, as they used social networks at least a few times per day. Instagram and Facebook were the most popular social networks. On the other hand, the respondents rarely had a profile on Twitter, LinkedIn and Snapchat.

Different generations prefer different social networks (Gwi, 2022). Their expectations from the companies on the social networks are different as well (Sproutsocial, 2021). The fact that different generations prefer different social networks, could indicate that they prefer different types of content as well. My empirical study confirmed that Generation Z uses Instagram more often than it uses Facebook, therefore, it can be stated that they have different content interests when compared with other generations.

Social network users use social networks for different reasons, and keeping in touch with friends/family is the most frequent one (Gwi, 2022). According to my study too, staying in touch with friends/family is the most frequent reason (70.3%), followed by usage for fun and enjoyment (48.6%). Other frequent reasons for usage are "watch the available content" (37.2%), "see what is trending" (36.5%), "fill spare time" (35.8%), "read news" (35.1%), "find information about products" (32.4%).

Companies may use their own social network profiles to communicate with their consumers (Colicev, Malshe, Pauwels & O'Connor, 2018). Posting on social networks might be good for the companies, because according to my study, when they want to find out more information about a certain product, the social network users choose the company's own social network profile as the most often used source of information (68.2%). Next are ratings and reviews with 57.4%, and posts and comments from other users of the product with 47.3%. Posts and suggestions from friends and family are used by 26.4% of respondents.

Kunz and Hackworth (2011) discussed that following the companies on the

social networks could be a valuable source of information for consumers, especially about new products, discounts, and sales. When respondents were asked about their opinion, whether they can find information on social networks about products, most of them (40.5%) had a neutral opinion. Still, 31.1% of them think they can find relevant information on social networks, while 12.2% use the social networks as a source of information all the time.

Previous research has shown that Instagram is mostly used for posting or sharing photos or videos, for following or finding information about products or brands, and for finding funny or entertaining content (Gwi, 2022). I hypothesized that the Instagram users were more likely to use the social networks to find information about products than Twitter users. I, however, was not able to test this hypothesis because of insufficient data. Among the respondents we had very few Twitter users, and that data was not enough for conducting the tests.

Social network users connect to other users and share information about products, services, or brands (Pookulangara & Koesler, 2011), and they consider their peers more trustworthy (Kozinets, 2002). While in my study most respondents claimed that they used the companies' own social network profiles when they needed information about certain products, it is not the source of information they trust the most. Social network users trust ratings and reviews the most, followed by posts and suggestions from friends and family. The scores of ratings and reviews and posts and suggestions from friends and family were very similar. It is safe to say that the posts and suggestions from friends and family are among the most-trusted sources.

According to Menon (2022), companies, celebrities, influencers, and PR agencies use social networks as an effective marketing tool, and according to Zak and Hasprova (2020) some products sell better when endorsed by influencers. On the other hand, my study shows that social network users distrust posts from influencers, and they are not very likely to buy a product that is being endorsed by an influencer. Still, nearly two thirds of the respondents follow at least one influencer on social networks. The reason behind these results might be the perception of the social network users that the influencers are untruthful, and that they have greater interest in their cooperation with the brand, rather than the interests of their own followers. The social network users might feel that influencers act in the interest of the brand they represent, rather than in the interest of the consumers (Singh, Crisafulli & Xue, 2020). Additionally, maybe some influencers do not align their content with the interests of their audience (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Or maybe it is just human nature, and they are not willing to admit they could be influenced by other people.

Social networks are used for different purposes, and different types of content are available on them (Masciantonio, Bourguignon, Bouchat, Balty & Rimé, 2021). My study shows that social network users prefer different types of content, with photos and videos being the content that influences their decision to buy the most. The respondents could rate how informative the content on social networks is. With a mean value of 3.36, the videos were rated as the most informative content on social networks, followed by photos with a mean value of 3.26.

Wahid (2021) claimed that content engagement is very important for the companies, and the consumers who interact with the companies on the social networks help in the development of the company. My study shows that social network users react differently to content they like, and content they do not like. Most of them ignore and scroll down when they encounter content published by companies that they do

not like. On the other hand, when respondents see content they like, 41.2% of them press like or love, 25% of them send it to friends in a message, and 27% of them ignore it and scroll down. In both content they like, and do not like, a very small percentage of respondents leaves comments on the content, tags their friends, and shares to their profile.

Social media allow the users to interact (Sheth, 2018), and the two-way communication on the social networks allows brands to engage their customers, to listen, and learn from them (Chopra & Gupta, 2020). Messaging a company directly on a social network can be a great source of information about products or services for consumers. However, the opinions of the respondents were divided regarding this statement. The answers generally gravitate toward the "neutral" answer, and are not as high as expected. 33.1% of respondents selected a neutral answer, 20.3% of respondents said that they are likely to message a company, and 15.50% said that they were very likely to do it. I did not explore the reasons why, but maybe this is because most of them use the company's social network profile to obtain information about the product, and they do not need additional information.

Being present on social networks can bring additional benefits to companies - such as acquiring new customers, better interaction with customers and an increase in income (Ndiege, 2019). More than half of respondents have answered that they have bought a product just because they have seen an ad on social networks. Still, a large percentage of respondents (39.9%) have never ordered a product just because they have seen an ad on social networks. On the other hand, 83.1% of respondents have ordered products directly from a company's profile on some social network (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok...).

4.2 Practical implications

My study has shown that almost half of the social network users think they can find relevant information about the products they want to buy on social networks. This leads to a conclusion that the companies should be active on the social networks and publish information about their products, as they might get discovered by social network users who require more information about some products, or are searching for substitute or complementary products. The younger generations use the social networks to find information about products more than the older generations.

With the rise of TikTok, came the rise of the video. So now, companies should focus on generating video content to present and promote their products. The results of my study showed that Generation Z is the most numerous generation on TikTok, so it would be wise for companies to tailor their TikTok content to this demographics if they want to be relevant to the younger consumers. Additionally, as the results of my research show, companies should focus more on Instagram if they want to reach the younger demographics, and more on Facebook if their targets are the older generations.

More than 80% of the respondents claimed they have already ordered products directly from a company's profile on some social network (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok...). This means that the social networks are an important point of sale and should therefore be considered a valuable asset for the companies. Creating content, publishing on a regular basis and maintaining communication with consumers are one of the ways to keep the audience engaged and interested in the products.

The respondents in my study said they were not very likely to buy a product

endorsed by an influencer, but almost a half of them answered that they are most likely to buy clothes and shoes because they have seen a social network post from an influencer. This is good news for the companies in the fashion and beauty industries, but influencers have a long way to go to earn the trust of their followers.

While the social network users do follow influencers, they do not specifically trust them much, according to the results in my study. It would be wise for influencers to be more open in their interactions and to carefully choose the products they endorse. Probably the social network users want to see influencers who are authentic, and honestly review products, rather than just seeing an ad of the influencer using the products. The influencers might be perceived by the social network users as driven by their financial motives, rather than their honest opinions.

The results of my research have shown that the level of trust in the social network content is not very high, and companies could work on building better relationships with their customers. The level of social network users' direct engagement with the companies' content is generally low, and most engagement is generated for the content the respondents like when they press like or love or send it to friends. Two-way communication between companies and consumers is key to achieving long-term relationships but based on my research more than two thirds of social network users usually do not leave feedback in the form of comments after a purchase. So, companies could think about ways for motivating consumers to share their experiences. This way, companies will understand their customers better and identify their needs and expectations. Social networks are just one channel through which two-way communication could take place and a convenient way to track consumer experiences.

4.3 Limitations

The population that was included in the research are social network users and the sample size was planned to cover approximately 150 social network users from the Republic of North Macedonia. The only criterion was the individuals to be users of at least one social network. I asked my acquaintances who were social network users to respond to my survey which resulted in a convenience sample, therefore I am not able to generalize the findings of my empirical study.

I used a variety of articles and papers as a theoretical base to create the model for the empirical research. However, the results I got sometimes varied from the results in the already published papers. This might be due to the location of the respondents and their habits being different. In the theoretical part, I mostly used articles that analyzed consumers from the United States, and most of my respondents were from the Republic of North Macedonia. Sometimes social networks have certain functionalities available only in some countries. The difference in answers might be due to the lack of some functionalities of social networks in the Republic of North Macedonia.

The questionnaire was online for five days (16-20 September 2022) and shared on social networks (Facebook, Instagram and TikTok). One limitation of doing so is that TikTok only has video-based content, and Instagram is photo and video-based, so it was more difficult to reach the users for the purpose of this research.

Moreover, this model of research was not focused on one type of product, content or social network. Maybe if they are explored in more detail, the results would be more precise and easier to be applied into the everyday work environment of the marketers.

CONCLUSION

The social networks are platforms which people use for various reasons, but mostly to communicate with their friends and family, have fun and spend their free time. (Madhuhansi, 2019). Each generation prefers different social networks, and they have different behavior on the social networks (Sproutsocial, 2021). After conducting my study I gained deeper insight of the influence of social network content on the purchase decisions of social media users.

It is only natural for brands to try and reach their (potential) customers where they like to spend their time, so their presence on the social networks is recommended, and beneficial for their sales (Evans, 2011). The social networks and the content that is being published on them contribute to a great extent to the availability of information about products. Moreover, social networks enable consumers to share their experiences and opinions about the products and services they used, or want to use (Yogesh & Yesha, 2014). However, according to my research the consumers rarely decide to leave feedback, and companies still have to figure out ways to engage them more.

I would say that the most important aspect of this thesis are the findings of the lack of the two-way communication between companies and social network users. My empirical study shows that social network users are not very likely to message a company on social networks, and they rarely post comments on their recent purchase. The answers also show that companies still have a long way to go to deserve the trust of the consumers. While I did not explore the reasons why social network users have low levels of trust towards companies, it is probable that the companies publish content that is intended for promotion and sales. On the other hand, the consumers would expect different types of content with greater transparency, and like to see the other side of the business, the people who work there, etc. The purpose of being part of the social networks as a company is to communicate and engage with the audience, and therefore the companies should find ways to successfully do so.

The social networks have shifted the power from the companies to the individuals. Individuals can now generate and share content, reach larger audiences, and have an even greater impact than the companies (Sharma & Verma, 2018). Word of mouth might be the best type of marketing from the consumers' point of view because it cannot be paid for or controlled in any way (Tan, 2015). It is the result of the company's good performance, and meeting the needs. You simply get what you deserve.

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