The Importance of Online Communities for Business Success. Case Study: Companies in Romania

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Abstract: *Social media and online communities have become vital components of the contemporary business environment, having a significant impact on how companies interact with customers and manage their reputation. The theoretical part of this paper explores various aspects related to social media and online communities in the business context. Furthermore, the paper also discusses the topmost influential social brands in Romania in 2023, according to the Top Social Brands ranking by "Biz" magazine, offering a frontline perspective on the impact of online communities in the Romanian business landscape. The practical part of the paper consists of a social media content analysis of the top four brands in the Social Brands ranking in Romania in 2023. This complex analysis provides relevant information regarding the strategies and activities carried out by these companies in the digital environment. Additionally, a questionnaire was used to assess the target audience's perception of the importance of*

online communities for business success, thus completing the picture with factual perspectives on the interaction between companies and online communities. This paper aims to provide an up-to-date understanding of the impact of social media and online communities in the business environment, both from a theoretical and from a practical, culture-specific Romanian perspective.

Keywords: *online communities; social media; digital and business environment*

1. Introduction

People are social beings. The need for social interaction and belonging is at the center of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which suggests a deeply rooted desire for people to be part of a community where they are accepted and where they can leave their mark.

Years have passed, the digital revolution has taken place, and today we cannot talk about the business environment without including social media. In the context of the business environment, social media has become a crucial aspect of marketing and communication strategies for companies worldwide. A detailed academic approach to this field requires an in-depth understanding of the conceptualization and evolution of social media, as well as its impact on modern business practices.

A significant study in this regard was conducted following the 2018 International Conference on the topic "Business Remodelling: Exploring New Initiatives in Key Business Functions." This study carefully analyzes and defines key concepts of digital marketing and social media, offering an academic perspective on how they influence the contemporary business environment. Digital marketing, defined in the study as the promotion of products or services through digital channels, is a constantly evolving field within modern business practices. The study emphasises that digital marketing encompasses a diversity of strategies and tactics aimed at promoting brands and stimulating consumer engagement through digital media platforms.

Regarding social media, the study highlights its essential role in facilitating the creation, sharing, and exchange of information, ideas, and interests within virtual communities and networks. It acknowledges that social media has become a powerful tool for companies in managing customer relationships, brand promotion, and generating relevant content. Thus, the academic contribution of the study provides an important perspective on the interaction between social media and the business environment, underscoring the complexity and importance of this field within contemporary marketing and communication practices (International Conference on Business Remodelling: Exploring New Initiatives in Key Business Functions, 2018, p.8).

In the contemporary digital era, online communities have become an omnipresent and vital phenomenon in the social, economic, and cultural landscape. These digital communities, composed of individuals with common interests, experiences, and goals, are not only a manifestation of technological connectivity but also fertile ground for exploring human dynamics, virtual relationships, and knowledge exchange. Robert E. Kraut and Paul Resnick, authors of the book "Building Successful Online Communities: Evidence-Based Social Design," define online communities as any virtual space where people congregate to have conversations on a common interest topic, exchange information, play, learn, or just have company. The term applies to many social configurations, from small groups to sites with millions of users (Kraut & Resnick, 2011, p.1). Thus, the authors suggest that these virtual environments are not just simple spaces for digital interaction but places where individuals gather to meet various social and personal needs.

Currently, companies increasingly recognise the benefits they can gain from active participation in and management of online communities within their marketing and customer relations strategies. The authors of the book "Online Brand Communities" enumerate the benefits that an organization can gain from integrating into an online community, including: facilitating the creation and development of a brand, allowing companies to implement relationship marketing

strategies and increase customer loyalty, providing benefits related to proper market segmentation as they are directed towards very specific audiences, representing an additional source of information and an efficient communication channel, and facilitating the development and launch of new products (Lopez et al., 2015, pp. 193-195).

Thus, social media and online communities have become vital components of the contemporary business environment, having a significant impact on how companies interact with customers and manage their reputation.

2. Research methods

The research has been conducted on two of the most popular social media networks at the moment, Facebook and Instagram, by analysing the posts generated on social media in 2023 by the top four brands in the Social Brands ranking in Romania in 2023.

This complex analysis provides relevant information regarding the strategies and activities carried out by these companies in the digital environment. Additionally, through a questionnaire-based survey, the research explores the target audience's perception of the importance of online communities for business success.

The findings thus complete the picture with frontline perspectives on the interaction between companies and online communities. The survey was conducted online between May and June 2024 via the Google Forms platform, and the link was distributed on various social networks to ensure responses from diverse backgrounds. The sample was random, thus including everyone who wished to participate in the study during that period. The survey consisted of 14 questions, 5 of which were socio-demographic questions. In total, the sample consisted of 212 respondents.

3. Results

The first three positions in the Top Social Brands in Romania ranking are held by four leading brands that have consolidated their position through creative strategies and continuous involvement in the online community they have formed: the first place is shared by Lidl and Samsung, Kaufland comes second, while Banca Transilvania ranks third.

The analysis has revealed that all four brands use their Facebook pages to promote their offers and products. Their posts are accompanied by attractive images and details about the products included in promotions. Posts that encourage community engagement through questions, events, and contests are the most appreciated among the four businesses. These activities directly involve followers, thereby developing a sense of belonging and increasing engagement and interactivity. For this reason, such posts have the most likes, comments, and shares, compared to other types of posts.

Lidl, Kaufland, and Banca Transilvania post educational and informative content such as cooking tips, recipes, and money management advice. Such posts are appreciated within the community because the brand manages to position itself not just as a simple product provider, but also as a trusted partner in the daily lives of consumers. Social responsibility is highlighted by all four brands through posts that include images and information about their corporate social responsibility projects, donations, and other initiatives supporting the local community. This type of post is the least appreciated, with the lowest level of interactivity among the four companies. Customer relationship management is carried out by responding to the vast majority of comments in a kind, direct and informal manner.

On Instagram, the four businesses present their various products and services in a captivating and creative way, focusing on visual aspects. Collaborations with public figures are more visible, as well as meme-style posts intended to evoke amusement.

Table 1: Monitoring by type of Facebook post

	Communication of Offers and Promotions	Community Engagement	Educational and Informative Content	Social Responsibility and Sustainability	Feedback and Customer Relationship Management
I Lidl	x	x	x	X	
	< 5,000 likes < 300 com. < 90 shares	< 7,000 likes < 500 com. < 70 shares	< 300 likes < 50 com. < 20 shares	< 100 likes < 5 com. < 33 shares	x
I Samsung	x	x		X	
	< 60 likes < 10 com. < 2 shares	< 50 likes < 15 com. < 5 shares		< 30 likes < 5 com. 2 < shares	x
II Kaufland	x	x	x	X	
	< 2,000 likes < 45 com. < 30 shares	< 8,200 likes < 34.000com. < 993 shares	< 1.500 likes < 30 com. < 70 distribuiri	< 700 likes < 30 com. < 30 shares	x
III Banca Trans.	x	x	x	X	
	< 3,300 likes < 30 com. < 30 shares	< 4,800 likes < 440 com. < 60 shares	< 2.100 likes < 70 com. < 30 shares	< 1,100 likes < 80 com. < 30 shares	x

It can also be concluded that online communities have helped the four analysed brands to:

- increase sales and revenue: through the ability to create and maintain constant and meaningful interactions with community members, they have contributed to customer loyalty and brand consolidation.
- improve reputation and strengthen the brand: all four analysed brands place great emphasis on feedback and customer relationship management, and collaborations with public figures have helped create a positive and credible image.
- expand their customer base: campaigns with public figures have allowed the four businesses to reach new audiences that would not have been accessible through traditional marketing methods.

The results of the survey highlight the importance of online communities for the success of a business, providing a clear picture of how users interact with online communities across various social networks, and how these interactions influence purchase decisions and, consequently, business success.

A significant number of respondents (45.8%) interact with online brand communities occasionally, whereas 25% interact daily. This indicates that a large segment of the target audience is engaged in a relationship with brands on social networks, which increases customer loyalty and engagement.

Cât de des interacționați cu comunitățile online ale brandurilor?
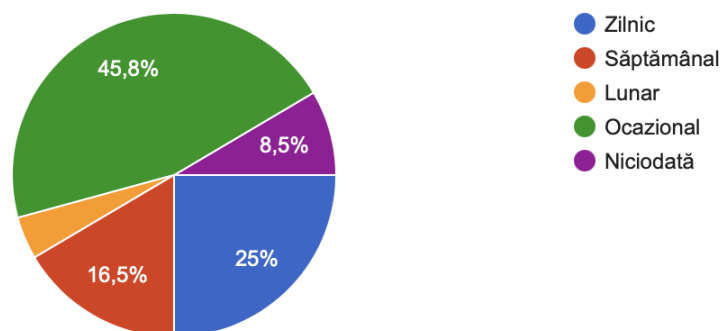
212 răspunsuri

Fig. 1. Interaction with online communities

While 44.3% of the respondents consider the influence of online communities neutral, 39.6% are influenced by the posts within these

communities, and 79.7% have purchased a product because of a post in an online community.

Cum evaluați influența comunităților online asupra deciziilor dvs. de cumpărare?
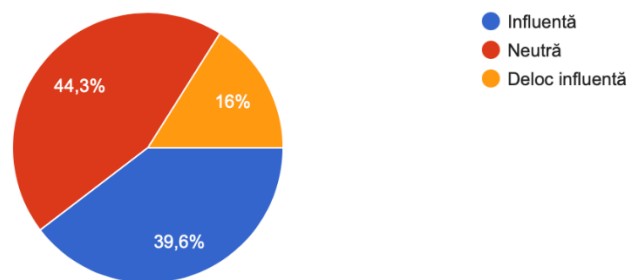
212 răspunsuri

- Influentă
- Neutră
- Deloc influentă

44,3%

16%

39,6%

Fig. 2. The influence of online communities

Ați cumpărat vreodată un produs datorită unei postări dintr-o comunitate online?

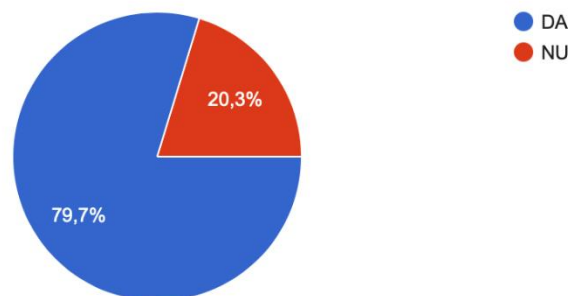212 răspunsuri

- DA
- NU

20,3%

79,7%

Fig. 3. Influence in the purchasing decision-making process

An overwhelming 82.5% of the respondents think online communities are important for the success of a business, while only 1.9% believe they are not important at all.

Cât de importanță considerați că este o comunitate online activă pentru succesul unei afaceri?

212 răspunsuri
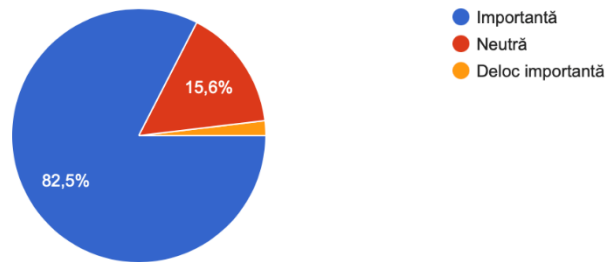
- Importantă
- Neutră
- Deloc importantă

15,6%

82,5%

Fig. 4. The importance of online communities for business success

This highlights the clear perception of the target audience regarding the crucial role of online communities in the growth and success of a business.

4. Conclusions

Companies should place special emphasis on creating and actively maintaining an online community. Considering all the benefits that online communities bring to the business environment, it would be a shame for companies not to take advantage of the opportunities offered by social media.

In light of the present study, it can be agreed that some specific factors of online communities influence the success of a business. Also, online communities seem to be essential for business success, according to the participants in the survey.

Businesses must be active on popular social platforms, provide attractive and valuable content, stimulate interactions, and leverage the influence of reviews. A strong presence in these communities not only attracts new customers but also strengthens the loyalty and engagement of existing ones, thus contributing to the long-term growth and success of a business.

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