

Research article

DIGITAL MARKETING IN THE CONTEXT OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR IN THE ICT INDUSTRY: THE CASE STUDY OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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Abstract. In Slovakia, a significant increase in spending on digital advertising was recorded in 2021. According to estimates, when compared to spending on other media types, online became the strongest advertising medium for the first time. As part of the analysis of consumer behaviour in the context of digital marketing, the research primarily focused on Slovak companies operating in the retail sector with IT and communication equipment – ICT specialized stores, because electronics is among the most frequently purchased online products by Slovak consumers. In the study, an analysis of consumer behaviour in the context of digital marketing was carried out to detect how respondents perceive selected digital marketing tools, to determine their preferences, attitudes, and reactions within ICT industry. For the purposes of this study, the method of collecting data through a questionnaire was chosen. The questions in the questionnaire were concerned consumer behaviour before purchase and were focused on selected digital marketing tools. The survey was conducted in December 2022 by the CAWI method, on a representative sample of the Slovak population of 391 respondents. The statistical method single proportion by one tailed test as well was used to verify the research assumptions. Based on the results of the consumer behaviour analysis, recommendations were established with the intention to be applied in the practice of Slovak companies in the context of digital marketing in the ICT industry. The fact that almost half of the respondents use the Internet for more than two hours daily presents many opportunities for businesses to appropriately address and engage potential customers through various digital marketing tools. The implementation of proposals should have a positive impact on companies in the ICT sector and their marketing activities. Their pursuance should bring benefits to businesses in the form of increased website traffic, acquisition of new customers, increased demand, profit, and satisfaction of customers.

Keywords: digital marketing; consumer behaviour; ICT industry; Slovakia.

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1. Introduction

A new era of digital marketing has entered modern society's practice [1]. In Slovakia, a significant increase in spending on digital advertising was recorded in 2021 in the amount of 32%, when it reached a value of 184 million euros. Of the total amount of expenses, 54% is related to mobile advertising, i.e., 99 million euros and 46% to desktop advertising, i.e., 85 million euros. According to estimates, when compared to spending on other media types, online has become the strongest advertising medium for the first time. Behind its growth in 2021 is a significant increase in advertising in the Slovak media, as well as from multinational players, especially in the second half of the year [2].

The year 2021 was highly non-standard not only in terms of Slovak media traffic, but also in terms of advertising expenditure, which was mainly caused by the significant transition to online communication of many brands during Covid. Investments in Slovak online advertising reached the level of 189 million euros in 2022, which means an increase of 3% year-on-year. The main reason for the low increase was the economic and political situation, which had an impact on consumer behaviour as well as the budgets of contractors. High inflation and the fear of a significant increase in energy prices in Slovakia in 2022 had an impact on lower consumption by the population as well as lower investment by brands in advertising. As a positive thing, there can be considered the fact that approximately 5% growth in digital marketing is predicted for the year 2023, despite the development of the economic situation with signs of recession [3].

As part of the consumer behaviour analysis in the context of digital marketing, this study primarily focused on Slovak companies operating in the retail sector with IT and communication equipment (ICT retail). The ICT retail sector is among the five types of assortments most often purchased online by Slovak consumers. Based on a survey by Forbes magazine, it follows that 25% of Slovaks buy ICT online [4]. Globally, the ICT segment ranked third in terms of e-commerce revenue, with revenues of nearly \$502 billion in 2020 [5].

During 2020, sales in Slovakia in the ICT retail sector developed very unevenly. A more significant impact of the pandemic was only noticed at the beginning of 2021. After high sales declines in the months of March (decrease by 18.6%), April (by 23.1%) and May (by 14.5%), sales fell even more significantly in November (by 12.8%) and slightly in October (by 2.8%). However, the declines were partially compensated by year-on-year sales growth in other months, especially in July (by 18%) and September (increase by 19.6%). In January 2021, a more significant drop in sales due to the corona crisis was recorded (by 20.2%). Sales fell even more significantly in February 2021, when the value of the index was at the level of 68.1, which represents a year-on-year drop of 31.9% [6]. During 2021, the demand for ICT increased, which was mainly caused by the pandemic, when people worked and studied from home. However, production was suppressed in certain cases, when it was not only a matter of slowing down the production of end devices, but also of the extraction of raw materials and the processing of input materials. This caused a lack of supply and subsequently ICT prices increased [7].

From the above, it is possible to deduce the assumption of constant growth of digital marketing in Slovakia as well. However, Slovakia differs from the rest of the world precisely because of the unpredictability of the demand for products in the ICT retail sector. The global market is

characterized by a definite increase in the sale of ICT products despite the increasingly saturated market because there is still a potential for growth in the segment of smart devices with more advanced premium functions [8]. This fact also represents the purpose of our study, which is to perform an analysis of Slovak consumer behaviour in the context of digital marketing used in the ICT retail sector. The aim was to detect whether the difference of Slovak customers is also reflected in the perception of selected digital marketing tools through the determination of their preferences, attitudes, and reactions within ICT industry.

This paper has the following structure: a) Section 2 is the literature review, which is centred on literary research and presents the main conceptual approach to the topicality of digital marketing and the variability of using its possible tools; (b) Section 3 describes the data, methods, and instruments for checking the research hypotheses; c) Section 4 expound the empirical findings obtained by applying the selected methodology; (d) Section 5 focuses on primary findings which are described and compared with those of other relevant studies. In addition to the most crucial findings, limitations, and scope for future directions of research on this topic are described at the end of this paper.

2. Literature Review

Digital technologies have spread rapidly in most parts of the world. With globalization, most people are immersed in the digital age. Digital marketing has grown enormously during the last decade, benefiting from the latest results and achievements in the field of digital technologies. In the future, there is room for enhancing digital marketing with IoT technology [9]. Thus, technologies have been exerting great pressure on companies to adapt their practice to the various existing modern mechanisms. With this, digital marketing has become an essential tool to compete in the market, being an efficient means of reaching potential consumers [10].

Digital marketing is an integral part of the transformation process of digital business. It is made up of new marketing techniques that are relevant to the current market situation and based on information and communication technologies [11]. Digital marketing takes place in a specific environment of digital media. It is currently already a standard element of complex marketing communication. It is based on all the practices of classical marketing and includes practically all marketing communication operating based on digital technologies, i.e., new media, such as tools from the Internet, mobile communications, and digital tools of communication [12]. Digital marketing is specifically defined as the process of using digital technologies to acquire customers and build customers preferences, promote brands, retain customers, and increase sales [13]. By digital marketing, one can imagine marketing of mass individualization, which allows creating a personalized approach to satisfying demand within the framework of the "seller-buyer" system [12,14]. Malesev & Cherry [15] and Nair & Nair [6] talk about digital marketing as marketing that uses digital media to communicate with customers, which will increase the demand for company products.

Thanks to digital marketing, companies have access to more effective tools in customer relationship management, which allows increasing customer satisfaction. These tools are characterized by interactivity, mobility and are very well understood by users, thanks to which they could satisfy their needs related to information search and perception [17]. They help companies implement marketing strategies more effectively and at the same time they are the

bearers of traditional marketing principles, the goal of which is to achieve higher customer satisfaction and increase sales or profit [11]. Currently, digital marketing provides a huge space for businesses that can effectively and especially cheaply get closer to customers. Digital marketing offers tools through which a business can reach new customers and justify why they should use its services and products [18].

In professional and scientific literature, there is no complete consent of authors regarding the definition of specific digital marketing tools [19-25]. However, the greatest penetration can be seen in the following tools: websites, internet advertising, PPC, SEO, SEM, social media, email marketing, content marketing, affiliate marketing and mobile marketing.

3. Methods

The inquiry method was used as part of a survey. The questionnaire was anonymous and contained several questions on the issue of consumer behaviour in the context of digital marketing. Questions in the questionnaire related to consumer behaviour before a purchase and were focused on selected digital marketing tools. The primary questionnaire survey took place in March 2022. The survey involved 391 respondents. The goal of the questionnaire survey was to find out how the respondents perceive selected digital marketing tools and what their preferences, attitudes, and reactions are within the ICT retail sector. For this reason, the following research objectives and assumptions were defined:

- Objective 1: To find out how many respondents most often use a mobile phone to search for websites. The goal was based on research assumption 1 that 64% of respondents most often use a mobile phone to search for websites. The assumption was based on the survey by Beus [26].

- Objective 2: Find out how many respondents click on the SEO results area in the Google search engine. The goal was based on research assumption 2 that 65% of respondents click on SEO results in Google. The assumption was based on the survey by Krnáčová & Benköová [27].

- Objective 3: To find out how many respondents who use social networks have an active account on the social network Facebook. The goal was based on research assumption 3 that 71% of respondents who use social networks have an active account on the social network Facebook. The assumption was based on the survey by the agency Go4insight [28].

- Objective 4: Find out how many respondents skip/close the ad. The goal was based on research assumption 4 that 81% of respondents will skip/close the ad. The assumption was based on the survey by Krnáčová & Benköová [27].

To verify the statistical hypotheses 1–4, there was used the method testing a single proportion. Significance level α was determined at 0.05. The test criteria were calculated according to:

$$T = \frac{p - \pi_0}{\sqrt{\frac{\pi_0 * (1 - \pi_0)}{n}}} \quad (1)$$

where T is test statistic; p means an observed proportion; π_0 is a null hypothesized value; n is a sample size.

By using the tables of the normalized normal distribution, there is found the critical value for the right-tailed test (2) for hypotheses 1–4 according to:

$$T > z_{2\alpha} \quad (2)$$

where T is a test statistic; $z_{2\alpha}$ is a critical value of the normalized normal distribution.

4. Results

Based on the evaluated questionnaire, most respondents (45.3%) spend more than 2 hours a day on the Internet. 73.9% of respondents most often use a mobile phone to search for websites. Most respondents (60.9%) will leave a website unless the content is adapted to the device they are using. The most common reason that discourages respondents from a store website is lack of clarity and disorganization. The majority of respondents (70.3%) click on the SEO results area of the Google search engine. 87.2% of respondents use social networks. Most respondents (91.8%) have an active account on the Facebook social network. The respondents most often stated that they consider the activity of adding photos and posts to be the most interesting from the side of online stores. Most respondents are bothered by ads on the YouTube social network, and most respondents are not bothered by ads on other social networks. Up to 98% of respondents will skip/close an ad if they have the option. The most common reason for skipping/closing an ad was that the respondents were not interested in the given product. The majority of respondents would accept if companies selling ICT would add relevant content for free beyond the scope of their business activities. Most would prefer visual content. 111 respondents answered an open and optional question regarding what the respondents would recommend to companies to improve their marketing activities on the Internet, which would make it easier for them to make purchasing decisions. The most common suggestion was reviews.

To verify the statistical hypotheses 1–3, the study used the method testing a single proportion. Results of verifying these statistical hypotheses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Verification of statistical hypotheses

Calculation of the sample proportion: $p = \frac{m}{n}$	Satisfaction of the condition $n * \pi_0 * (1 - \pi_0) > 5$	Test criteria	Critical field	Inequality	Acceptance or rejection of the hypothesis
Hypothesis 1:					
H ₀ : The share of respondents who most often use a mobile phone to search for websites is 64%.					
H ₁ : The share of respondents who most often use a mobile phone to search for websites is more than 64%.					
p = 0.73913	90.09 > 5	4.08	1.96	4.08 > 1.96	H ₀ rejected
Hypothesis 2:					
H ₀ : The share of respondents who click on SEO results in the Google search engine is 65%.					
H ₁ : The share of respondents who click on SEO results in the Google search engine is more than 65%.					
p = 0.70332	88.95 > 5	2.21	1.96	2.21 > 1.96	H ₀ rejected
Hypothesis 3:					
H ₀ : The share of respondents who use social networks and have an active account on the Facebook is 71%.					
H ₁ : The share of respondents who use social networks and have an active account on the Facebook is more than 71%.					

Calculation of the sample proportion: $p = \frac{m}{n}$	Satisfaction of the condition $n * \pi_0 * (1 - \pi_0) > 5$	Test criteria	Critical field	Inequality	Acceptance or rejection of the hypothesis
$p = 0.91789$	$70.21 > 5$	8.46	1.96	$8.46 > 1.96$	H ₀ rejected
Hypothesis 4: H ₀ : The share of respondents who skip/close the ad is 81%. H ₁ : The share of respondents who skip/close the ad is more than 81%.					
$p = 0.97954$	$60.17 > 5$	8.55	1.96	$8.55 > 1.96$	H ₀ rejected

Source: devised by the authors.

Table 1 shows that in all hypotheses the inequality applies, so the hypothesis H₀ was rejected, i.e., the alternative hypothesis H₁ was accepted. Based on the comparison of the value of the test statistics and critical value of the normalized normal distribution, the following conclusions were made:

- more than 64% of consumers in the ICT retail sector most often use a mobile phone to search for websites.
- more than 65% of consumers in the ICT retail sector click on SEO results in the Google search engine.
- more than 71% of consumers in the ICT retail sector use social networks and have an active account on the Facebook.
- more than 81% of consumers in the ICT retail sector skip/close an ad.

The results prove that the consumers of the examined sample (consumers in the ICT retail sector) did not show great differences in the perception of selected digital marketing tools through determining their preferences, attitudes, and reactions compared to global customers in general. Besides, the given results showed more positive attitudes towards digital marketing in the ICT sector than from a global point of view (apart from the knowledge that an enormous number of respondents would skip or close an advertisement).

5. Discussion

The survey showed that more than 45% of respondents use the Internet for more than 2 hours a day, this represents many opportunities for businesses to appropriately address and engage potential customers through various digital marketing tools. The study found that the majority of respondents use mobile phones to search for websites. 60.9% of respondents said they would leave a website when its content did not adapt to the device they were using. A similar share of consumers (60%) completes a comparison with our result of 60.9% who do not recommend a business with a poorly designed mobile website [29]. According to survey question focusing on what most discourages respondents from the website of ICT retail sector, it was found that the three most common responses from respondents were a lack of clarity and disorganization, insufficient, out-of-date information and slow loading. The results are somewhat different from the list of UX factors considered most important by the users [30].

The survey also showed that the majority of the respondents (70.3%) click on SEO results in the Google search engine. This is useful information for companies in the ICT retail sector, because in general almost half of all enterprises state that organic search brings the best return

on investment, more than a half of website traffic is generated by search. Search traffic has a 15% conversion rate and 28% of searches convert within 24 hours [29]. Companies in the ICT retail sector should therefore focus largely on SEO optimization, but high-quality and elaborate content is also important. The development of technologies and the Web 2.0 environment have influenced the behaviour of content producers and consumers as well and made it necessary to change marketing concepts. Content marketing is a current trend that brings benefits to companies and their clients, moving in a digital world flooded with redundant information. It does not force products or praise the seller but focuses on the needs and interests of (potential) customers [31]. For businesses selling ICT devices, it is recommended putting online product reviews on the website, which are forms of content marketing. The survey showed that 43.3% of respondents find online reviews the most helpful when making a purchase decision. This was also confirmed based on an open question, where a large part of respondents stated that they would accept reviews and their clear publication, the possibility of adding reviews even after a longer period of using the product, publishing negative reviews, motivating reviews, etc.

Ratings and recommendations are the most effective marketing tool ever. Up to 93% of consumers read online reviews when making a purchase decision [29] and 88% of people trust online reviews almost as much as those by friends and well-known persons [32]. In fact, consumers spend 50% more per order if a business regularly responds to reviews [29]. The second most common answer was video, chosen by 29% of respondents. It is recommended that companies should add videos to individual products (ICT devices). In the open question, the respondents also stated that they would accept video reviews, or also video instructions for use, or instructions for replacing certain parts, etc. Thanks to the video, it is easier for consumers to remember the brand and recognise it even after a long time. The study concludes that videos strengthen brand positioning and allow repeatability and continuity (e.g., in the form of podcasts). They also increase web traffic and work well on all personal devices [33]. The importance of video as a content marketing tool is growing. According to a HubSpot study [34], a video will account for 80% of all web traffic in two years. Adding a video to a newsletter or blog article will increase your click-through rate by up to 300%. The 90% of consumers say that demo videos of products have helped them with their purchasing decisions. According to the Ascend2 study, up to 51% of marketers rated testimony and tutorials as the most effective for building a brand. The demo videos mentioned are also considered highly effective (49%) [35].

Based on the results of the survey, it was found that 87.2% of respondents use social networks. Of the respondents who use social networks, up to 91.8% have an active account on Facebook, 54.5% on Instagram and 50.7% on YouTube. To increase awareness of the company, or brand with potential customers, social media is another important digital marketing tool. As the largest network in the world, Facebook offers companies many opportunities for raising awareness of the company, its activities, offered products or services. This social network is also suitable for obtaining feedback from customers. The conducted survey found that 62% of respondents do not follow any company selling ICT devices on social networks. The rest of the respondents consider adding photos and posts and organizing contests for consumers to be the most interesting activities on social networks by companies in the ICT retail sector. For this reason, up to 93% of brands are active on Facebook building their brand awareness [29]. Social networks can be considered a distribution channel for content marketing. The second view emphasizes the possibility of understanding specially adapted content on social networks as one

of the possible tactics of content marketing. The conclusions of the Content Marketing Institute study [36], according to which social networks are one of the most used content marketing tools to build brand awareness, also correspond to this concept. The content effectiveness on social networks in building a brand was examined by Gunelius [37], who found that it is a more economical way of marketing than traditional marketing. It enables direct communication, audience involvement and effectively builds brand awareness. According to this author, most marketers use the golden 80/20 rule when creating content on social networks, where about 80% of the content has a non-sales character, while offering additional value for the customer. Moreover, another study shows that user-generated content on social networks causes 6.9 times more involvement than corporate content [38].

It is clear from the survey that up to 98% of respondents skip or will shut down an internet advertisement if they have the option. The most frequent reasons indicated by the respondents are that they are not interested in the given product, they are not interested in any advertisement and an advertisement did not get them interested. A few respondents expressed their own opinion, where they mostly stated that advertisements annoy them. A negative aspect for digital marketing is that consumers have developed banner blindness over time, or use ad blocking tools [39]. Therefore, as a possible solution, it is recommended that companies in ICT retail sector should use native advertising. The development of advertising spending in the US so far has confirmed the growing importance of native advertising as a new advertising phenomenon [40]. Native ads will account for a whopping 74% of the total US display ad revenue by 2021, up from 56% in 2016, according to an estimate by Business Insider based on data provided by PwC and the Interactive Advertising Bureau. This mind-blowing statistics shows the power and impact of native ads [41]. Google also sees native advertising as a phenomenon of the future. Ekin Ozenci, a Mobile Product Specialist at Google, said in an interview with Hansen [42] that this is because every component of native advertising can benefit from it – users, publishers and advertisers as well. It allows the media to optimize their advertising space effectively. It offers advertisers an easy way to gain user time and attention [43]. The attention is becoming an increasingly valuable resource at a time when some studies and companies as Microsoft claim that humans are able to hold attention shorter than a goldfish [44]. The average attention by reading of a quality native article takes a few minutes. Long native articles can have a readability to the end of an incredible 73% [45]. Valuable content is so important for visitors that they discuss it and recommend it to their loved ones and acquaintances. In short, people like native articles or videos so much that they often forward them [46].

6. Conclusion

Although the purchasing behaviour of consumers in the ICT retail sector in Slovakia is different from the global one, as far as the perception of selected digital marketing tools is concerned, Slovak consumers share global preferences, attitudes, and reactions. There can even be perceived more positive results of attitudes towards digital marketing in the ICT retail sector than from a global perspective. Therefore, it is appropriate for companies in the Slovak ICT retail sector in Slovakia to implement digital marketing in accordance with global trends. Nowadays, when the communication space is dense, the creation of the right digital content and its effective distribution is very important. Digital marketing is literally experiencing its golden era, its importance is also increasing in Slovak companies, because for most of them digital marketing is a high to top priority due to sustainable competitiveness.

The first crucial limitation in this research is its territorial validity. Secondly, the applicability of the suggested recommendations based on research outcomes is justified only according to the customer's preferences of the analysed sector and chosen tools. It means that it is not fully possible to apply these claims and recommendations to generally effective practice. The research outcomes provide an overview of digital marketing and its tools in business practice, which could be considered as the article's main theoretical benefit. It also provides space for further discussions on specific digital marketing activities as a source of competitive advantage. Based on this, the main managerial recommendation is the effective application of digital marketing in business practice focused on the new trends and strategies that are gradually evolving in the conditions of high-tech industry. It includes customizing communication according to the specific preferences of targeted customer segments. It follows from the above that digital marketing as a source of competitive advantage has a great potential for further research. It would be appropriate to examine and compare the impact of digital marketing and its perception by consumers in particular fields.

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