The Role of Social Media in Shaping Romanian Consumer Behavior

Marius C. Neacșu[1], Gabriela Țigu[2], Alexandra Boștenaru[3] and Erdem-Yuneis Eregep[4]
[1)2)3)] *Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania.*
[4)] *Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands.*
E-mail: marius.neacsu@ase.ro; E-mail: gabriela.tigu@ase.ro;
E-mail: abostenaru@gmail.com; E-mail: eregeperdem@gmail.com;

Please cite this paper as:
Neacșu, M.C., Țigu, G., Boștenaru, A., and Eregep, E.Y., 2024. The Role of Social Media in Shaping Romanian Consumer Behavior. In: R. Pamfilie, V. Dinu, C. Vasiliu, D. Pleșea, L. Tăchiciu eds. 2024. *10th BASIQ International Conference on New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption.* Almeria, Spain, 6-8 June 2024. Bucharest: Editura ASE, pp. 530-537
DOI: 10.24818/BASIQ/2024/10/050

Abstract

This study is based on an exploratory research aimed at analyzing the role that reviews posted on social media by different users, brand ambassadors, influencers or company specialists play in shaping the attitudes and consumer behavior of young people in Romania. The research method used was an online survey, opting for a non-probability sample. The results confirmed that the most frequently accessed information is the reviews based on consumers' experiences with the product, rather than those posted by business professionals, with these reviews having a direct proportional influence on the decision to purchase the product: users have more confidence in a product when they see positive reviews, and conversely, negative reviews also have a negative impact on the purchase decision. In Romania, the most used social media platform to search/view information about a specific brand is YouTube, which is almost exclusively accessed from smartphones. This research is based on data collected through a questionnaire. The results show how retailers and consumers of goods and services interact via social media, allowing for a calibration of the retailer-consumer relationship. The practical implications of the results of this research suggest integrating specific web 2.0 and web 3.0 tools into the current retail business model, given the role that online reviews play in consumer behavior.

Keywords

Social media, online content, reviews, consumer behavior, retail

DOI: 10.24818/BASIQ/2024/10/050

Introduction

At the outset, it should be mentioned that this research emerged from a larger project on the impact of social media applications in retail (Săseanu et al., 2022), which analyzed the state of the use of social media channels in the business environment, the implementation and use of social media applications and tools in the business environment, the perception of Romanian retailers on the mentioned aspects and the influence of consumer reviews posted by brand ambassadors and business professionals on social networks.

The interesting question therefore arises as to what role the reviews posted on social networks by various users, brand ambassadors, influencers or company specialists play in shaping the attitudes and consumer behavior of young people in Romania. To this end, a questionnaire was used to collect data, the results of which could lead to a reassessment of the relationship between retailers and consumers. The study begins with a review of the academic literature, presents the research methodology, followed by an interpretation of the results obtained and a discussion of the findings.

1. Review of the scientific literature

Why is social media relevant for retail? Because more than half of the world's population uses it, namely 59.9%, i.e. 4.8 billion social media users, with four social networks each having more than one billion users:

1. Facebook (3 billion users), 2. YouTube (2.5 billion), 3. Instagram (2 billion), 4. TikTok (1.2 billion) (Walsh, 2023). In Romania, almost the entire population uses the Internet, i.e. more than 18 million users (91.6% of the resident population), of which more than 13 million (67.4%) are social network users, with 28 million connected smartphones, i.e. 141.9% of the total population (January 2024), with the most used social networks in Romania being 1. YouTube (13.3 million users), 2. Facebook (9.05 million), 3. TikTok (8.97 million), 4. Instagram (5.3 million) (Kemp, 2024).

The context of this research on the role of social media in shaping consumers' perceptions of goods and services, particularly by young people in Romania as a case study, is set by the fundamental transition from Web 2.0, based on a network of social and business networks (Mchaney and Sachs, 2016), to interactive social media as a strategic marketing tool (Berthon et al, 2012) or direct marketing (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008), with a positive or negative influence on the decision process to buy one product or another (Power and Phillips-Wren, 2011), to Web 3.0, whose principles or keywords are decentralization, blockchain technology, token-based economy (Darwish, 2024), metaverse and artificial intelligence (Zhang et al., 2023).

In terms of shaping consumer perceptions or the decision-making process for purchasing a particular brand, this has been consistently addressed in the academic literature, with recent studies demonstrating the impact of social platforms on the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises/SMEs (Ghazwani and Alzahrani, 2023), the role of social media influencers in driving consumer purchasing behavior (Wang et al., 2024; Mrisha and Xixiang, 2024), the impact of social media use on minimum consumption (Lu and Sinha, 2024), or the relationship between the digital age and consumer behavior (Gupta et al., 2024).

2. Research methodology

Aim of the research. From the literature review, it is evident that social media has become an integral part of consumer behavior, be it in making a purchase decision for one product or another or in evaluating a product through social media reviews posted by brand ambassadors, influencers, business professionals or even friends who describe online various experiences related to the interaction with the product or service. *The aim of the research was therefore to investigate how online content can influence the attitudes and consumer behavior of Web 2.0 users.*

Research objectives. A number of secondary objectives were also achieved, namely:

- Analysis of the socio-demographic structure of respondents to an applied questionnaire resulting in a *specific consumer profile influenced by online content on social media channels*;
- Analysis of access to and frequency of use of social media platforms, from which it can be concluded whether they have become *business tools* in addition to their primary function of communication and social interaction;
- Identifying *areas of applicability of social media platforms in the consumer-retail relationship*;
- Analysis of *the results of the use of social media platforms in the process of purchasing goods and services*.

Application of an online questionnaire. An questionnaire was used as research tool to identify how online content can shape the behaviour of consumers of goods and services. It was created on an online platform (www.survio.com/ro) due to its popularity and ease of use for both the respondent and the researcher. As the research is exploratory, *a non-probability sampling* was chosen (with its limitations). Sample size: 301 respondents out of a total of 561 users who viewed the questionnaire (success rate 53.7%) during the period 21.10.2022-08.06.2023. The questionnaire was distributed mainly on social media (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) and professional groups (professors, PhD students, MSc students) consisting of 14 closed questions structured in four sections: multiple choice (one), single answer (13 questions). A five-step graded scale (1. never, 2. very rarely, 3. rarely, 4. usually, 5. always) was used to assess the frequency of social media use and a five-step Likert-type scale (1. strongly disagree, 2. disagree, 3. neither agree nor disagree, 4. agree, 5. strongly agree) was also used to assess the areas of applicability and advantages/disadvantages of using social networks in the decision making process of purchasing a product/service.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Socio-demographic structure of the sample

Three independent variables were selected as relevant for the survey - gender, age and level of education - in this respect there was a *female predominance* (67.4% of respondents), a *young population aged* 18-25 (75.7%), with *secondary and higher education* (90%), of which 39.9% of respondents had a degree or a master's or doctorate in a specialized field.

The hypertrophy of women and the lower age segment (18-25 years) can be explained on the one hand by the way the questionnaire is distributed (online, in social networks), whereby it can be seen that the most active presence on the Internet clearly predominates in the lower age segments, and on the other hand by the increased appetite of the female population in the area of online marketing.

3.2. The relationship between retail - social media - consumers

To the only multiple-choice question in the questionnaire, i.e. "Which of the following types of shops do you frequently find information about (reviews, posts, promotion, opinions) on the social media channels you use?", the majority of responses (78.7%) indicated *online shops* (Emag, Elefant, Fashionsdays, etc.), followed by *specialised shops* (Altex, Dedeman, Mobexpert, Sephora etc.) with 53.5%, with high percentages (40-50%) also indicating *discount shops* (Lidl, Penny, Profi etc.) and *hypermarkets* (Auchan, Carrefour, Cora, Kaufland), with the lowest share of responses (4%) associated with *neighbourhood shops*.

The explanation for this distribution of responses lies in the different financial strength of the large chains and neighbourhood stores, with the former allowing themselves online advertising campaigns or a presence on certain social networks and online in general. There is also a difference between stores that specialize in e-commerce and those that sell physically.

3.3. Access to and frequency of use of social media

In terms of online presence and experience of using social networks, the results showed that the overwhelming majority of respondents, 87%, chose the 5+ age range, of which more than half (51.4%) were between 18and 25 years old, while only a quarter of the sample (24.8%) fell into the active age group (26-65 years).

So far, at least two points have emerged: a) young people are spending more time on social media and b) the results of the survey in relation to investigating the influence of brand ambassadors and company specialists posting on social media on consumers are relevant as respondents are regular users of the online and social media environment and can distinguish between an advertisement, display, review or opinion of a user who has already used a retail product or service.

There are some differences between the most frequently used social networks (Table 1). WhatsApp is the most frequently used application for personal purposes, with 95% of respondents using it frequently ("always" and "most of the time"), while 67.8% use YouTube to search for information about a specific brand. The second most frequently used social media platform for both personal interests (79.4%) and searching for a specific product (58.1%) is Instagram.

The least used social network, both for personal use and for searching for product reviews, is LinkedIn. 84% of the former and 94.3% of the latter responded that they "rarely", "very rarely" or "never" use it. In addition, 67.1% stated that they "never" use LinkedIn to search for product information in retail stores and 46.2% for personal purposes, both of which are the highest values in the negative dimension. The TikTok platform is also negative: 40.5% do not use it for business purposes and 31.9% "never" use it for personal purposes.

Regarding the use of other social media platforms that were not explicitly mentioned in the question, i.e. Facebook, You Tube, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, these are also not used very frequently by Romanian consumers and internet users. 77.7% of respondents answered that they do not use these platforms very much ("rarely", "very rarely" or "never") for personal interests, and 65.4% do not use them for commercial interests either.

Table no. 1. Most used social networks, both for personal activities and for searching information about a specific brand (%)

Social media	Always		Usually		Rarely		Very rarely		Never	
	Pers.	*Info brand*	Pers.	*Info brand*	Pers.	*Info brand*	Pers.	*Info brand*	Pers.	*Info brand*
WhatsApp	80,4	*12,3*	14,6	*10,6*	1,7	*23,9*	1,3	*16,3*	2	*36,9*
Instagram	63,5	*30,9*	15,9	*27,2*	8,6	*16,9*	2	*7*	10	*17,9*
YouTube	44,5	*31,9*	35,5	*35,9*	14,6	*17,3*	3,3	*9*	2	*6*

TikTok	36,2	*19,6*	17,3	*17,9*	8	*11,6*	6,6	*10,3*	31,9	*40,5*
Facebook	23,9	*13*	27,6	*23,3*	26,9	*25,2*	13,3	*15,9*	8,3	*22,6*
LinkedIn	6	*2*	10	*3,7*	16,9	*14,3*	20,9	*13*	46,2	*67,1*
Others	8	*13,3*	14,3	*21,3*	25,6	*20,3*	25,2	*13,6*	26,9	*31,6*

As to what kind of content users most often access or search for when researching a particular brand, the majority of respondents (64.8%) referred *to opinions expressed by people who have already used a particular product*, indicating that people are knowingly looking for experience-based information, with only 16.9% of respondents pointing to expert reviews posted by brand ambassadors or influencers, etc. Less than 10% of respondents search for articles by business experts (9.6%) or company advertisements/promotions (8.6%).

When asked in what form they prefer the information they are looking for, about half (44.9%) of respondents indicated *text*, over 27.2% *image* and 25.6% *video*, with only 2.3% indicating podcast as a trending form of information delivery. This correlates with the responses to the question about the social network frequently used to search for information about a particular brand (Table no. 1), with 31.9% of respondents 'always' using YouTube and 25.6% indicating 'video'. It should also be taken into account that 'text', 'image', and 'video' are equally supported by all the social networks mentioned above, even if at first glance they seem to be 'specialised' on a specific content (or at least this is how they were thought/designed).

By far, the most used *device* for accessing social media in the context developed above is the *smartphone*, with almost the entire sample indicating this: 99.4% ("always" and "usually"), with "never" not being selected as an option by any respondent. The explanations lie primarily in the particular accessibility of this type of device, which can be accessed non-stop, during breaks, in idle time spent on transport, etc., or simply for the convenience of its use, being easily available to the user at any time of the day or night.

Interestingly, more than half of smartphone users (52.8%) also frequently ("always" and "usually") use their *laptop* to access social networks. Almost diametrically opposed to the smartphone is the use of the *tablet* for accessing social media platforms, with 60.1% of respondents never using it, plus another 15.6% with "very rarely". This leads to the conclusion that *the two are substituting for each other*, with the mobile phone taking the place of the tablet and vice versa when it comes to accessing social media, which is intuitively explainable by their similarity, including technical, not only social. Much more balanced in terms of responses as surveyed devices are *the desktop* and t*he laptop*, first of all by the disappearance of absences of responses at a certain frequency of use, these being relatively evenly distributed across the spectrum. Thus, the desktop tends to be used more "rarely", "very rarely" or "never" (72.8%) than the laptop (47.1%).

3.4. Areas of application/use of social media in consumer behavior

Another section of the questionnaire focused on the areas of application of social media platforms, using a five-step Likert-type rating scale from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), thus following the purpose of collecting information through social media. In this sense, the sample was polarised in the positive dimension ("agree" and "strongly agree"), with 84.3% indicating that they access product information in order to obtain general information about existing trends in the market ("what's hot") or to find out news or information about innovations in the field (81%). In the same sense, 77.1% of respondents obtain up-to-date information about a specific product from social networks.

With regard to voluntary or involuntary user "marketing" activity on social media, the results show a more even distribution on the rating scale. Thus, when asked whether they upload pictures and descriptions of products they learn about or want to buy, relatively comparable weights were diametrically distributed on the rating scale: 41.5% answered that they upload images and descriptions of products on social media ("agree" and "strongly agree"), while 36.9% do not usually do so (inferable from the answers "strongly disagree" and "disagree"), with the remaining 21.6% being in the neutral zone ("neither agree nor disagree"). The situation is similar for the next item in question, i.e. whether they advertise free of charge via *share/like/recommend/comments* to other users 37.2% answered that they do react to product information via the indicated means ("agree" and "strongly agree"), while 34.6% firmly answered that they do not ("strongly disagree" and "disagree"), 28.2% being in the neutral zone ("neither agree nor disagree"). When asked about driving traffic to the shop's website, 42.8% of respondents agreed that they do, 31.2% relatively undecided ("neither agree nor disagree"), with only a quarter firmly in the negative dimension.

Also, when asked if they send the link to the shop's website to other users, more than half (59.5% to be exact) answered yes ("agree" and "strongly agree"), 28.6% were relatively undecided ("neither agree nor disagree"), with only 15.2% saying no. In addition, on the question of whether they post reviews/content on social media about their experience of using or buying a particular product, 43.6% of respondents agreed, with 28.6% placing themselves in the neutral dimension ("neither agree nor disagree") and 27.8% in the negative.

As regards the engagement of social media users in interacting with other users on a particular product, the results are in the same relatively balanced distribution on the rating scale, although some trends can be identified. Thus, when asked whether they interact with other users about the store's products/services (regardless of which), 47.5% agreed and strongly agreed, 26.6% were undecided ("neither agree nor disagree"), with a relatively similar percentage (25.9%) in the negative dimension ("strongly disagree" and "disagree").

Concerning the intention to inform other users about various promotional campaigns, there was a greater emphasis on the positive dimension, with more than half (54.2%) responding that they do ("agree" and "strongly agree"), compared to 23.9% who said they do not usually ("strongly disagree" and "disagree"). When asked whether they usually ask for feedback from users on the products/services they are looking for, 46.6% of respondents were in the affirmative ("agree" and "strongly agree"), compared to 22.6% in the negative ("strongly disagree" and "disagree"). But when asked to respond to user feedback, one third hesitated ("neither agree nor disagree"), with 35.5% in the negative and 30.9% in the affirmative. The trend becomes more strongly negative on the last item ("do you initiate conversations between users?"), with 42.2% firmly saying no and 31.6% undecided ("neither agree nor disagree").

3.5. Benefits of using social media

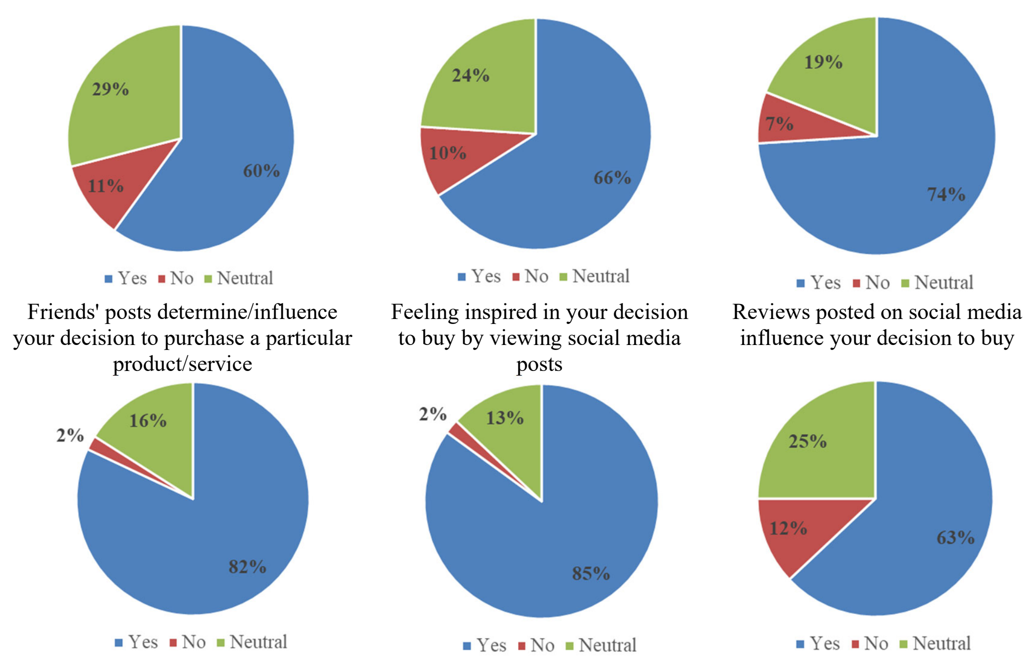
The last section of the questionnaire provided a series of items to quantify the influence of social media, in particular the content posted by brand ambassadors and business specialists, but also by other users, on consumer behaviour, with the following results (Figure no. 1):

a) most respondents use social media *to find out about new products/services* (85%), with related posts prompting them *to search the internet for more information* (82%), with more than half (60%) *seeking this information first on social media*;

b) reviews posted on social media also *influence users' decision to buy* (74%), with 66% feeling *inspired by viewing these posts*, 60% reacting in the same sense of *determining/influencing the decision to purchase a particular product/service to friends' posts*; in addition, 63% of respondents responded that *there have been situations where content generated by brand-ambassadors, influencers, business experts has influenced them to purchase a particular brand*;

c) in terms of the type of review on social media, 75% *are more likely to trust a product if they see positive reviews*, with direct proportionality holding true in the other case as well, with 63% of respondents *declining from purchasing a product in the case of negative reviews*;

d) also, knowing that text is searched to access information about products and services, however, 62% of respondents say that *the presence of images/videos from various social networks on the store webpage favourably influences their decision to buy*;



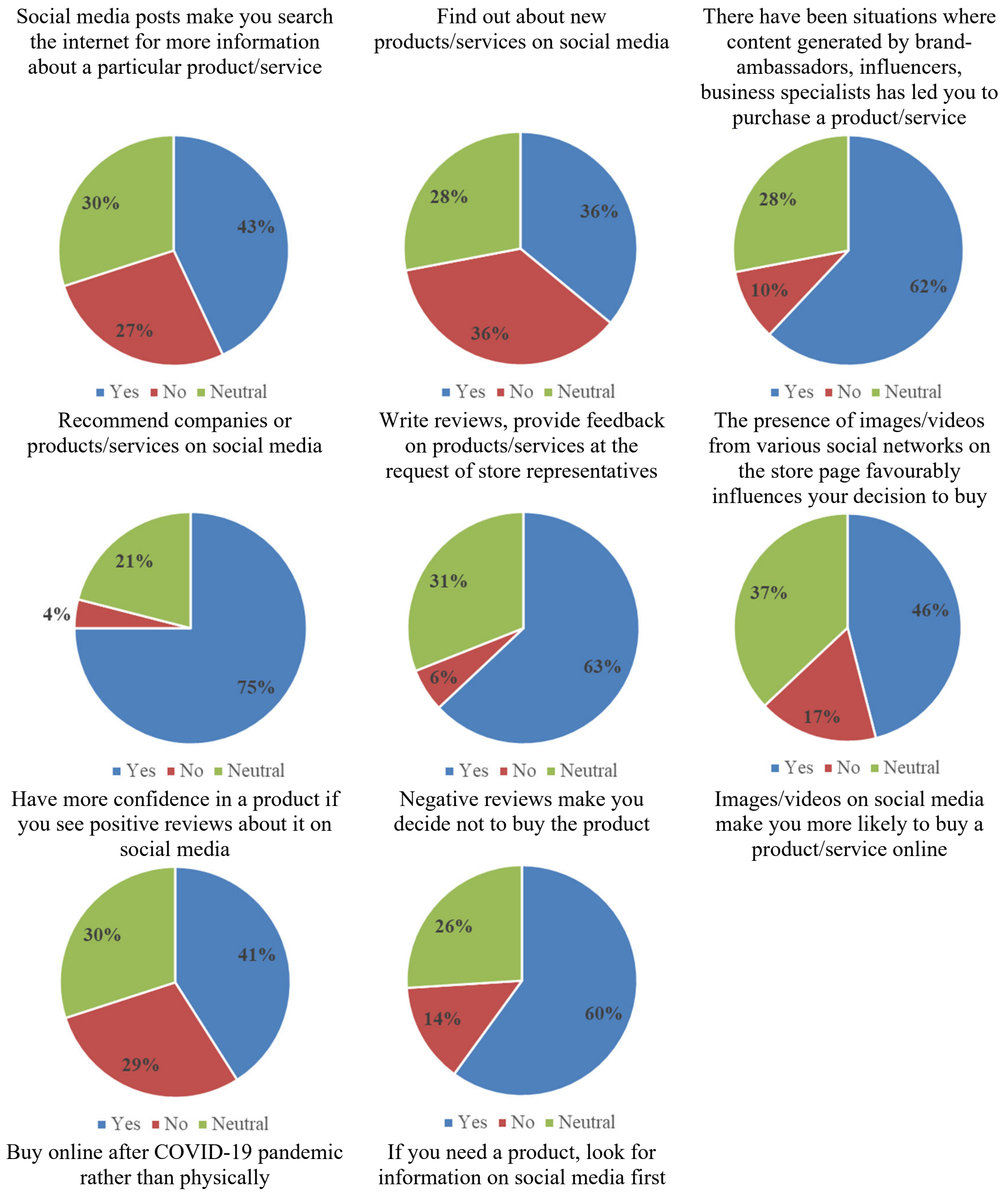


Figure no. 1. The influence of social media on consumer behavior for products and services

e) although they appreciate that social media posts and online content about certain products and/or services influence their decision to purchase them, only 43% of respondents *recommend companies or products/services on social media*, with 30% being neutral (neither yes nor no), while more than a quarter (27%) clearly state that they do not usually make recommendations on social media;

f) furthermore, only 36% of respondents *write reviews, provide feedback on products/services at the request of store representatives*, with an equal proportion not doing so, only 28% being undecided;

g) regarding the decision to buy online rather than physically, this is neither linked to the presence of images/videos on social media nor as an inertia reminiscent of the COVID-19 pandemic, with only 46% answering yes in the first case and 41% in the second, more than half hesitating or clearly denying it.

Conclusions

The analysis of the role of social media in shaping consumer perceptions of products and services, through online content and reviews, led to the following *conclusions*:

The predominant profile of the social media user who uses online content, i.e. reviews of different products and services in triggering or shaping the purchase decision making process is that of *a young, middle and high school educated female who has been using social media on a continuous basis for more than five years.*

Online shops (e.g. Emag, Elefant, Fashionsdays etc.) dominate the online environment in terms of content (reviews, posts, promotions etc.) on social media.

The most searched/accessed information on products/services are *reviews based on consumers' experience of using the product*;

The form in which this information is preferred is *text*, followed by *images* and *video*. The device used almost exclusively ('always' or 'usually') for accessing social networks is the *smartphone*. The least used device for accessing social media platforms is the tablet;

The most used social network for personal use is WhatsApp, followed in descending order by YouTube, Instagram and Facebook. *The most used social media platform used to search/view information about a specific product/brand is YouTube*, followed in descending order by Instagram and Facebook. The least used social media network, both for personal use and to search for product reviews is LinkedIn, followed by TikTok.

In retail, social media platforms are used by users for: 1) getting general information about trends; 2) finding news/innovations in the field and 3) getting up-to-date in-formation about a specific product searched.

More than half of social media users *send the link to the shop's website to other users*. Over 40% of respondents *post reviews/content on social media about their experience of using or buying a particular product, upload images and descriptions of products they learn about or want to buy on social media*, and additionally *contribute to increased traffic to the store's website*.

Comparable proportions (more than a third of respondents) *share/like/recommend/comments to other users*, with a relatively close but somewhat smaller proportion diametrically opposed.

There is a general tendency to inform other social media users about various promotional campaigns. Social media posts lead users to search the internet for more information about a particular product or service. *The vast majority of consumers find out about new products/services from retail stores on social media*.

Users have more confidence in a product if they see positive reviews about it on social media and, conversely, *negative reviews also negatively affect the purchase decision. Product/service reviews posted on social media influence users' decision to buy*.

Consumers are more inspired to make a purchase decision by viewing social media posts made by other users. Friends' posts determine/influence users' decision to purchase a particular product/service.

The decision to purchase is influenced more by users' experience of the product and less by expert posts (by brand ambassadors and business specialists).

Study limitations. The results of the questionnaire are based on a non-probability sample, which means that the results cannot be generalized from the sample to the total population without allowing for a certain margin of error, as the authors of the study were primarily interested in verifying a trend and less interested in generalizing the results to the total population.

The importance of the study. The results summarised by the findings of this study show that web 2.0 specific tools are increasingly shaping the retail business model, with consumer behaviour clearly influenced by online content posted on social media, with the quality of reviews directly influencing the decision to buy or not to buy a particular product. This is why e-space has become not only a business medium in itself, but also a marketing and consumer interaction tool.

Possible applications and extensions of the research. Given the explosive emergence of web 3.0-specific tools, particularly in the context of the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI), which can generate online content on a scale never seen before, future research directions should be considered to explore the role, influence, and impact of AI in shaping retail business in particular, and the business environment in general. It would also be interesting to see how fake online content (fake-news, deep fake etc.) influences consumer decision making process.

Also, based on the results of this research which show that reviews posted on social networks directly influence the purchase decision (positively or negatively, as the case may be, directly proportional to the meaning of the review), it is necessary to understand the complex mechanism by which the internet and its tools shape the consumer's economic behavior at a psychological, social, etc. level.

References

Berthon, P.R., Pitt, L.F., Plangger, K. and Shapiro, D. (2012). Marketing meets Web 2.0, social media, and creative consumers: Implications for international marketing strategy. *Business Horizons*, 55(3), pp.261-271. doi:10.1016/j.bushor.2012.01.007.

Constantinides, E. and Fountain, S.J., 2008. Web 2.0: Conceptual foundations and marketing issues. *Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice*, 9(3), pp.231–244. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.dddmp.4350098.

Darwish, D., 2024. The Driving Forces Behind Web 3 Growth: In: D. Darwish, ed. *Advances in Web Technologies and Engineering*. IGI Global. pp.29–56. https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-1532-3.ch002.

Ghazwani, S.S. and Alzahrani, S., 2023. The Use of Social Media Platforms for Competitive Information and Knowledge Sharing and Its Effect on SMEs' Profitability and Growth through Innovation. *Sustainability*, 16(1), p.106. https://doi.org/10.3390/su16010106.

Gupta, S., Paul, J., Stoner, J.L. and Aggarwal, A., 2024. Digital transformation, online advertising, and consumer behaviour. *International Journal of Advertising*, pp.1–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2024.2317632.

Kemp, S., 2024. *Digital 2024: Romania*. [online] DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. Available at: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-romania> [Accessed 7 April 2024].

Lu, F.-C. and Sinha, J., 2024. How social media usage and the fear of missing out impact minimalistic consumption. *European Journal of Marketing*. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-08-2022-0641.

Mchaney, R.W. and Sachs, D., 2016. *Web 2.0 and Social Media. Business in a connected world*. 3rd ed. London: Bookboon.

Mrisha, S.H. and Xixiang, S., 2024. The power of influence: How social media influencers are shaping consumer decision making in the digital age. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, p.cb.2308. https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.2308.

Power, D.J. and Phillips-Wren, G., 2011. Impact of Social Media and Web 2.0 on Decision-Making. *Journal of Decision Systems*, 20(3), pp.249–261. https://doi.org/10.3166/jds.20.249-261.

Săseanu, A. et al., 2022. *Impactul aplicaţiilor de social media în comerţul cu amănuntul*. Bucharest: University of Economic Studies.

Walsh, S., 2023. *The Top 10 Social Media Sites & Platforms*. [online] Search Engine Journal. Available at: <https://www.searchenginejournal.com/social-media/social-media-platforms/> [Accessed 7 April 2024].

Wang, F., Zhang, C., Lin, F., Chi, M. and Zhao, J., 2024. Understanding the effectiveness of influencer recommendation information on social media platforms. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, p.cb.2330. https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.2330.

Zhang, X., Min, G., Li, T., Ma, Z., Cao, X. and Wang, S., 2023. AI and Blockchain Empowered Metaverse for Web 3.0: Vision, Architecture, and Future Directions. *IEEE Communications Magazine*, 61(8), pp.60–66. https://doi.org/10.1109/MCOM.004.2200473.