Research on the Impact of Social Media on Consumer Trust

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Abstract: Trust is one of the most important elements in the process of purchasing and customer loyalty. The benefits of companies that enjoy a high degree of trust are well known. On the other hand, the effects of the lack of confidence are also obvious (unsatisfied consumers, lost sales) and very expensive for the company. Word-of-mouth or "buzz marketing" has gained a great deal of credibility and, implicitly, contributes to increasing the credibility of a company. A positive online presence can add value to the company's products and services, but it can also contribute to increasing the level of trust in its brand. Trust is an important and, at the same time, very complex relationship between the participants in a social network. Trust plays an important role in forming communities within social networks, in assessing information in terms of quality and credibility and decisively determining how information is transmitted across the network. In this context, we intend to bring through the following study more understanding on the extent to which brands have gained consumer confidence through social media.

Key words: marketing research, consumer behavior, consumers trust, statistic survey, social media

1 Introduction

Trust is one of the defining aspects in the relationship between two entities, being essential in assessing the level of risk [2] and overcoming insecurity. Also, trust determines the level of customer involvement and satisfaction, facilitates long-term inter-organizational interactions and strengthens the organization's reputation. Consumer trust is extremely important for a company because it expresses the latter's ability to retain its customers, maintain sales growth and performance on the market of interest. Trust is the cornerstone of consumer loyalty.

In addition, the lack of trust in a brand causes consumers to look for products and services offered by competing brands. Successful companies develop their strategies based on consumer confidence and winning their loyalty.

On the other hand, word-of-mouth or "buzz marketing" has gained a great deal of credibility and, implicitly, contributes to increasing the credibility of a company. A positive online presence can add value to the company's products and services, but it can also contribute to increasing the level of trust in its brand.

Given that more than 4 out of 10 Romanians from the urban area, over 15 years old, have a Facebook [8] account where they spend an average of 5.5 hours per day [1] additionally, 21% of Romanians spend online at least 8 hours daily and 87% of Romanians are social networks users [7], we can say that part of the confidence invested by the Romanian consumers in various brands has been gained to a certain extent through the companies’ activity on social media platforms. In this context, the purpose of the exploratory research presented in this paper is to identify the impact of social media on consumer confidence in existing brands on the market and to identify those specific social media elements that contribute to increasing the level of consumer confidence in a brand. The results of this research provide entrepreneurs interested in gaining consumer confidence a few coordinates for an effective activity in social media.

2 The importance of consumers’ trust

The concept of trust is usually defined as representing a person's hope that it can rely on the word of another or the extent to which a person is confident and willing to act on the words, actions and decisions of others [10]. Confidence in a brand can be considered to be that consumer's attitude in which he chooses to rely on the brand's ability to fulfill its stated function [3].

Consumer confidence translates into confidence in the company's products and services as well as in its activities [4]. Trust is an extremely important element in business as it contributes decisively to reducing costs, improving efficiency, increasing flexibility and supporting long-term market planning.

Confidence causes consumers to adopt three behaviors that are of most interest to companies: to follow the advice offered by the company, to share personal information and to buy the company's products/services [6].

Usually, when deciding whether or not to trust a person, we are influenced by a number of factors, such as:

a. our own predisposition in granting confidence, which is in relation to his own psychology, influenced, in turn, by numerous events throughout his life; these events may not have any connection with the person we decide to trust or not;

b. current relationship and past experience with the person in question and his/her friends, including rumors and gossip;

c. our own opinions about the actions and decisions that the person in question has made in the past.

And as a significant part of the information that subscribes to points b and c, mentioned above, circulates with the greatest freedom in the online environment, and with a predilection on social media platforms, we can say that social media contributes significantly to gaining and maintaining consumer confidence.

3 The contribution of social media in building consumers' trust

It's no secret that online social networks now offer companies the opportunity to approach and interact with actual and potential consumers, to create and maintain a sense of intimacy with the customer and thus to establish a solid relationship with them, relationship that leads to the integration of brands in the lifestyle of consumers, a goal of any company, especially in the current competitive environment characterized by the volatility of consumer loyalty, which can disappear at the slightest mistake of the company, mistake that propagates in a geometric progression in the online environment [11]. This is not surprising if we consider the formidable speed with which bad news are circulating in the current period, considering that social networks provide their own messaging system that allows anyone to share and connect stories with each other. Social media has added new dimensions to communication, surpassing the classic system in which the flow of messages came mostly from the organization [5]. The social media category includes a variety of online applications that allow users to share information: social networking sites (such as Facebook), content communities (YouTube, Flickr etc.), collaborative sites (Wikipedia) or microblogging (Twitter).

One of the most significant implications of social media is the increase of consumer power due to the easy access to information previously unavailable to them, acceleration of the flow of information as well as to the possibility of having conversations at global level. Currently, consumers have a strong voice and companies do not have any control over the conversations that take place between them. In these circumstances, consumers and their conversations are a topic of maximum interest to marketers [3].

The interactions that take place within social networks are a good indicator of the relationship between individuals. One of the aspects of trust is based on the notion of integration, which shows that interactions between individuals form the basis of developing a relationship based on trust. A number of specific characteristics such as the persistence of the communication process and the balance regarding participation are the signs of the presence or formation of a relationship based on trust.

Social media is both an opportunity and a great challenge in the process of building and maintaining consumer confidence, the marketing practiced in this context exceeds the simple activity of transmitting messages, consisting rather in participating in a dynamic conversation, listening and creating relevant content that will lead to consumer confidence. Social media allows companies to develop a strong relationship with consumers in a form that is closest to the relationships between people [9].

4 Research methodology regarding the impact of social media on brand trust

The research presented in this article is based on a quantitative research carried out among a small group of residents in Bucharest aged 18 and over, active members of a social network with a level of education ranging from high school to postgraduate studies.

The research aims to determine the impact of social media on consumer confidence in brands and to identify those specific social media elements that contribute to increasing the level of consumer confidence in a brand.

The main objectives corresponding to the above formulated purpose are:

- Determining the main social media applications used for interaction with various brands;
- Identifying brands' spontaneous notoriety obtained through social media;
- Establishing the extent to which Romanian consumers interact with brands within social media applications;
- Determining the level of trust inspired by brands that consumers interacted with within social media applications;
- Identifying the actions taken by the Romanian consumers in the social media applications in relation to a brand in which they trust;
- Establishing the main attributes of trusted brands;
- Determining the social media applications that Romanian consumers trust regarding information about brands;
- Establishing the extent to which the social media activity of the companies with which the consumers interact has contributed to the increase of the level of confidence gained by them;
- Identifying the impact of social media activity related to a company on the level of confidence that consumers give to it;
- Determining the types of messages conveyed on social networks that inspire consumers to trust a company;
- Determining the factors within the social networks that influence the level of consumer confidence in a company;
- Identifying the main sources within the social networks in which consumers have confidence regarding brand information.

The data collection method used in the research was the face to face survey due to the complexity of the questionnaire that was used. The questionnaire contains 21 questions, of which one open question that allowed the measurement of the brands' spontaneous notoriety in social media, 13 closed questions with multiple choice answers (of which 3 dichotomous and 10 multichotomous) and 7 semi-closed questions. The introductory part of the questionnaire was developed in such a way as to allow the measurement of habits in the use of social media applications, the main section of the questionnaire was developed to allow the identification of the social media impact on consumers' confidence in brands, and the final part of the questionnaire was designed to identify the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. A wide variety of measurement scales, generally nonparametric, were used, such as Likert's scale, semantic differential and rank-ordering method.

The limited financial and time resources restricted the research to the Bucharest area. Considering that the research has an exploratory nature, the sample size was set at 285 people, its elements being selected using the non-probability method of snowball sampling.

5 Research results

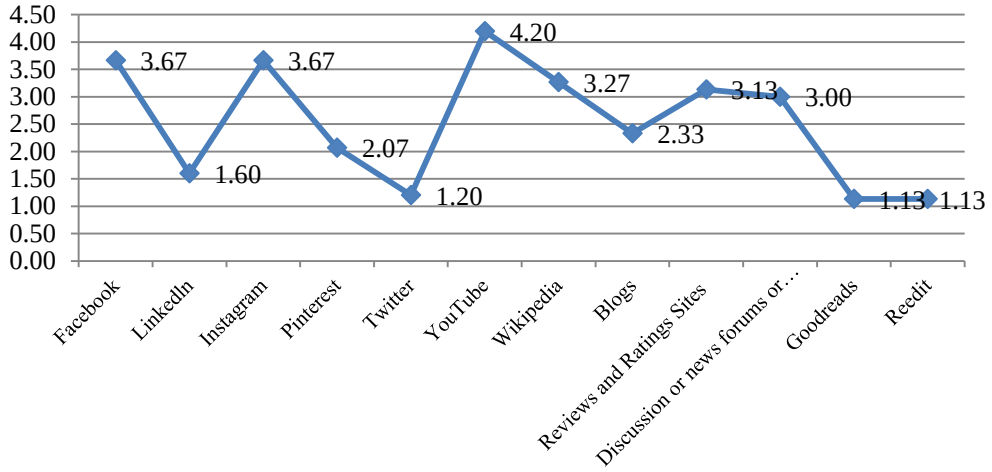
The data collected shows that 88.23% of the users of social media applications interacted in this environment with various brands, the rest of 11.77% stating that they never used such applications to interact with any brand.

The main applications used by the Romanian social media users to interact with different brands are Youtube, 80% of the respondents interacting a lot with brands on this platform (on a 5-step scale between the bipolar attributes "I interact very much" - "I don't interact at all") and Instagram, 66.67% of the respondents also saying that they interact a lot with different brands on this platform. Not to be overlooked are Facebook (46.67%), Wikipedia and Reviews and Ratings Sites (both with 40% of those who interact very much). The least used applications are Reddit (6.67% of respondents use the app), Goodreads and Twitter (both with a percentage of users of 13.34%).

The mean scores specific to the semantic differential used reinforce the previous conclusion (see Figure 1). Thus, Romanian consumers said that they interact a lot with different brands on YouTube (an average score

of 4.2), Facebook and Instagram (both with an average score of 3.67) and that they also interact with brands on the Wikipedia platform (3.27), review and rating sites, and discussion forums (average score of 3). At the opposite end, Goodreads and Reddit (with an average score of 1.13) and Twitter are platforms that consumers do not use in any way to interact with brands.

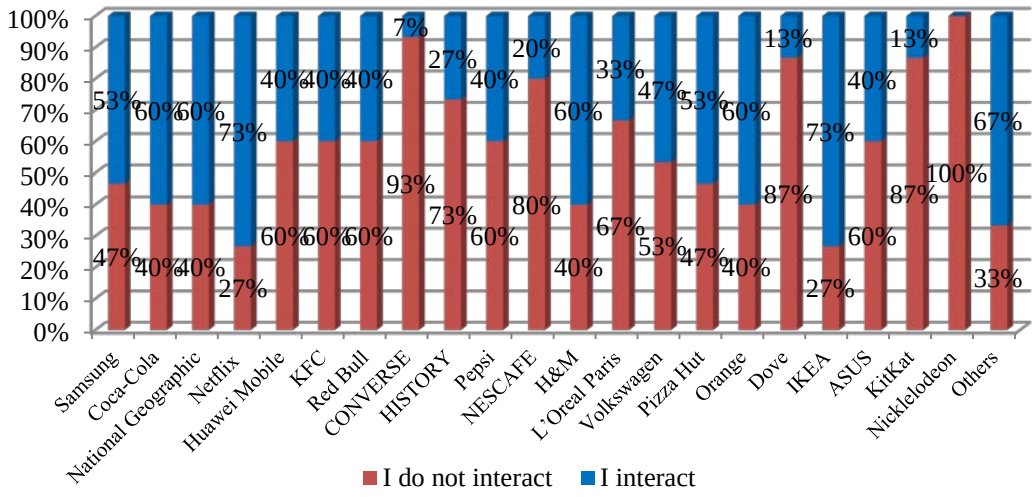
Fig.1. Distribution of average scores on the extent to which social media users interact with brands on different social platforms



From the answers to the question "Can you mention five brands that you have interacted with so far on social media?" we were able to determine the ***spontaneous notoriety gained by brands through social media***. Thus, some of the top 20 brands in the general ranking of FaceBrands.ro were distinguished: Samsung (6.76% of total responses), Coca-Cola and Netflix (4.05% of total responses) but also other well-known brands on the Romanian market such as Apple (6.76% of total responses), Nike (5.41%), Fashion Days, McDonald's, Vodafone and Zara (2.70% of responses). But if we consider the areas from which the brands with which the consumers interact on social media come from, it appears that Clothing and Footwear (27% of the answers), IT and Food & Drinks (each with 16.22% of the answers) are the ones to which the attention of the Romanian consumers is directed the most.

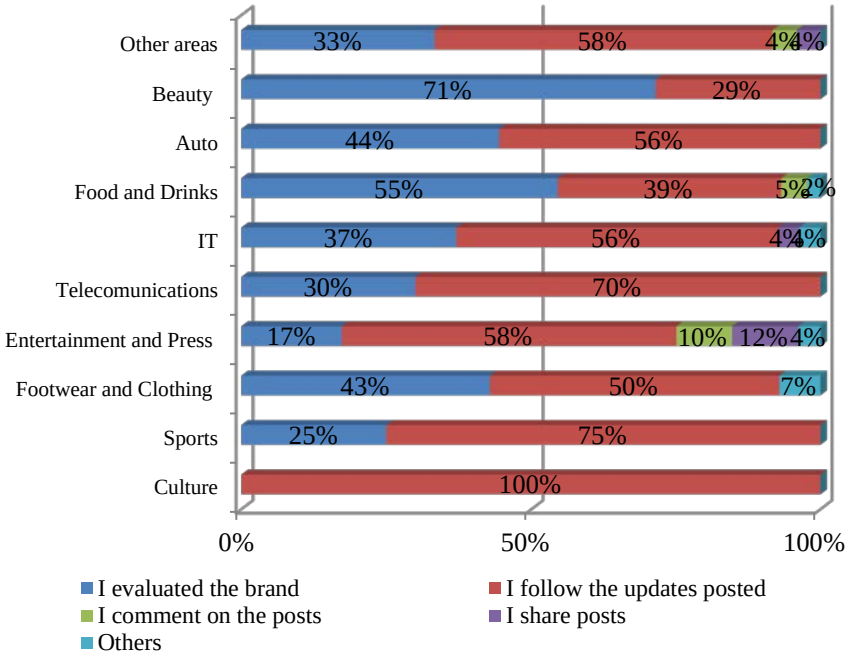
To establish the extent to which Romanian consumers interact with brands on social media, the data collected from the investigated sample reflects that in general Romanian consumers interact quite a lot with brands on social media platforms. From the top 20 brands present in the general ranking of FaceBrands.ro in June 2019 (see Fig. 2), Romanian consumers interact most with Netflix and Ikea (73% of the respondents said they interact with these brands in online) and Coca-Cola, National Geographic, H&M and Orange (60% of the respondents). However, 67% of the respondents interact mainly with "Other brands". Taking into account the areas of the brands with which the Romanian consumers have said they interact online, we notice that brands from Entertainment and the Press (27% of the answers), Food and drinks (23%) and IT (14%) benefit from the greatest interaction.

Fig. 2. Interaction with top 20 brands from Facebrands.ro



Regarding the actions taken by consumers in online in relation to the aforementioned top 20 brands, we can see from the collected data that the action of following the news posted (with percentages ranging between 25% -70% of total responses), and the action of evaluating the brand (with percentages ranging between 11% - 100% of the total answers) predominates as expected. By area of interest, the two mentioned actions differ only as weights, the brand evaluation actions being predominant in Food and drinks area (55% of the total responses of those who interact with brands; the Beauty category having too little weight in the total answers to be of interest) and the actions of following-up the news posted by brands are predominant in the field of Entertainment and Press (58%), IT (56%), Footwear and Clothing (50%) and Telecommunications.

Fig. 3. The main actions taken on social networks in relation to brands

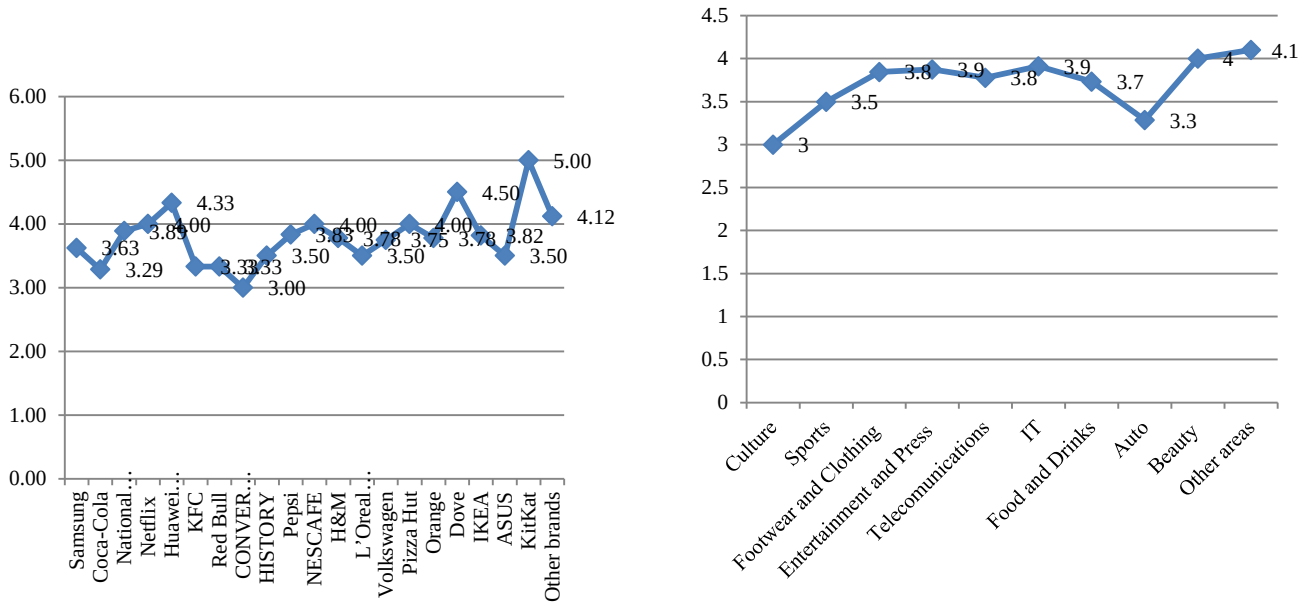


40% of the respondents who stated that they interacted with a brand on social media applications said that they do this often and very often, the average score obtained in the case of the 5-step semantic differential used to measure this indicator is 3.4 placing the interaction of Romanian consumers in the category "neither often, nor rarely". The age group 18-24 years old deviates positively from the general average, with an average of 4.2, which reflects that they often interact with brands on social media applications. The segment with an income of up to 800 lei also often interacts with brands on social media, while those who have an income

between 1601-2400 lei and those who have no personal income interact very often. The segment of those with post-graduate studies interacts very often with brands (with an average of 4.5), and if we consider the occupation, students and freelancers also interact very often. If we consider the gender of the respondents, the differences in the frequency of interaction with brands within social media applications are not significant.

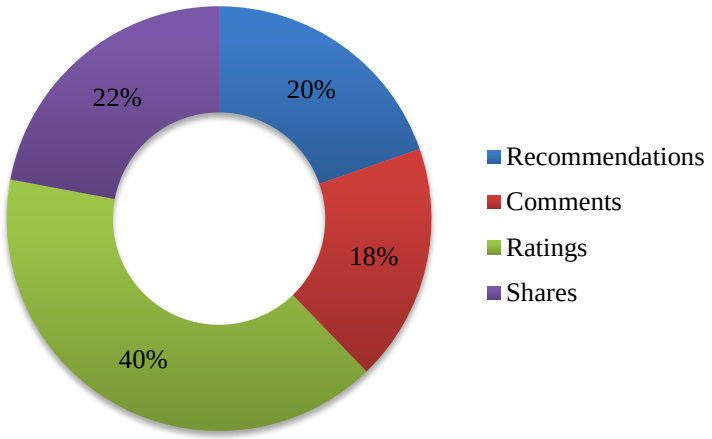
Regarding the ***level of confidence inspired by the brands that consumers interacted with within social media applications***, from the data collected through a 5-step semantic differential scale placed between the bipolar attributes "I have full confidence" – "I have no confidence at all" resulted that the top 20 Facebrands.ro brands with which the consumers interacted within the social media applications registered average scores that place them in the categories "I have complete confidence" (KitKat, Dove etc.), "I have great confidence" (Huawei, Netflix, H&M, etc.) and "I have confidence" (Coca-Cola, KFC, Red Bull, etc.), a conclusion also underlined by the average scores calculated for the main areas in which the brands fall (see Fig. 4) and of the general average score of 3.80 which fits the level of trust inspired by the brands with which consumers interacted in online in the "I have great confidence" category.

Fig. 4. Distribution of average scores regarding the level of trust inspired by the brands that consumers interacted with within social media applications



Regarding the ***actions that Romanian consumers take on social media applications in relation to a brand they trust***, we note that consumers most often choose to carry out evaluations of these brands (40% of responses, see Fig. 5), and in a much smaller percentage to share brand content (22% of responses), recommend the brand (20% of responses) and comment on brand content (18%).

Fig. 5. Actions undertaken within social media applications in relation to a brand that consumers trust



Among the respondents who stated that they interact with brands on social media platforms, those between the ages of 18-24 are more inclined to carry out the full range of actions in relation to brands (ratings, recommendations, comments, shares) in contrast to those between the ages of 25-34 who focus mostly on brand evaluations (41% of responses) and those aged 35-44 who focus mostly on sharing posts and evaluating brands. On the other hand, consumers with an income of up to 800 lei are less likely to share posts and those with post-university studies comment on posts to a very small extent compared to the other segments. Also, women are inclined to share to a greater extent the content regarding brands that they trust (31% at segment level) than men (18% of men), but the latter recommend and comment to a greater extent than women (see Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Social media actions by gender undertaken in relation to a brand that consumers trust

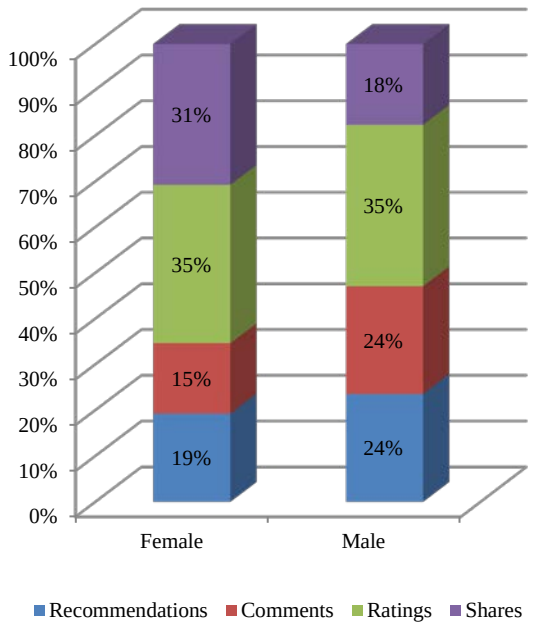
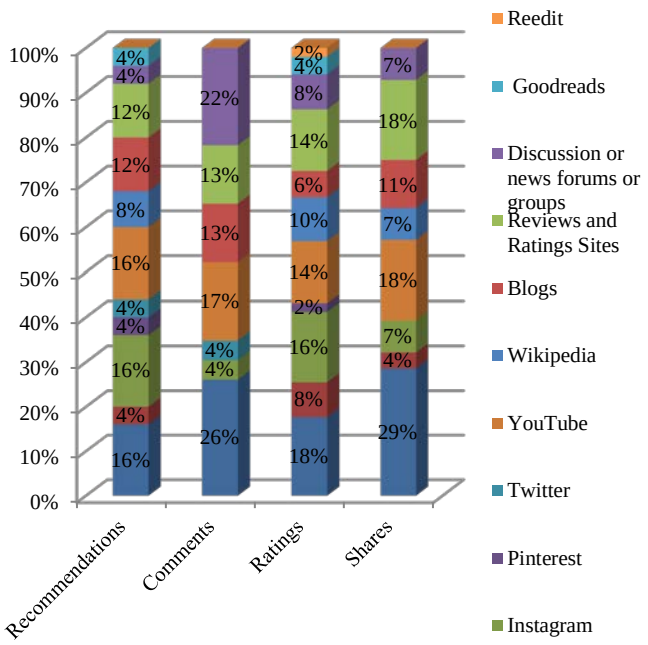


Fig. 7. Actions taken on the main social networks by consumers in relation to a brand in which they trust

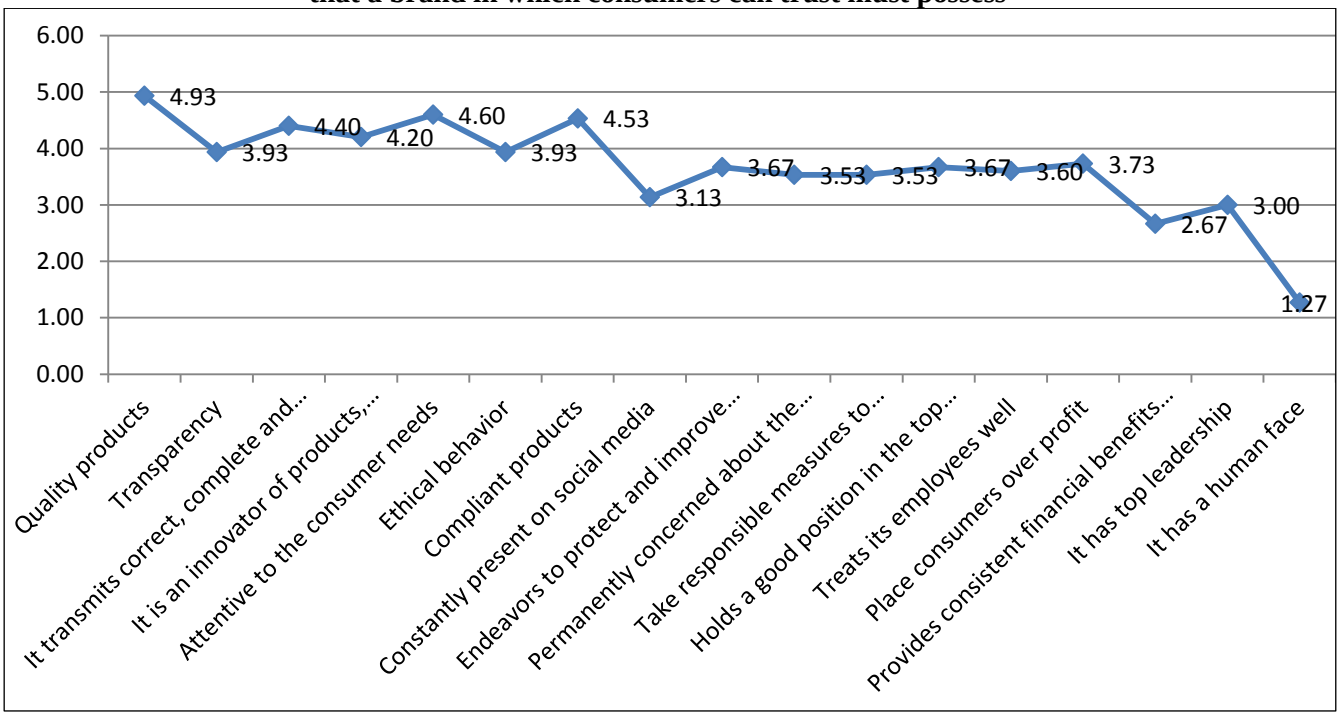


Typically, as reflected by the data collected, recommendations are made on Facebook, Instagram and Youtube (each accounting for 16% of total responses, see Fig. 7) and to a lesser extent on Blogs and Review and Ratings Sites (with 12% of total responses), comments are most often done on Facebook (26% of total responses), Discussion or news forums or groups (22%) and to a lesser extent on Youtube (17%), ratings are prevalent on Facebook (18%), Instagram (16%), Youtube and Reviews and Ratings Sites (both with 14% of

total responses) and shares are made with predilection on Facebook (29%), Youtube and Reviews and Ratings Sites (both with 18% in total responses). We can conclude that Facebook is the social media application on which Romanian consumers carry out the full range of actions in relation to "trusted" brands, and to a lesser extent Youtube.

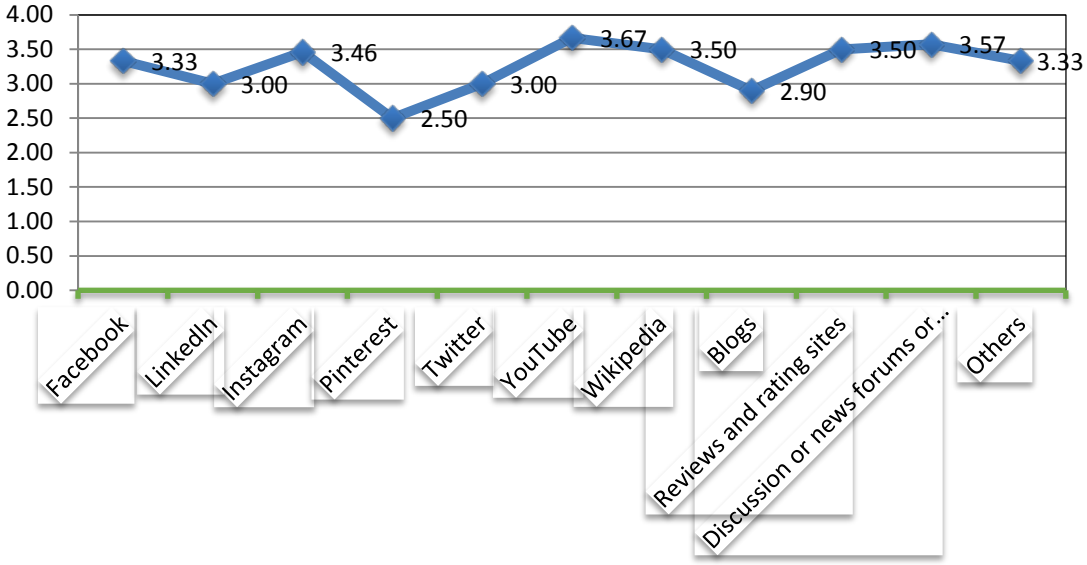
Regarding the consumer's opinion on the ***attributes that a brand in which they can trust must possess***, the data collected shows that they are to a large extent represented by the fact that "the products are of good quality" (fact confirmed by the average score of 4.93 on the 5-step semantic differential scale "To a very large extent" – "To a very small extent", see Fig. 8), the company is "attentive to the needs of consumers" (average score 4.60) and that "the company's products are compliant" (average score 4.53). Also, the Romanian consumers consider that a company that "transmits correct, complete and impartial information" (average score 4.40), "is an innovator of products, services or ideas" (4.20), transparent (3.93) , with an ethical behavior (3.93), which "endeavors to protect and improve the environment" (3.67), "permanently concerned about the community in which it operates" (3.53) and which "takes responsible measures to address a problem or crisis" (3,53) exhibits the attributes of the brands in which they trust. The constant presence in social media (average score 3.13) is an attribute that represents, to an appropriate extent, brands that inspire confidence to Romanian consumers, so not the most important, but not to be neglected.

Fig.8. The distribution of the average scores on the semantic differential scale regarding the attributes that a brand in which consumers can trust must possess



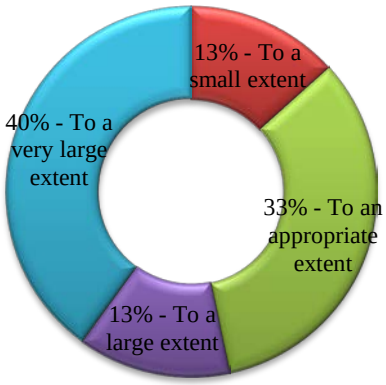
Regarding the ***social media applications in which Romanian consumers trust regarding brand information***, based on the data collected it can be concluded that the biggest trust capital that the Romanian consumers invest in the social media applications is not heading, as we would have expected, to Facebook, but to Youtube (with an average score of 3.67 on a five-step semantic differential scale between the bipolar attributes "I have complete confidence" – "I have no confidence at all", see Fig. 9) in which consumers have high confidence, followed by Discussion or news forums or groups (average score 3.57), Wikipedia and Review and rating sites (both with an average score of 3.50). The overall average score of 3.25 places the level of consumer confidence in the social networks in the "I have confindence" category.

Fig.9. Distribution of average scores on the semantic differential scale regarding the level of trust in social media applications regarding brand information



40% of the respondents consider that ***the social media activity of the companies they interact with has contributed to a great extent to increasing the level of trust that consumers have given them***. The average score obtained in this case (3.8) on the semantic differential scale between the bipolar attributes "To a very small extent" – "To a very large extent" reflects the fact that the companies' social media activity has greatly contributed to increasing the level of trust gained among consumers.

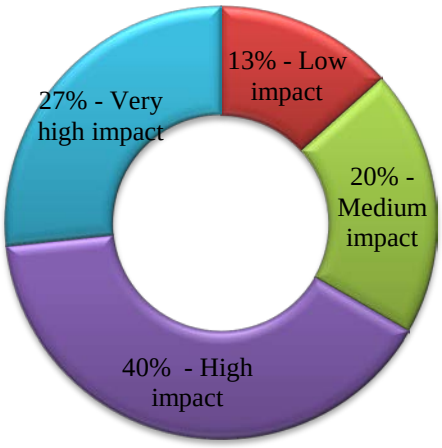
Fig.10. The extent to which the social media activity of the companies with which consumers interact has contributed to increasing the level of gained trust



With regard to the age trend, the averages reflect a negative difference from the general opinion of those aged 25-34, who are considering that the companies' activity in social media had a medium influence on the level of consumer confidence, unlike those between the ages of 18-24 and 35-44 who consider that social media activity has had a great influence on the level of trust. Regarding the respondents' income, we observe a negative deviation from the general average of those who have an income between 2401 - 3200 lei and those with an income of 4001 lei and above, the average recorded for these two segments fits them in the category of those who consider that social media has had only a medium influence on the level of trust they have in a brand, as opposed to the other income segments, where a positive deviation from the general average is observed. Also, employees without management responsibilities and private entrepreneurs consider that social media has had a medium influence on the level of trust in a company.

On the other hand, the data collected shows that the ***social media activity related to a company has a significant impact on the degree of confidence invested by consumers in it***, 67% of the respondents saying that the impact is high and very high (see Fig. 11) a fact very well underlined by the average score specific to the five-step differential scale "Very low impact on the level of trust" – "Very high impact on the level of trust" (3.80).

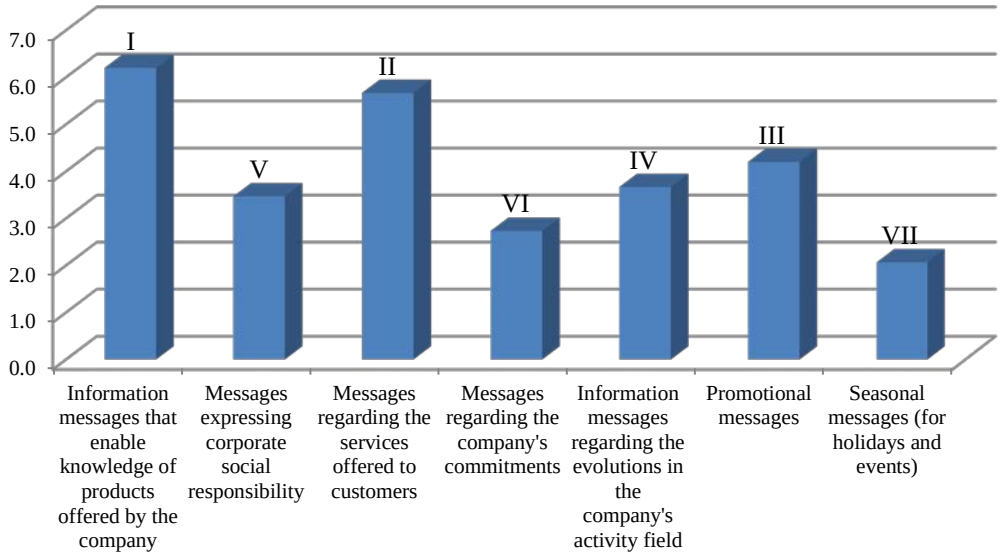
Fig.11. The extent to which social media activity related to a company has an impact on the level of trust that consumers give to it



In this case also, the segment of people between the ages of 25-34 years old records a negative deviation from the general average, considering that the social media activity related to a company has a medium impact on the level of trust that consumers give, as well as those with an income between 2401-3200 lei, as opposed to the respondents with an income up to 2400 lei, which register a large positive deviation, considering that the social media activity related to a company has a very high impact on the level of trust. In addition, the averages registered for the categories of respondents with high school and postgraduate studies have a positive deviation reflecting that the social media activity has in their opinion a very high impact on the level of confidence given by consumers. On the other hand, private entrepreneurs register a negative deviation from the general average and students a positive deviation from the general average.

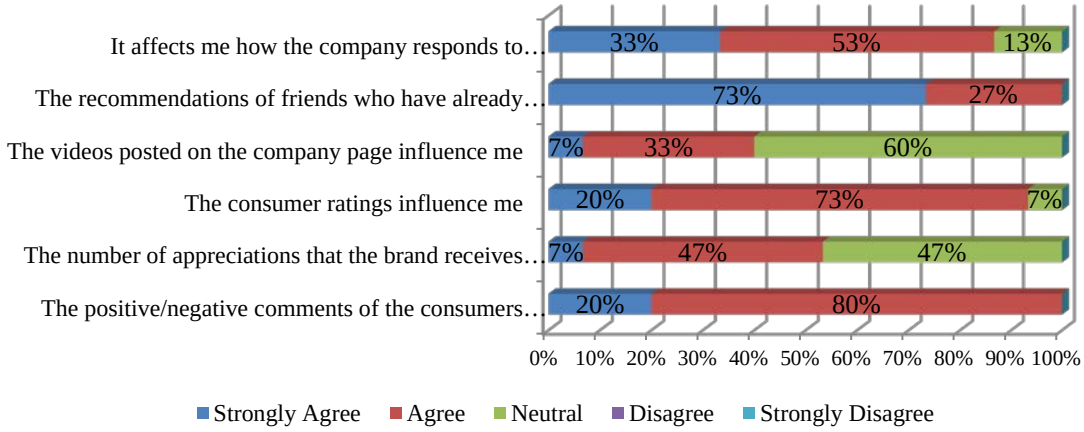
In order to ***identify the main types of messages transmitted on social networks which inspire consumers to trust a company***, we applied the rank ordering method. The ranking obtained after calculating the scores specific for this type of scale places first the information messages that offer knowledge about products offered by the company, on the second place the messages regarding the services offered to the clients and on the third place the promotional messages.

Fig.12. Ranking of the types of messages transmitted on social networks that inspire consumers to trust a company



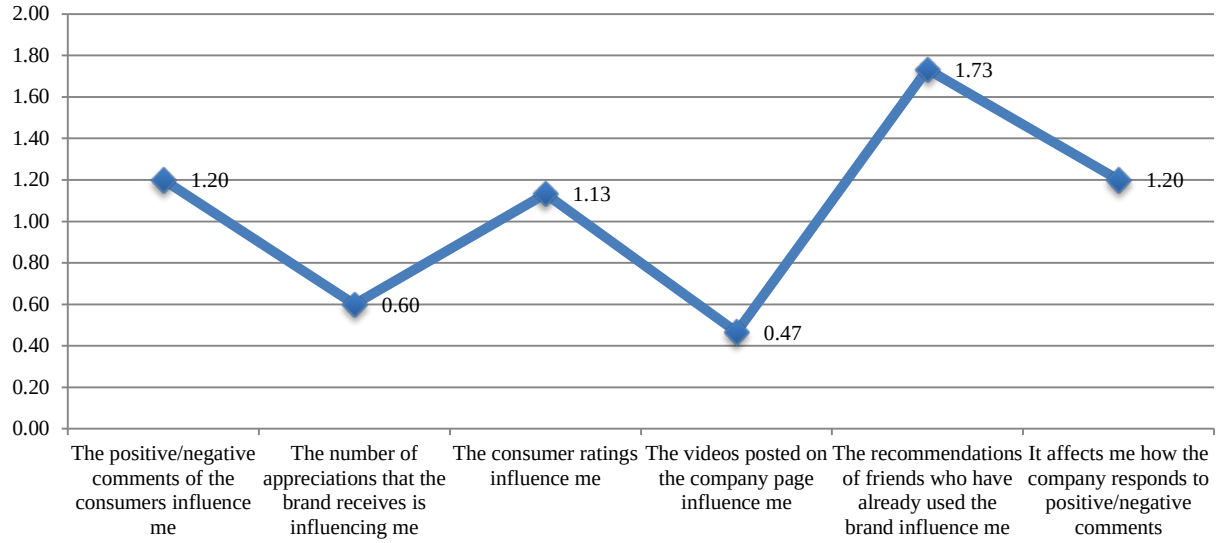
Regarding the factors existing within the social networks that influence consumers confidence in a company, the majority of respondents agreed, to a greater or lesser extent, that the level of trust depends on each action taken in social media in relation to the company (see Fig. 13).

Fig. 13. Factors influencing the level of consumer confidence in a company on social networks



In this context, it particularly influences the recommendations of friends who have already used the brand, statement that stands out significantly from the others considered, with 73% of "Strongly Agree" on Likert's scale and an average score of 1.73 (see Fig. 14), it influences the consumers' positive/negative comments and how the company responds to positive/negative comments (both with an average score of 1.20 on Likert's scale, which includes both statements in the "Agree" category). Consumers agree that they are also influenced by other consumers' ratings and the number of ratings the brand receives. Consumers show indifference to videos posted on the company page according to the data collected (with an average score of 0.47 on Likert's scale).

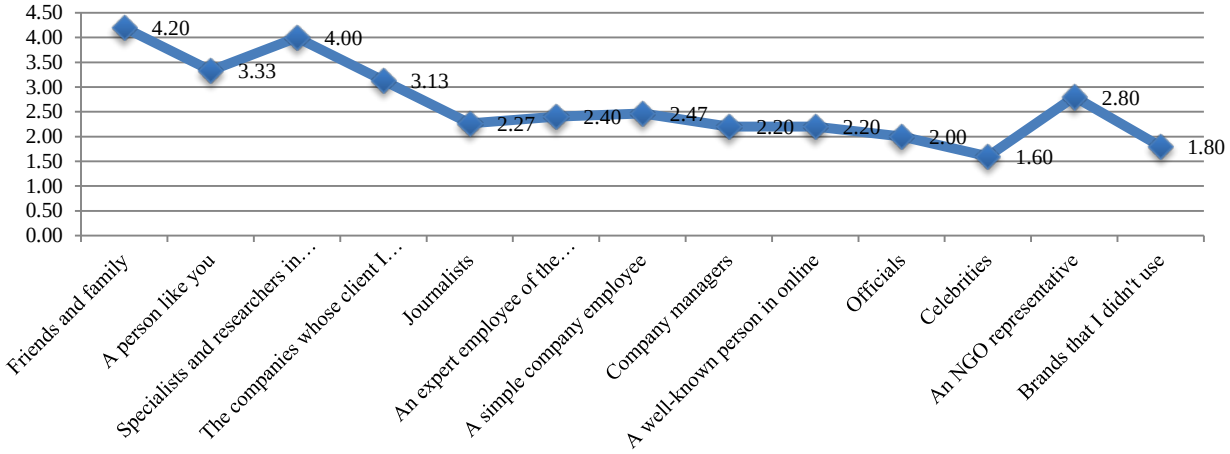
Fig. 14. The average scores specific to the Likert's scale used to determine the factors within the social networks that influence the level of consumer confidence in a company



According to a significant share of respondents (93.33%), the activities generated by consumers or consumer communities that are neither paid nor encouraged by the brand owner represent the category of activities in which consumers have the most confidence on social media.

Also, most of the respondents do not fully trust any source of information conveyed on social networks if it is to consider the average scores calculated for the five-step semantic differential "I have complete confidence" – "I have no confidence at all".

Fig. 15. Distribution of average scores on the semantic differential scale regarding the level of trust in the sources of brand information on social networks



However, consumers have great confidence in the information that their family and friends pass on (33% of the respondents have complete confidence) a fact also confirmed by the average score obtained by this category, and in those transmitted by specialists and researchers in the field (with an average score of 4). Other sources of information in which consumers have said they trust are “a person like you” (average score 3.33), “companies whose client I am” (average score 3.13) and “an NGO representative” (2.80). The rest of the considered categories obtained average scores that reflect a low degree of confidence regarding the information conveyed on social networks, the last places being Celebrities (1.60), Brands that consumers did not use (1.80) and Officials (2.00).

6 Conclusions

In identifying the motivations that drive consumers to provide personal information, buy or follow someone else's advice, companies should take into account the very high impact that trust has and the elements on which consumers' trust is built, including on social networks.

We can conclude that Romanian consumers have great confidence in the brands they interacted with within social media applications, most often evaluating the brands they trust, sharing the content about the brands, recommending the brands and, to a lesser extent, commenting on brand content. In addition, the segment of those between the ages of 18-24 are rather inclined to perform the full range of actions in relation to brands as opposed to those between the ages of 25-34 who mostly perform evaluations of brands and those aged 35-44 who are rather doing shares and brand evaluations. On the other hand, consumers with an income of up to 800 lei are sharing to a very small extent and those with post-university studies comment to a very small extent compared to the other segments. Also, women are inclined to share content about brands they trust to a greater extent than men, but the latter recommend and comment to a greater extent than women. Of all the social media applications, Facebook is the one on which the Romanian consumers carry out the full range of actions in relation to "trusted" brands, and to a lesser extent Youtube.

According to consumers, the attributes that a brand that they can trust has to possess are represented, first of all, by the fact that “the products are of good quality”, the company is “attentive to consumers’ needs” and “the company's products are compliant”. The constant presence in social media is not the most important attribute for a brand that inspires confidence to Romanian consumers, but it is not an aspect to be neglected.

Youtube has the biggest trust capital regarding brand information, consumers having great confidence in it, followed by discussion or news forums or groups, Wikipedia and review and rating sites.

Also, according to consumers, the companies’ activity in social media has contributed to a great extent to the increase in the level of confidence gained among consumers and social media activity related to a company has a significant impact on the degree of confidence invested by consumers in it.

The main types of messages sent on social networks that inspire consumers to trust a company are, first of all, information messages that offer knowledge of the products offered by the company, messages regarding the services offered to customers and promotional messages. In addition, within social media applications, the recommendations of friends who have already used the brand, the consumers’ positive/negative comments and

the way the company responds to the positive/negative comments influence greatly the consumers' confidence in a company. The activities generated by consumers or consumer communities that are neither paid nor encouraged by the brand owner represents the category of social media activities in which consumers place the greatest trust.

Also, consumers have great confidence in the information that their family and friends pass on and in those transmitted by the specialists and researchers in the field. Other sources of information in which consumers have said they trust are "a person like yourself", "companies whose client I am" and "an NGO representative".

It is clear that reputation is the element on which the initial trust in a company is built because a potential consumer relies in this case on the experience of others reflected in the company's reputation. As a result, reputation development and communication is an essential element on which consumers' initial trust in a company can be built.

In order to increase consumer confidence, companies need to get much closer to consumer communities, to openly encourage dialogue, to consider consumers' suggestions and feelings. Companies need to personalize the answers for the most valuable consumers, recognizing that they represent the main advocates of the brands and that they can be essential in increasing the company's good reputation in social media. And the main strategic elements for developing a close relationship with consumers through social media are communication, capturing attention, entertainment and actions that determine a response from consumers. All this will create a true experience that will be the basis of a long-term relationship.

The exploratory research carried out and presented in the previous pages represents the starting point for carrying out research on representative samples of social media users, using perhaps a more complex set of questions and thus obtaining important information for the specialists in the field.

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