



University of National and World Economy

Fifth International Scientific Conference

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND MARKETING IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

November 2025

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Editor

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UNWE Press

Sofia, 2026

This book of proceedings was funded by a targeted grant for scientific research at the University of National and World Economy under Contract No. NID NF-4/2025/B.

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ISSN 3033-2257

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Резюме: Често се приема че съвременните информационни технологии, големите бази данни и изкуственият интелект (AI), са променили не само количественото анализиране и прогнозиране на икономическите обекти и субекти, но и качествено са създали нова реалност. Доказва се че (поне засега) дигиталният „помощник“ на стопанските ръководители не променя насоките и качеството на анализите и прогнозите. Но дигиталният и аналоговият „свят“ поставят нови въпроси пред икономическата теория, които изискват отговор.

Ключови думи: анализиране; планиране; стратегия; маркетинг; икономическа теория.

JEL: A10, E60, M30.

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND MARKETING IN THE REAL WORLD: THE CLASSICAL VERSUS THE DIGITAL PARADIGM

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Abstract: It is often assumed that modern information technologies, big data, and artificial intelligence (AI) have not only transformed the quantitative analysis and forecasting of economic entities and actors, but have also qualitatively created a new reality. It is demonstrated that (at least for now) the digital „assistant” to business managers does not alter the direction or quality of analyses and forecasts. However, the digital and analog „worlds” pose new questions for economic theory that require answers.

Keywords: analysis; planning; strategy; marketing; economic theory.

JEL: A10, E60, M30

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Въведение

Стратегическото планиране и маркетингът са ключови елементи за устойчивото развитие на организациите и държавите в условията на регионалната и глобалната конкуренция. *Класическата парадигма* на стратегическото управление се основава на систематичен анализ на външната и вътрешната среда, формулиране на цели и избор на стратегии, разработени варианти на прогнози и планове, включително с помощта на човешка интуиция и предишен управленски опит (Porter, 1985), достигащи нивото на стратегически планове (Mintzberg, 1994). С навлизането на информационните технологии, големите бази данни и изкуствения интелект (AI) се появи нова „*дигитална*“ парадигма, която обещава „революция“ в управлението, планирането и маркетинга (Brynjolfsson, 2017). Въпросът обаче остава: променят ли тези технологии фундаменталната логика на стратегическото мислене, или просто усъвършенстват инструментариума? Настоящото изследване разглежда класическата и дигиталната парадигма, за да покаже, че макар дигитализацията да ускорява процесите и да добавя нови възможности, стратегическите принципи, подходи и методи остават непроменени. Същевременно дигитализацията поставя пред икономическата теория *нови и сложни въпроси*, които търсят отговор.

Класическа парадигма на стратегическото управление

Класическата (също наричана дизайнерска или планировъчна) парадигма на стратегическото управление доминира теоретичната и приложната мисъл от средата на XX-ти век до началото на новото хилядолетие, широко се прилага и сега.

Тя възприема организацията като *рационална система*, чиято бъдеща успешност може и трябва да бъде предвидена (анализирана, прогнозирана и планирана). В тази парадигма стратегическото управление е в голяма степен формален, аналитичен и йерархичен процес, воден от най-висшето ръководство „лидер/и“ (Матеев, 2000), като двата ключови компонента – планирането и маркетингът – са тясно свързани в единството на реализирането на целта (Голдрат & Кокс, 2013).

Характеристики на класическата парадигма

Основните характеристики на класическата парадигма са следните:

1. *Рационалност и Детерминизъм.* Светът се възприема като предсказуем, а пазарната среда е стабилна за да бъде анализирана. Успехът е резултат от внимателно изчисление и избор на оптималната стратегия.

2. *Формално стратегическо планиране.* Процесът на управление е структуриран, стъпаловиден и цикличен, включва фази на анализ, формулиране, изпълнение и контрол.

3. *Водеща е ролята на високоразположения център за управление („мозъчният тръст“).* Стратегията се разработва „отгоре-надолу“ и „отдолу-нагоре“ („насрещни планове“). Върхът на организацията (ръководството) в края на краищата взема окончателните решения, а останалата част (по-ниско разположените нива) – изпълняват тези решения.

4. *Фокусът на високоразположения център е върху пазарна позиция* (в националното планиране – благоденствието на народа, в корпоративното – изместването на конкурентите и по-висок пазарен дял) и поддържане на трайни конкурентни предимства. Целта е организацията да заеме силна позиция в системата (държавата да е по-развита от останалите, а корпорацията – да расте по-бързо от другите в сектора) и да поддържа устойчиво конкурентно предимство.

Планирането в класическата парадигма

В класическата парадигма, *планирането е сърцевината на управлението.* То следва ясна логическа последователност чрез първоначално изследване на „анатомията и физиологията на икономическата система“ и достигайки до „проектиране на целесъобразното конкурентоспособно развитие и функциониране на икономическите системи“ (Манов, 2015). Още по-конкретно, в корпорациите се следва „железната логика“:

1. *Външен и вътрешен анализ.* Използват се инструменти като PEST-анализ (за макросредата: политически, икономически, социални, технологични фактори), модел на „петте сили“ на Портьър (за анализ на индустрията и конкурентните сили), SWOT-анализ (за консолидиране на вътрешните силни и слаби страни, възможностите и заплахите).

2. *Определяне на мисия и цели.* Формулира се мисията на организацията и се установяват конкретни, измерими, постижими, релевантни и времево ограничени (SMART) стратегически цели.

3. *Формулиране на стратегия.* На базата на анализа се избират стратегически алтернативи. Типични стратегии на ниво корпорация включват диверсификация,

интеграция или концентрация върху основния бизнес. На бизнес ниво, моделът на Майкъл Портър за общи стратегии (лидерство в разходите, диференциация, фокусиране) е основополагащ.

4. *Изпълнение и бюджетиране.* Стратегията се превежда в конкретни оперативни планове, разпределение на ресурси и бюджети.

5. *Контрол и оценка.* Следва се изпълнението на плановете и се правят корекции при отклонения.

Маркетингът в класическата парадигма

Маркетингът в тази класическа парадигма не е самостоятелна функция, а *ключов инструмент за реализиране на стратегията*. Той е основно производно на стратегическото планиране.

1. *Маркетинговата стратегия е производна на корпоративната стратегия.* Маркетинг целите и стратегиите се извеждат директно от общите корпоративни цели. Ако корпоративната стратегия е за растеж чрез навлизане в нови пазари, маркетингът трябва да разработи план за това.

2. *Сегментиране, таргетиране и позициониране (STP).* Това е ядрото на стратегическия маркетинг. Процесът включва сегментиране на пазара на целеви групи потребители, таргетиране на избор на един или няколко сегмента за атака, позициониране на продукта/марката в съзнанието на целевите потребители спрямо конкурентите.

3. *Концепцията за маркетинговия микс (4P, 7P или нещо подобно).* Това е централният инструмент за операционализиране на маркетинговата стратегия. Той включва ясни контролируеми променливи: Product (Продукт) - какви продукти/услуги да се предлагат, за да се задоволят пазарните нужди и да се постигне диференциация; Price (Цена) - каква ценова политика да се следва, за да се постигне целта за пазарен дял и рентабилност; Place (Място/Дистрибуция) - как продуктите да достигнат до потребителите; Promotion (Промоция) - как да се комуникира ползата на продукта чрез реклама, насърчения и др.

Въпреки своята логичност и широко разпространение, *класическата парадигма е подложена на честа критика* по три основни причини: прекалена рационалност – понеже игнорира ролята на интуицията и организационната култура; неадекватност в динамична среда - в днешния бързо променящ се свят петгодишните планове често стават неадекватни още преди изтичането на първата година; ограничаване на

иновациите - строгата йерархия и формалност могат да задушат иновативността и инициативата „отдолу“.

Следователно *класическата парадигма на стратегическото управление представлява фундаментална школа на мисълта*, която поставя основите на модерния мениджмънт. Нейният стълб – неразривната връзка между формално стратегическо планиране и стратегически ориентиран маркетинг – остава валиден и днес. Въпреки че съвременните подходи (като обучаващата, ресурсна и извънредна парадигма) предлагат по-гъвкави алтернативи, инструментите и логиката на класическата парадигма продължават да бъдат от съществено значение за организации, работещи в стабилни и зрели отрасли.

Дигиталната трансформация на мениджмънта - от автоматизация на процесите към еволюция на стратегическите принципи

Какво е въздействието на дигиталните технологии като Big Data, Изкуствен интелект (AI) и автоматизацията върху съвременния мениджмънт?

В центъра на изследването е тезата, че въпреки радикалното ускоряване на оперативните процеси и подобряването на ефективността, *дигиталната трансформация не променя фундаменталната логика на стратегическото управление*. Тя по-скоро предоставя нови, мощни инструменти за прилагането ѝ. Чрез анализ на маркетингови приложения като персонализация, динамично ценообразуване и прогнозиране на търсенето, *технологията трансформират изпълнението, но не и същността на стратегическите решения* – постигането на устойчиво конкурентно предимство.

Контекстът на Четвъртата индустриална революция (Schwab, 2016) - текущата ера на бърза трансформация в технологиите, индустриите и социалните модели, се характеризира със „сливане“ на цифровия, физическия и биологичния свят, което води до радикални промени в начина, по който живеем, работим и се свързваме.

Основни характеристики на Четвъртата индустриална революция

Ето накратко основните характеристики и прояви на Четвъртата индустриална революция:

1. *Масово свързване и Интернет на нещата (IoT)*. Физическите устройства (машини, превозни средства, уреди) се свързват към интернет и си обменят данни. Появяват се „умни“ фабрики, където машините комуникират помежду си за самооптимизиране.

2. *Изкуствен интелект (AI) и машинно самообучение.* Системите могат да анализират данни, да учат и да вземат решения с минимална човешка намеса. Например, автономни коли, чатботове като тези, които диагностицират заболявания. Впрочем, въпреки ширещите се убеждения, изкуственият интелект се появи още през миналия век (Папазов, 1989), въпреки че едва през двадесетте години на този век намери мащабно приложение (Кордон, 2023).

3. *Big Data и аналитика в реално време.* Събирането и анализът на огромни обеми данни позволяват прогнозиране на тенденции и поведение. Например, персонализирани препоръки в Netflix, основани на предпочитанията на потребителя.

4. *Роботика и автоматизация.* Развитието на когнитивни роботи, способни да работят заедно с хората (коботи). Примерно, роботи в логистични центрове, които сортират и разпределят пратки.

5. *Добавъчно производство (3D принтиране).* Създаване на обекти слой по слой, което позволява бърз прототипинг и персонализирани продукти. Примерно, 3D принтирани медицински импланти или дори цели сгради.

6. *Киберфизически системи и цифрови двойници.* Създаване на виртуални копия на физически обекти или процеси за симулация и оптимизация. Примерно, цифров двойник на фабрика, който тества промени преди тяхното реално прилагане.

7. *Биотехнологии и невротехнологии.* Интегриране на технологии в човешкото тяло и съзнание. Например, бионични крайници, мозъчни импланти за лечение на заболявания.

Всичките тези характеристики на Четвъртата индустриална революция и свързаната с нея. „дигитална трансформация“ често се възприемат като синоним на пълна промяна на управленческите парадигми.

Дигиталните технологии като катализатор и усилвател на класическите принципи на стратегическото управление

Поставяме под съмнение това популярно „революционно“ схващане. *Дигиталните технологии, макар и революционни по своето въздействие, действат като катализатор и усилвател на класическите принципи на стратегическото управление, а не като техен заместител.* Технологиите трансформират „как“ се върши работата, но не преосмислят фундаментално „защо“ и „какво“ решава организацията.

Какви са фактите?

Съвременният мениджър *разполага с инструменти*, които преди са били прекрасни идеи на научната фантастика:

1. *Big Data и аналитика*. Вместо да разчита на ограничени извадки и исторически данни, мениджмънтът вече може да анализира цели популации в реално време. Това превръща управлението от изкуство в наука, базирана на данни, като елиминира предположенията от процеса на вземане на решения.

2. *Изкуствен Интелект (AI) и машинно обучение*. AI не само автоматизира задачи, но и предоставя прогнозни модели, и способност за симулации. Той позволява на мениджърите да тестват хипотези в „цифров двойник“ на бизнес средата, като по този начин минимизира риска.

3. *Автоматизация (RPA, AI-driven Automation)*. Роботизирането на повтарящи се процеси (RPA) и интелектуалната автоматизация освобождават човешкия потенциал от рутинни задачи, като го насочват към дейности, изискващи креативност, емпатия и стратегическо мислене.

Сферата на маркетинга е може би най-ясно демонстрираща трансформацията. Ето приложението ѝ в маркетинга:

1. *Персонализация в масов мащаб*. Big Data и AI позволяват сегментиране на ниво индивидуален потребител и хипер-персонализирани комуникации. Това е практическото приложение на маркетинговата концепция „внимание към клиента“ в нейното крайно развитие.

2. *Динамично ценообразуване*. Алгоритмите анализират търсенето, наличността, поведението на потребителя и цените на конкурентите в реално време, за да оптимизират приходите. Това е усъвършенствана форма на ценовата стратегия, отговорена пазарните сигнали с безпрецедентна скорост.

3. *Прогнозиране на търсенето*. Машинното обучение анализира сложни модели от данни (включително социални мрежи, метеорологични данни, икономически показатели), за да предвиди бъдещи тенденции с висока точност. Това директно подпомага класическата функция на планирането.

Технологията като инструмент, а не като самостоятелна генерираща стратегия

Въпреки всички тези промени, *основната логика на стратегическото управление остава непроменена.*

Стратегическите въпроси остават същите. Въпросите: „Кой е нашият целеви пазар?“, „Какво е нашето конкурентно предимство?“ и „Как създаваме стойност за клиента?“ остават фундаментални. Технологиите помагат да се отговорят на тези въпроси по-добре, но не ги променят.

Big Data и AI са инструменти. За да се превърнат в устойчиво конкурентно предимство, те трябва да бъдат интегрирани в уникална бизнес стратегия. Данните сами по себе си са безполезни без стратегическа рамка, която да им придава смисъл.

Дигиталните системи могат да предлагат опции, но *крайният избор, отговорността за риска, етичните съображения и визията за бъдещето* остават в ръцете на човешкия мениджмънт. Стратегията е и ще продължи да бъде „човешко изкуство“, подпомогнато от цифрова наука.

С други думи, дигиталната трансформация не отменя нуждата от добър мениджмънт; напротив, тя я прави – тази нужда - още по-критична. Тя премества фокуса на мениджърите от оперативен контрол към стратегическо лидерство, от анализ на миналото към интерпретация на бъдещето, базирана на данни. Технологиите ускоряват процесите, повишават ефективността и предоставят дълбочина на прозрение, която преди е била немислима. Те обаче не променят същността на стратегическото мислене. В ерата на дигиталната трансформация, победата не ще принадлежи на организацията с най-мощните технологии, а на тази, която най-умело интегрира тези технологии в своята фундаментална бизнес логика и човешка визия.

Примери за „дигитализация“ на стратегическото управление, планирането и маркетинга

Няколко *свежи примери за „дигитализация“ на стратегическото управление, планирането и маркетинга:*

Amazon – Big Data и AI за персонализирани препоръки и динамично ценообразуване.
Стратегия: лидерство по разходи и удобство.

Tesla – AI за автономно управление и иновации. Стратегия: диференциация чрез технологично лидерство.

Procter & Gamble – AI за анализ на потребителски данни. Стратегия: класическа сегментация и бранд мениджмънт.

Netflix – алгоритми за препоръки и прогнозиране на съдържание. Стратегия: лидерство чрез съдържание и удобство.

JPMorgan Chase – AI за управление на риска и откриване на измами. Стратегия: доверие и сигурност.

Lufthansa – AI за оптимизация на маршрути и персонализация. Стратегия: максимизация на запълняемостта и лоялност.

Walmart – Big Data за управление на веригата за доставки. Стратегия: лидерство по разходи.

Във всичките тези примери са налице аргументи за *непроменената същност на стратегическото човешко мислене*. Структурата на мениджмънта остава непроменена: цели → стратегии → тактики. Във всичките случаи AI играе ролята на инструмент, а не субект. При него е характерна липсата на интуиция и ценностни преценки, силно е зависим от качеството на данните. Огромни са ограничения пред AI за решаването на етични проблеми, както и за управленска „прозрачност“ и отговорност.

Но дигиталната трансформация поставя *нови въпроси пред икономическата наука*.

Дигиталната трансформация и новите въпроси пред икономическата наука

Най-честото твърдение е че *дигиталната икономика вече е надминала реалната „аналогова“ икономика*. Фактите оборват тази масова хипноза.

Данните за дела на онлайн покупките в световен мащаб непрекъснато се актуализират (данните са приблизителни и се базират на агрегирани отчети от компании за пазарни изследвания като eMarketer, Statista и Forrester), но ето най-съвременното и обобщено резюме на ситуацията, базирано на отчети от световно признати източници. Приблизително 20% от всички покупки на дребно (retail sales) в световен мащаб се осъществяват онлайн през 2024 г. До 2027 г. се прогнозира този дял да нарасне до около 23-24%. Този процент е значително по-висок в развитите страни и по-нисък в

развиващите се пазари. Това означава, че въпреки бурния растеж на е-търговията, *около 80% от всички покупки все още се случват във физически магазини.*

В Азия *делът на онлайн продажбите е най-висок*, като в страни като Китай и Южна Корея представляват над 30-35% от общите търговски продажби, благодарение на развитата дигитална инфраструктура и култура на мобилните плащания. Втори в класацията са Западна Европа и Северна Америка в диапазона 18-22% (САЩ и Великобритания са в горната част на този диапазон). В Латинска Америка и Африка делът е по-нисък (под 15%), но тези региони показват най-бързите темпове на растеж. Пандемията действа като катализатор и ускори резкия скок в дела на онлайн покупките с няколко процентни пункта. Въпреки че има известно „откачане“ след възстановяването, делът се стабилизира на нива, значително по-високи от допандемийните.

По категории стоки делът силно варира в зависимост от *продуктовата категория*: много висок (>50%) за електронни книги, софтуер, музика; висок (30-50%) за електроника, мода, книги, фитнес оборудване; нисък (10-20%) за хранителни стоки (въпреки че расте бързо), мебели, строителни материали; много нисък (<10%) за автомобили, луксозни стоки (въпреки че този сегмент също расте онлайн).

Бъдещето видимо се развива към *хибриден модел* (omnichannel), при който потребителите безпроблемно превключват между онлайн и офлайн канали.

Най-новата идеология твърди също, че *цифровата икономика и изкуственият интелект* ликвидират капитализма, че концепцията за стокото производство не е подходяща в дигитализирания свят, ако вече няма „конкретни“ стоки. Във връзка с бъдещето на работата в цифровия капитализъм съществуват две основни предположения. Първото е, че ще има все по-малко работа за хората. Второто е, че тази работа е израз на свобода и самоусъвършенстване. И двете предположения са погрешни по различни причини. Например, „около 60 000 души работят за Google, а около 600 000 работят за „Фолксваген“. Така че образецът на цифровия гигант наброява едва 10 на сто от заетите от една от най-големите традиционни автомобилни компании“ (Krell, Meyer, & Scherer, 2018). Човешката дейност е от основно значение за Google, но тези дейности обикновено се генерират от потребителите без заплащане на такса. В допълнение - и така твърди не само цифровият елит в Силициевата долина - тази работа се разбира по-скоро като експлоатация, отколкото като самоусъвършенстване и упражняване на свободата. Но

работата никога не свършва. Малкият брой работници в дигиталните гиганти крие високия брой на тези, които работят външно обвързани с компанията – не се смята, че работят директно за компанията. Скрити зад компаниите често съществуват платформи, които обединяват много по-голям брой потребители и доставчици, отколкото използват. Прогнозите че ще намалява търсенето на работна сила в цифровия капитализъм не се оказаха верни.

Заклучение

Дигиталната трансформация не е революция в стратегическото планиране, а еволюция на инструментите. Big Data, AI и автоматизацията подобряват точността на прогнозите и ефективността на изпълнението, но не заменят човешката визия, ценностните преценки и стратегическата логика (Davenport & Harris, 2017). Основните етапи – анализ, целеполагане, избор на стратегия – остават валидни както в класическата, така и в дигиталната парадигма. Новата реалност обаче поставя пред икономическата теория въпроси за стойността, конкуренцията и етиката в алгоритмично управляваните пазари (Zuboff, 2019). Бъдещето на стратегическото планиране е хибридно – съчетание между дигитални технологии и човешка интуиция, което гарантира устойчивост и конкурентоспособност.

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NEOLITHIC-CHALCOLITHIC SIGNS AND COMMUNICATION VEHICLES ON THE TERRITORY OF BALKANS: BUILDING A DATABASE FOR STUDYING BRAND GENESIS

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Abstract: *During the Neolithic (New Stone Age) and Chalcolithic (Copper Age) periods, the population of the Balkans developed a precise communication system with a corresponding semiotic subsystem. The role of carriers of ancient communication was played by cylindrical seals, non-cylindrical seals, metopes, signs on the bottoms of clay vessels, signs on ritual loaves, signs on residential and non-residential buildings and signs on plaques/badges. This report aims to present the ancient communication carriers and to substantiate the idea that it is in these Neolithic-Chalcolithic communication systems (with a corresponding semiotic subsystem) that the roots of modern branding should be sought. The report presents the components of the research database.*

Keywords: Branding, Communication Vehicles, Ancient Semiotics

JEL: M31, N, Z13

Introduction

This paper was developed in connection with the scientific project NID NI-2/2024/A GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF BRANDING IN THE BALKANS AND IN EUROPE - FROM 6 THOUSAND. B.C. TO THE PRESENT DAYS. This publication presents the components of the scientific research database, which contains artifacts with signs that prove the existence of an ancient communication system during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods on the territory of the Balkans and Europe. The main object of research is communication channels/carriers and signs. The current study presents the results of a pilot study that identified 7 real (proven by archaeological artifacts) communication carriers that participated in the process of Neolithic/Chalcolithic communication. These communication carriers fully coincide with the components of the database of this study. Moreover, we tried to find, systematize and apply all the artifacts in a single database. The separate groups of communication carriers (corresponding fully to the composition of the database of this study) are:

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- 1)Non-cylinder seals
- 2)Cylinder seals
- 3)Bottoms of ceramic vessels
- 4)Metopes on large ceramic vessels (grain storages)
- 5)Ceramic models of ritual breads
- 6)Residential and non-residential buildings
- 7)Ceramic badges/plaques

It is necessary to bear in mind that in the role of communication media, for which we do not have artifacts on the basis of which to substantiate the thesis that they also played a role as communication media. Such as clothing (marked with signs through embroidery or paint prints) or exposed parts of the body such as the face, hands, etc. (marked with stamps/pintaderas in the form of temporary tattoos). In the course of the study, assumptions in this direction are also presented using indirect evidence. This part of the study is not included in this report.

1. Signs on cylinder seals as a component of the database

Non-cylindrical seals (also known as pintaderas) are most often clay artifacts with an oval base (very rarely another shape) and a handle for gripping, with some artifacts having a hole in the handle that served to pass a string through so that it could be worn by the person who owned the respective seal.

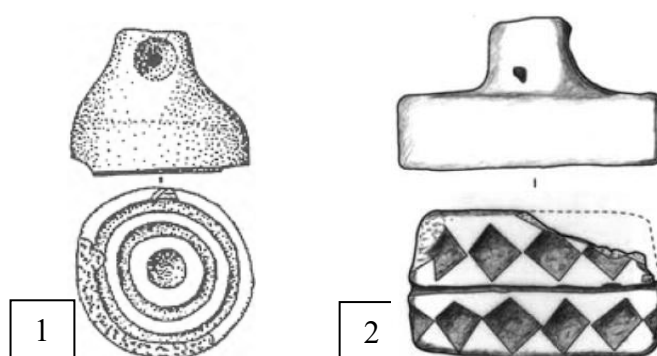


Fig. 1 Early Neolithic non-cylindrical seal from the area of the village of Kovachevo, Blagoevgrad region: (1) Ceramic seal with a round base Kovacevo-Podini, Penitcheva 1990, Early Neolith, Bulgaria, (2) Ceramic seal with a rectangular base, Lichardus-Itten, 2009, fig. 4: 4, p. 407

Typical artifacts of the type under consideration are shown in Fig. 1. The role of these seals in the ancient communication process was very important, which is why we tried to collect all available artifacts of this type. The main source of information is the catalogue by János

Mackay “Early Stamp Seals In South-East Europe”, Akademiai Kiadó, Budapest 1984, as well as the later supplement to this catalogue “Supplement to the Early Stamp Seals of South-East Europe”, Budapest, 2005 by the same author. To the samples published in this catalogue and the later supplement, we added artifacts from later archaeological discoveries and artifacts that were not included in the catalogue by János Mackay. The total number of non-cylindrical seals that were included in the database of the present study amounts to 369 pieces. The origin of this group of artifacts is from Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Greece, Romania, Albania, Serbia, Hungary, etc.

2. Signs on cylinder seals as a component of the database

The second component of the database includes the so-called cylinder seals (also called pintaders). As their name implies, they have a cylindrical shape, through which signs were applied by rolling. Not all artifacts of this type have an ideal cylindrical shape - some really approach an ideal cylindrical shape, while others have a profile more approaching an elliptical one, and still others resemble a prism.



Fig. 2 Ceramic cylinder seal from the Late Neolithic, village of Damyanitsa, Sandansko, (Перничева, 2007, p. 26, Fig. 5)

Fig. 2 presents an example of a cylinder seal from the area of the village of Damyanitsa, Blagoevgrad region from the late Neolithic period. The finds of cylinder seals are significantly fewer compared to the finds of non-cylinder seals. In the database of the present study, they amount to 36 pieces. The origin of the cylinder seals included in the database is associated with: Bulgaria (Blagoevgrad region – village of Kovachevo and village of Damyanitsa; Novozagorski region – village of Karanovo and Hlebozavoda; Sliven region – village of Bikovo; Albania; Greece; Romania, Croatia)

3. Marks on the bottoms of ceramic vessels as a component of the database

From the point of view of branding, the markings on the bottoms of clay vessels from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods are important and therefore artifacts of this type are included

as a component of the database. Similar signs (on the bottoms of vessels) have been observed since ancient times. Their purpose will be discussed in the following chapters, but here we will mention that the bulk of this type of markings were placed carelessly (hastily scratched) even before the firing of the ceramic vessels, while another part was placed more precisely and is obviously the case with the bottoms of ritual vessels. The majority of the markings are of the first type.

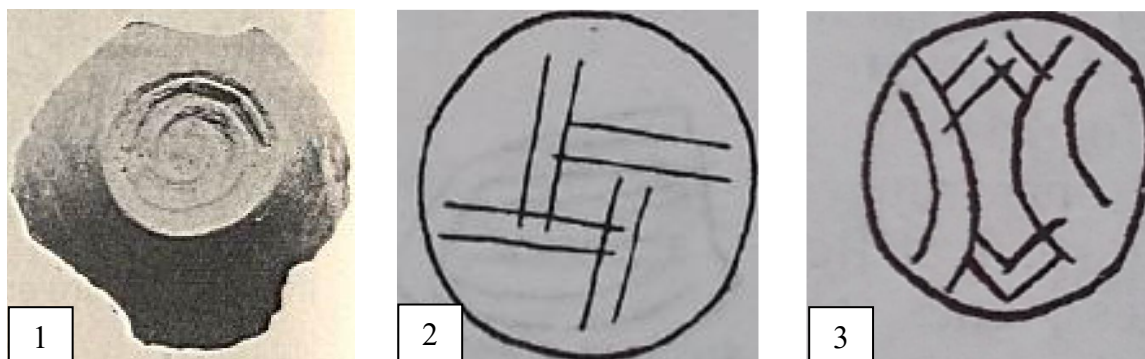


Fig. 3 Markings on the bottoms of ceramic vessels: (1) Spiral mark on the bottom of a clay vessel from the Late Neolithic, village of Salamanovo, Shumen region (Popov, 1915, p. 188, Obr. 165: A); (2) Mark on the bottom of a Chalcolithic vessel from the village of Brenitsa, Pleven region (Nikolov, B., 1986, p. 169, Fig. 7: 46); (3) Mark on the bottom of a Chalcolithic vessel from a vessel excavated near the village of Brenitsa, Pleven region (Nikolov, B., 1986, p. 169, Fig. 6: 25).

Fig. 3 shows three artifacts of the type “markings on the bottoms of ceramic vessels”. The origin of artifacts of this type is mainly from the Balkans and especially the territories of Bulgaria, Serbia, North Macedonia and Romania.

- 1) Azmashka Mogila, Stara Zagora Region, Bulgaria – Early Neolithic;
- 2) town Vrashac, Serbia – Chalcolithic
- 3) Parta Municipality, Romania – Chalcolithic
- 4) Tordos District, Romania – Chalcolithic
- 5) Anzabegovo village, North Macedonia – Chalcolithic
- 6) village Aradac, Serbia – Chalcolithic
- 7) village Ardak, Serbia – Chalcolithic
- 8) village Banitsa, Yugoslavia – Chalcolithic
- 9) village Brenitsa, Pleven region, Bulgaria – early Neolithic and early Chalcolithic;
- 10) village Vaksevo, Kyustendil region, Bulgaria – early Neolithic and late Chalcolithic;
- 11) Vinca village, Serbia – Chalcolithic
- 12) village Gradac, Serbia – Chalcolithic
- 13) village Gradeshnitsa, Vratsa region, Bulgaria – early Chalcolithic;
- 14) village Djela, Yugoslavia - Chalcolithic
- 15) village Divostin, Serbia - Chalcolithic
- 16) village Medvenjak, Serbia - Chalcolithic
- 17) village Orlovets, Veliko Tarnovo Region, Bulgaria - Early Neolithic;
- 18) village Salamanovo, Shumen Region, Bulgaria - Chalcolithic;
- 19) village Selevac, Serbia - Chalcolithic

20) village Slatino, Kyustendil region, Bulgaria - Early Chalcolithic.

The total number of artifacts of this type amounts to 381, which represents just over 45.79% of the total database.

4. Metope-type signs on large ceramic vessels (storage vessels)

The term "metope" (μετόπη) is of ancient Greek origin and means "forehead". It is of much later origin compared to the dating of the artifacts that we will examine in this chapter. It is used to denote the symbols discussed below on Chalcolithic pottery vessels due to the analogy of the shape and due to the lack of a term for these signs at the time when they were first discovered by archaeologists. The metope is a rectangular or square frame at the top of ancient Greek buildings (e.g. the Parthenon, temples, etc.), which represents the space between the so-called "triglyphs" (triple supporting pillars) at the top of the building (Webster's ninth new collegiate dictionary, 1983, p. 748).

Metopes in the context of Chalcolithic pottery vessels also represent a rectangular frame in which signs are inscribed. These signs are incised into the soft clay before the vessels are fired. After the vessels are fired, these signs become permanent.



Fig. 4 presents an artifact with a “metope” type designation. The origin of the artifacts is from the village of Brenitsa, Pleven region, the village of Gradeshnitsa, Vratsa region and the Cucuteni-Tripolie culture, Romania. The similarity of this designation with modern labels makes their analysis mandatory when studying brand genesis. The number of artifacts of this type is small – 8 pcs., which corresponds to a 0.96% relative share within the database.

5. Signs on ceramic models of ritual breads

Interesting artifacts from the perspective of ritual communication in antiquity (Neolithic and Chalcolithic) are ceramic models of ritual breads. These finds are not numerous, but they contain designations (signs) that are important in analyzing the ancient communication system and semiotic subsystem.



Fig. 5 Ceramic model of ritual bread from the Vinča culture, Banica district of Belgrade, Serbia, 5200-5000 BC (Gimbutas, 1991, p. 313, Fig. 9-11)

In our opinion, the reason for making miniature ceramic models of ritual breads during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods is related to the markings on them and, more precisely, to the need to accurately recreate the signs on the ritual breads (Fig. 5). There are a total of 5 such artifacts in the database.

6. Signs on residential and non-residential buildings

The thesis that the walls of residential and non-residential buildings were "decorated" is supported by some researchers (Makkay 1984, p. 101; Dominique Collon (Collon, 1997, pp. 11-12). Recently, the idea has become established that it is not just about decoration, but about designating families, clans, etc. by special signs. In other words, it is about identifying the families/clans living in a particular building. Temples were also marked with signs, which is clearly visible from the reduced ceramic models of Neolithic and Chalcolithic temples (Fig. 6b).



Fig. 6a Reconstruction of Chalcolithic houses from the Tripolie-Cucuteni culture (source: <https://bibliotekar.ru/3-1-76-eneolit/44.htm>)



Fig. 6b Model of a temple or dwelling with a gable roof and ornaments of human figures and incised geometric motifs, Chalcolithic, village of Gradeshnitsa, Vratsa region (Nikolov, 1974, 65);

The database of the present study contains 10 artifacts of this type, 5 of which are residential buildings (Fig. 6a), and another 5 - temples/sanctuaries (Fig. 6b).

The origin of the artifacts from this group is associated with the region of Yambol, Stara Zagora, Vratsa and the Cucuteni-Tripolie culture (encompassing parts of Romania-Ukraine-Moldova).

7. Insignia on badges/plaques

Finally, an interesting communication model is the so-called plaques or badges, which are ceramic and contain symbolic designations. These are small tiles with an area of a few square centimeters, which were adapted (with holes) for sewing to clothing (Fig. 7). They were probably used to identify some rank or position in society.



Fig. 7 Ceramic badges for sewing on clothing, late Chalcolithic, Merdzhumekya site, Drama village, Yambol region, Regional History Museum – Yambol, photos - the author

Ceramic badges/plaques appear in a limited area – Yambol. They are characteristic of the late Chalcolithic (Karanovo 6 culture). However, they are an interesting communication medium and should not be ignored. During the research, data on 12 artifacts of this type were found, all of which are included in the database.

Conclusion

It is important to point out that the signs on the seals coincide with those found on other ceramic vessels, buildings, temples, etc. So, one can speak of more than sporadic markings denoting individuals or ownership. In fact, we can postulate the existence of a **broad communication system** (covering most, if not all ancient communities on the Balkans) during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods and a **semiotic subsystem** (a defined set of signs).

Even the preliminary (pilot) analysis of the sign-bearing artifacts (which may be called communication vehicles) suggests that a coherent communication system with a structured set of symbols existed in the Balkans and Europe during the Neolithic Era and later during the Chalcolithic Era. The logical next step following comparative analysis of the signs on various communication media (such as seals and ornamented ceramics) is to substantiate the hypothesis of an ancient communication system with a semiotic subsystem.

Such substantiation is crucial, because if a systematic set of signs and carriers indeed existed, they must be studied in depth from the perspective of **brand genesis**. This research is huge and goes out of the scope of the present paper. That's why it will be continued in the future.

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- <https://bibliotekar.ru/3-1-76-eneolit/44.htm>)

ДИГИТАЛИЗАЦИЯТА КАТО ФАКТОР ЗА УСТОЙЧИВ МАРКЕТИНГ: РОЛЯТА НА КРІ ПОКАЗАТЕЛИТЕ В ИЗМЕРВАНЕТО НА ЕФЕКТИВНОСТТА

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Резюме: Настоящият доклад е с целева насоченост към влиянието на процесите на дигитализация върху развитието на устойчивите маркетинг практики и подчертава значението на ключовите показатели за изпълнение при оценка на тяхната ефективност. В настоящата и променяща се дигитална среда, компаниите са изправени пред необходимостта да интегрират устойчиви принципи в своите маркетингови стратегии, като същевременно осигуряват измеримост и прозрачност на резултатите. Освен ролята на дигитализацията са открити различните KPI's метрики при проследяването на екологични, социални и икономически аспекти на маркетинговите дейности.

Представено е обобщаващото значение на дигиталната трансформация като катализатор за устойчив растеж и дългосрочна конкурентноспособност на организациите.

Ключови думи: дигитализация; устойчив маркетинг; KPI показатели; дигитална трансформация; ефективност; данни; устойчиво развитие

JEL: M31

“DIGITALIZATION AS A FACTOR FOR SUSTAINABLE MARKETING: THE ROLE OF KPI INDICATORS IN MEASURING EFFECTIVENESS”

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Abstract: *This report focuses on the impact of digitalization processes on the development of sustainable marketing practices and emphasizes the importance of key performance indicators in assessing their effectiveness. In the current and changing digital environment, companies are faced with the need to integrate sustainable principles into their marketing strategies, while ensuring measurability and transparency of results. In addition to the role of digitalization, the various KPI's metrics in tracking environmental, social and economic aspects of marketing activities are highlighted.*

The overall importance of digital transformation as a catalyst for sustainable growth and long-term competitiveness of organizations is presented.

Keywords: digitalization; sustainable market

JEL: M31

Дигитализация и устойчиво потребителско поведение

Ускореното навлизане на дигитализацията успява с бързи темпове да измести фокуса на търговията на дребно не само в скоростта с която се придвижват продуктите и измененията в бизнес логистиката, но и се променя адекватното събиране на данни, които превръщат търговския бизнес в бизнес на бъдещето. Дигиталните промени в търговията на дребно вече не са пожелателни, а задължителни, особено що се касае до иновации в цялостното осъществяване на търговския бизнес. Крайната цел е все пак да се стимулира възвръщаемостта на инвестициите, които създават нови услуги за клиентите, нови продукти за тях или нови потребителски преживявания, които в още по-бързо и адекватно да задоволяват техните нужди, желания и потребности. Тези промени всъщност са катализатор за цялостното моделиране на потребителското поведение в търговията на дребно, под въздействието на дигитализацията.

Целта на доклада е да се представи ролята на дигитализацията като фактор за устойчив маркетинг и ролята на КРІ показателите в измерването на ефективността.

От своя страна съвременните генерации потребители осъществяват своите действия като се обучават и образоват взаимно за функционалността на различните продукти, превъзходството на марките, качеството на услугите, измеренията на спецификата на марката и други въпроси, свързани с нея. Следователно социалните медии могат да

бъдат стратегически използвани като катализатор за изграждане или модифициране на потребителските нагласи и чувствителност към конкретна марка, което е от съществено значение за управлението на марката в тази дигитализирана среда.

Това е и причината маркетинг специалистите и търговците на дребно да имат ясна представа за функцията и приноса на социалните медии при обслужването на потребителите и цялостното тяхно потребителско поведение.

Изследователи и маркетинг мениджъри полагат усилия да изследват различните измерения на връзката между социалните медии и маркетинга.

Дигиталните технологии оказват много голямо влияние върху потребителите, като видоизменят и модифицират както начинът на избор на покупка, така и всички останали етапи през които преминава потребителското поведение. Успоредно с това се променят и много от факторите, които оказват влияние върху това поведение, като от съществено значение е именно и гореспоменатото влияние на дигиталната трансформация.

Тази цялостна промяна кореспондира и с наличието на устойчивост, към което се стремят компаниите дори и при онлайн пазаруването.

Освен от устойчиви продукти, онлайн потребителите са много рационални в дигиталната ера и са ориентирани и към продукти, които им носят максимална ползност. Това обстоятелство предопределя и подобряването на достъпността до различни уебсайтове, което по своята същност води и до оптимизиране както по отношение на дизайн, функционалност, така и по отношение на бързина на сърфиране.

Логически, това ще доведе до насърчаване на устойчиво поведение при пазаруване онлайн.

Ако се концентрираме върху основната цел на статията, а именно реалната възможност за постигане на устойчивост при онлайн пазаруването, следва да отбележим, че тази устойчивост може да се постигне през три измерения, които са и в основата на самата концепция за устойчивост: екологичната страна на онлайн търговията, икономическата страна и социалната страна. (Hossain, A.,2002)

Влиянието на различните измерения трябва да се разглежда внимателно, тъй като са налице различни последици, които влияят върху развитието на онлайн търговията, а оттам и върху различните измерения на устойчивостта.

Ако се ориентираме да анализираме икономическото измерение на устойчивостта в онлайн търговията, можем да отчетем:

- оперативни и иновационни резултати,

- по-добри начини за отличавање от конкурентните компании, подобрения в активите,
- по-голяма гъвкавост по отношение на начините, чрез които се обслужват потребителите. (Hossain, A.,2002)

Особено важно, за да се създаде устойчивост при онлайн пазаруването е да се подчертае в уебсайтовете, че закупените продукти отговарят на всички изисквания за опазване на околната среда или поне в представянето на продукта ясно да проличава това. Същевременно е от значение и да се разбере с какво уебсайта е по-различен от физическия магазин на компанията. Ефективността на информационното съдържание и уеб забавленията също имат положителни и значими резултати и върху електронното удовлетворение.

Търговците на дребно в онлайн среда трябва да изградят същото присъствие, вградено в уебсайтовете, както в случая с физическите магазини, за да спечелят вниманието и желанието да пазаруват на клиентите.

Купувачите в среда за онлайн пазаруване се нуждаят от подходяща и лесна за намиране информация, в противен случай те могат да се преместят при конкурент или дори да се откажат от онлайн пазаруването. В резултат на този факт, онлайн уебсайтовете на търговците на дребно трябва да бъдат оборудвани с подходяща и лесно достъпна информация . (Vijay, T.S.; Prashar, S.; Sahay, V. 2019)

Съвсем ясно и подчертано става, че постигането на устойчивост съвсем не е лесно, особено в онлайн среда. Тази устойчивост се осигурява не само когато потребителите потърсят екологично чисти продукти или такива, които ще осигурят устойчивост като цяло. Голямо е предизвикателството пред повечето мениджъри, защото проблематиката свързана с постигането на устойчивост все повече ще вълнува не само потребителите, но и компаниите, контрагентите и потребителите. В крайна сметка целта е и ще бъде постигане на електронна лоялност, увеличаване на ефективността на онлайн покупките, постигане на сигурна и стабилна устойчивост. (Димова, Н., 2021)

Ускорените промени в бизнеса и динамичното потребителско поведение поставят пред редица предизвикателства внедряването на дигиталните технологии в ритейл сектора и оттам възможността да се удовлетворяват променящите се вкусове и предпочитания на потребителите.

За да се реализира действително интегриране на технологии в търговията на дребно следва да се спазват редица изисквания, както по отношение на правилния избор на технология, така и по отношение на начинът и времето за внедряването им.

На първо място трябва да се осъзнае как електронните и виртуални магазини, AI, AR, VR, MR, XR, променят начинът на мислене на хората. Особено важно мениджърско решение е какво конкурентно предимство се цели да се постигне именно чрез инвестицията в нови дигитални технологии, които реално се опитват да подпомогнат търговците на дребно да отговорят на все по-информирания и взискателен потребител. За да се полечи този резултат, търговците на дребно трябва да засилят своето присъствие в дигитална среда, за да задоволят потребностите не само на по-възрастното поколение, но и на по-модерните поколения, защото те вече естествено използват новите бизнес модели на електронната, мобилната и социалната търговия.

За да интегрират успешно своите маркетингови стратегии, търговците на дребно трябва да се съобразяват със съвременните тенденции и промени в потребителското поведение, които могат да се ситематизират по следния начин:

- Съвременните поколения се стремят към скромен и здравословен начин на живот (clean living). Специфичните характеристики и ключови ориентири на поведението на този живот са свързани с минималистичност, умереност, подреденост, цялостност и хармония. Това е стилът, който е характерен аз 20 и 30 годишните (поколенията Y и Z), които са наричани дигитални поколения.
- Стремeжът към достъп, а не към собственост. Все повече потребители отхвърлят необходимостта от притежаването на материални ценности и вещи, в замяна на повечето свобода в начина на живот и по-малко багаж в ежедневието си. Тази тенденция се подхранва от наличието на урбанизация и възникването на т.нар. фрициклиране (freecycling). Под този процес стои практиката да се раздават, да се подаряват стоки, което са запазени и полезни, но не са желани. Главната цел е тези стоки да не се изхвърлят на сметищата, а да се използват по предназначение. В мопощ на този процес са именно социалните мрежи, които улесняват различните форми на взаимодействие и комуникация между потребителите. (Peteva, V., 2011) Тези две тенденции изключително много подпомагат действителното осъществяване на устойчиво потребителско поведение.

- Използването на изкуствен интелект се осъществява основно чрез използването на чатботове при обслужването на клиентите.

- Засилено използване на визуалните елементи в маркетинга на съдържанието. Маркетингът чрез съдържание (Content Marketing) се реализира чрез добре обмислена стратегия за създаване на атрактивно съдържание посредством текст, снимки, видео и да се привлече вниманието на потенциалните потребители като се предизвика предприемането от тях на действия, водещи към осъществяване на покупка.

- Този вид маркетинг е още едно доказателство за значението на информацията и дигитализацията за осъществяването на устойчивото потребителско поведение.

Технологиите за виртуална реалност (VR) и добавена реалност (AR) също повишават популярността си в дигиталния маркетинг и оказват влияние върху избора на потребителите (Scholz, Duffy, 2018).

- Изключително важно място заема използването на социалните мрежи за позитивно представяне на търговската марка и подпомагане на решението а осъществяване на покупка. Различните профили на търговските компании в социалните мрежи (Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube и др.) вече не са само възможност за запознаване на публиката с фирмената дейност, нейното популяризиране или директно взаимодействие с клиентската група.

- Все по-засилено използване на инфлуенсър маркетинга. Реализирането на този вид маркетинг се осъществява чрез използването на онлайн популярни лица, като целта им е да споменят или препоръчат конкретни продукти пред многобройните си последователи в мрежата. Обикновено те са блогъри/влогъри и други. Освен известни личности – музиканти, актьори, модели, спортисти, които изискват високо заплащане за рекламирането на продукти, инфлуенсърите могат да бъдат и обикновени хора, споделящи своето ежедневие и представящи стоки или услуги дори само срещу безплатното им получаване от търговеца.

- Разрастване на Интернет на нещата и анализ на големи бази данни. Интернет на нещата (IoT – Internet of Things) обозначава свързаността на продукти, сензори и обекти с глобалната мрежа, чрез която те генерират и обменят данни при минимална човешка намеса.

В обобщение на изследването по отношение на дигитализацията и постигане на устойчиво потребителско поведение би могло да се представят следните аспекти, а именно:

- С помощта на мобилните приложения се увеличава ангажираността и лоялността на потребителите не само към компанията, но и към бранда. Налице е възможност за повторни покупки и промяна на поръчката, а тази тенденция е тясно обвързана с реализирането на устойчиво потребителско поведение.
- Притежаването на мобилни приложения води до по-ускорена търговия на дребно.
- Използваните мобилни приложения надхвърлят покупките в търговията на дребно. Съвременните технологии и мобилните приложения позволяват по - бързо и по всяко време пазаруване. Самите мобилни приложения се използват от много компании като програми за лоялност, които при устойчивото потребление са от особено важно значение.
- Мобилните приложения дават възможност на потребителите да видят в реално време всички промоции и реклами на компаниите и успоредно с това им помагат да вземат информирани решения за покупки. Този процес при осъществяването на устойчиво потребление е важен, защото по-високата цена и качество, както и добрата информираност по отношение на истинността на информацията относно продуктите, карат потребителите преди да потребят устойчиво да сравняват още по-задълбочено различните алтернативни варианти за покупка.
- Чрез мобилните приложения може да се плаща и онлайн. Мобилните плащания осигуряват и безпроблемно изживяване на процеса на покупката онлайн от страна на потребителите, които пазаруват с помощта на смартфоните си.

Дигитализацията играе съществена роля върху осъществяването на устойчивото потребителско поведение, не само чрез различните канали за получаване на информация, но и чрез възможността да се сравняват различните алтернативи при закупуването на различни бързооборотни продукти.

Мястото на устойчивият маркетинг в икономиката

В своята същност устойчивият маркетинг се възползва от нарастващата екологична осведоменост на потребителите. Много маркетингови стратегии, често прикрити като

грийнуошинг, обаче дават приоритет на растежа пред целите за достатъчност. (Jones, P., Clarke-Hill, C., Comfort, D. & Hillier, D., 2007). Устойчивият маркетинг е тясно свързан с екологичното поведение, което се формира от вътрешни фактори (като нагласи, намерения и ценности) и външни фактори (като ценообразуване и инфраструктура). — (Islam, Q., & Ali Khan, S.M.F., 2024).

Ранните подходи са експериментирали с маркетингови практики, ориентирани към достатъчност, преосмисляйки бизнес моделите и насърчавайки трансформативни инициативи.

Приложението на устойчивостта все повече се разпознава като жизнеспособна маркетингова стратегия, която може да повлияе на поведението на потребителите. Чрез приемане на устойчиви практики, компаниите могат да се позиционират позитивно в съзнанието на потребителите, често като „герои“, допринасящи за опазването на околната среда. В този смисъл концепцията за устойчивост става силно пазарно ориентирана, водена до голяма степен от маркетингови усилия, които оформят или отговарят на потребителските възприятия и изисквания.

Този тип маркетинг признава основната роля на клиентите като вземащи решения в посока към устойчивост чрез средства като намаляване на въглеродните емисии, рециклиране на нарастващи количества отпадъци, подкрепа на инициативи за справедлива търговия и възприемане на по-здравословен начин на живот.

Атрактивната и отговаряща на изискванията за устойчивост опаковка резонира с възприятието за разбирането на компанията и марката. Ето защо устойчивостта трябва да бъде комуникирана с потребителите, тъй като те очакват компаниите да бъдат чувствителни към екологичните проблеми и да поемат социална отговорност.

Все по-често потребителите купуват продукти от компании, които демонстрират силна устойчивост, независимо от цената. По-дългото задържаното удовлетворение на клиента е от голямо значение, особено защото перспективата се променя от продажба на продукти към продажба на ползи. Именно непрекъснатото предоставяне на полза, като например мобилност или чистота поддържа важната комуникация с потребителите.

Действителното мнение на потребителите става важно и значимо във фазата след покупката. Оплакванията, предложенията за подобрение или изразеното удовлетворение създават отправни точки за по-нататъшна оптимизация, профилиране и управление на взаимоотношенията.

Ако трябва да бъдем обективни, устойчивият маркетинг е все още сравнително нов и все още не се прилага навсякъде, все още няма ключови показатели за ефективност (KPI), които могат да се използват за измерване на устойчивостта в тази област. Важно е да се използват ключови показатели за ефективност (KPI), защото те могат да разкрият много възможности за компаниите.

Компаниите използват устойчив маркетинг и виждат в него по-висок процент на конверсия, което по своята същност отчита връзката между посетителите на уебсайт и извършените покупки или взаимодействия. По правилосе отчита период от 24 часа или максимум една седмица от първия контакт.

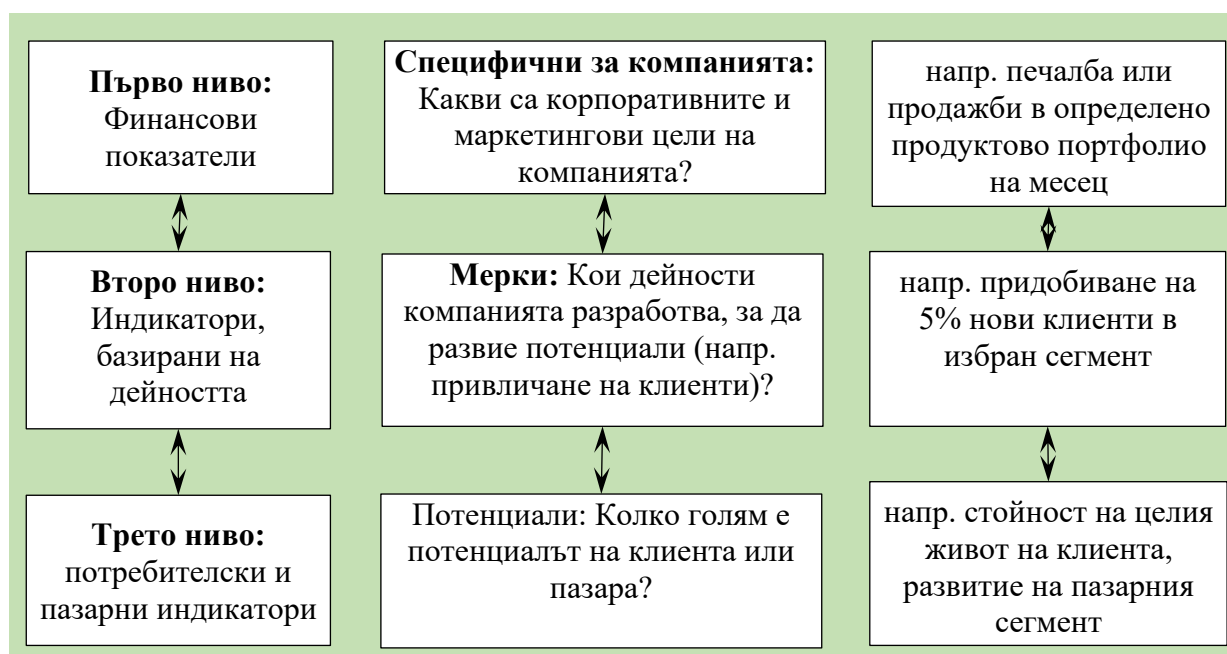
Като цяло става въпрос за фокусиране върху дългосрочната възвръщаемост на инвестициите (ROI – Return of Investments) на потребител, който обича марката и нейните продукти, а не върху краткосрочната възвръщаемост на инвестициите от бърза продажба. Самият показател ROI описва колко приходи са генерирани спрямо бюджета, използван за конкретно действие.

За компаниите най-голямото предизвикателство при изчисляването на ROI е правилното разпределение на инвестиционните разходи и печалбите едни към други. Ако разпределението е неточно или неправилно, съществува риск от погрешни заключения относно рентабилността на дадена кампания или дигитален маркетингов канал.

Друг важен KPI е цената на придобиване (CPA). Това са всички разходи, направени във връзка с взаимодействието с клиентите и с популяризирането и осигуряването на текуща поддръжка за мобилното предложение, които са включени в разходите за придобиване. Те включват разходи като разходи за реклама в маркетингови кампании в магазини за приложения по други канали и поддръжка в социалните медии. Те могат да се изчислят отделно въз основа на процента на конверсия за всеки носител. Цената на потенциален клиент (CPL) е индикатор за успех на рекламата, предназначен да постави различни рекламни кампании на сравнима основа. Той оценява успеха на маркетинговите кампании не въз основа на постигнатите продажби, а въз основа на броя на заинтересованите страни, които получават по-подробна информация за даден продукт. Стойността на жизнения цикъл на клиента (CLV) представлява средната стойност, която клиентът има за дадена компания през целия си „жизнен цикъл на клиента“ и се очаква да има и в бъдеще.

Ако задълбочим значението на устойчивият маркетинг през призмата на икономиката, показателите могат да бъдат оценени на три нива (вижте Фигура 2). На първо ниво това

са формални икономически показатели, използвани за определяне на крайните финансови резултати на компанията. Те включват показатели за печалба, продажби или сигурност, като например коефициента на ликвидност. На второ ниво показателите, свързани с дейността, са релевантни и могат да се използват за оценка на специфични основни задачи, изпълнявани от компанията. Класическите основни задачи са привличане на клиенти, мерки за лоялност на клиентите или иновации в услугите и поддръжка. Начинът, по който се справят с тези основни задачи, отразява част от стратегията в устойчивия маркетинг. Ако задачите се изпълняват успешно, това оказва влияние върху финансовите резултати (напр. нарастващи продажби чрез нови клиенти). Третото ниво обхваща показателите за клиенти и пазар за маркетинг за устойчивост. Тези показатели отчитат потенциала, който компанията има на пазара или с клиентите. Един пример е стойността на жизнения цикъл на клиента. Тази стойност отразява маржа на приноса, който клиентът ще реализира през целия си живот. Пазарните показатели се отнасят предимно до развитието или размера на пазарен сегмент.



Фигура 1: Ключови показатели, ориентирани към устойчивия маркетинг

Първо ниво: Финансови показатели

Специфични за компанията: Какви са корпоративните и маркетингови цели на компанията?

напр. печалба или продажби в определено продуктово портфолио на месец

Второ ниво: Показатели, базирани на дейност

Мерки: Кои дейности разработва компанията, за да развие потенциали (напр. придобиване на клиенти)?

напр. придобиване на 5% нови клиенти в избран сегмент

Трето ниво: Показатели за клиенти и пазар

Потенциали: Колко големи са потенциалите на клиентите или пазара?

напр. стойност на жизнения цикъл на клиента, развитие на пазарния сегмент

Обединено кралство)

Пример за екологичен KPI е процентът на рециклираните материали. Това се измерва чрез използваните рециклирани опаковки. Друг KPI е намаляването на отпадъците, което се измерва с процента на генерираните отпадъци на хиляда продуктови единици. (Hristov, I. & Chirico, A., 2019).

KPI's, които се използват от социална гледна точка са нетен рейтинг на промоутърите (NPS), процент на взаимодействие и повтарящи се клиенти. NPS е ключов индикатор, който косвено определя количествено удовлетвореността на клиентите и директно определя количествено готовността за препоръчване на продукт или услуга на други. Конкурентното предимство на NPS е неговата простота, докато недостатък е фактът, че не предоставя никакви обосновани квалифицирани твърдения за това защо някой е недоволен или доволен от даден продукт, услуга или компания. NPS определено е полезен за бързо и лесно проучване на удовлетвореността.

Разликата между относителните пропорции на промоутърите и критиците дава нетния резултат на промоутърите, който се дава като процент. С помощта на тази стойност вече могат да се сравняват други продукти или услуги помежду си.

Друг ключов показател за ефективност (KPI), който е част от социалния аспект, е степента на взаимодействие. Той се използва за определяне на процента взаимодействия на импресия на рекламния блок. Това работи за реклами, с които може да се взаимодейства чрез харесвания, коментари или споделяния, например.

Повторните покупки са от съществено значение или т.нар. връщащи се потребители. Тази концепция е ключовият индикатор за връщащи се посетители. Социалните KPI включват също степента на интеграция, степента на удовлетвореност на заинтересованите страни, степента на удовлетвореност на служителите и степента на удовлетвореност на клиентите. Всички, освен степента на удовлетвореност на клиентите, могат да бъдат измерени с помощта на въпросник. Степента на удовлетвореност на клиентите може да бъде измерена с анализ на разходите. . (Hristov, I. & Chirico, A., 2019).

Източникът на някои KPI (най-вече тези от уебсайтове) е Google Analytics, но CRM система и въпросници също могат да служат като добри източници. (United Nations, (2021). KPI имат плюсове и минуси и по отношение на устойчивостта е важно да се погледне в дългосрочен план и да се включат трите перспективи (социална, екологична и икономическа). Използването на качествени показатели, като цена на лийд или цена на придобиване, увеличава стойността на клиента през целия му живот. Това помага да се вслушваме в клиентите и да се фокусираме върху създаването на дългосрочни взаимоотношения. Този вид ключови показатели за ефективност (KPI) е по-добър от показатели като обхват или цена на хиляда показвания. (Roberts, M., 2018)

При приложението на устойчивият маркетинг е важно да се използват повече KPI, ориентирани към клиента, и по-малко финансови показатели. Много компании вече са разпознали и са внедрили това. KPI, ориентирани към клиента, могат да се използват за измерване на това колко добре една компания преследва определените си цели, ориентирани към клиента. Примери за такива KPI са разпознаваемостта на марката, ангажираността на уебсайта и процентът на кликване (CTR).

CTR е броят на кликванията, генерирани на импресия на банерна реклама. Стратегическите KPI са особено подходящи за наблюдение и следене на дългосрочните цели, което е от голямо значение за устойчивостта. Като цяло може да се каже, че измерването и оценката на възможните мерки в областта на управлението на устойчивостта са задължителни. Постигнатият успех може да бъде оценен само чрез оценка на съответните мерки.

Като обобщение, както устойчивостта на отделните продукти, включително техните компоненти, така и устойчивата ориентация на целия процес на създаване на добавена стойност са от значение за измерването и оценката на устойчивостта.

Когато внедрява устойчив маркетинг, компанията трябва да е наясно със своята визия и мисия по отношение на трите измерения (екологично, икономическо и социално).

Стратегическата ориентация обикновено се основава на стандартите за устойчивост на международните компании и произтичащите от тях цели и постижения.

В заключение, дигитализацията представлява фундаментален фактор за развитието на устойчивия маркетинг, като променя начина, по който организациите планират, реализират и оценяват своите маркетингови стратегии. Чрез внедряването на дигитални технологии се осигурява по-висока степен на прозрачност, проследимост и ефективност на процесите, което създава предпоставки за постигане на дългосрочни стратегически

цели. В този контекст **ключовите показатели за ефективност (KPI)** се явяват незаменим инструмент за измерване и анализ на резултатите, като подпомагат обективното вземане на решения и оптимизацията на ресурсите.

Осъзнаването на значението на KPI показателите в дигиталната среда позволява на организациите да изграждат устойчиви маркетингови практики, основани на данни, иновации и отговорно управление. По този начин дигитализацията не само стимулира ефективността на маркетинговите дейности, но и допринася за постигането на баланс между икономическите, социалните и екологичните измерения на устойчивото развитие. Следователно, интеграцията между дигитализацията и устойчивия маркетинг представлява стратегическа необходимост за всяка организация, стремяща се към конкурентоспособност и дългосрочна стойност в съвременната бизнес среда.

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SOCIAL MARKETING IN GREEN PRODUCTS AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR TOWARDS THEM

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Abstract: *This study aims to investigate consumer behavior towards green products and the factors that influence their purchase decisions. In particular, the study examines how aware consumers are of the benefits of green products and whether this awareness affects their purchasing preferences and behaviors. Using a statistical approach, the study analyzes data collected from a sample of consumers to highlight the main trends and motivations that lead them to choose or reject green products.*

The results of the study show that a large part of consumers are aware of the benefits of green products and are inclined to choose them to contribute to the protection of the environment. Furthermore, factors such as product quality and self-satisfaction play an important role in purchasing decisions. Consumers demand that green products meet high quality standards and provide tangible benefits for them. However, the study also reveals some challenges that need to be overcome to further encourage the purchase of green products. The higher cost of these products and the lack of clear and reliable information about their benefits are the main obstacles that consumers face. To address these challenges, manufacturers and marketers must offer high-quality products at competitive prices and provide accurate and reliable information to consumers.

In conclusion, this study shows that environmental awareness is increasing and that consumers are willing to choose green products to protect the environment. However, to further encourage this behavior, it is important to improve the quality of green products, reduce costs and increase information and education about their benefits. This will help create a more sustainable and environmentally responsible market, where green products occupy an important place in consumer behavior.

Keywords: Green products, consumer behavior, green marketing, digital era.

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JEL: M31, D12, D91, Q56

1. Introduction

Consumer behavior towards green products is a complex and multidimensional topic, influenced by a variety of psychological, sociological, and cultural factors. Consumers are increasingly becoming aware of the environmental impact of their choices and are striving to make decisions that are more favorable to the planet. This includes preferring products that are recyclable, biodegradable, made from sustainable materials, and that have a low carbon footprint. However, despite increased awareness and desire to make greener choices, many consumers still face significant barriers in this process.

One of the main issues affecting consumer behavior towards green products is the perception of high prices. Many consumers perceive purchasing green products as a costly activity. This perception may be related to the fact that the production and certification of green products often require higher costs, which are then reflected in the selling price. Furthermore, consumers may not be willing to pay a premium price for green products if they are not convinced of their environmental benefits and the improvement they offer compared to traditional alternatives.

Another important issue is the lack of clear and reliable information about green products. Consumers often do not have access to detailed and accurate information that tells them how green products help protect the environment. This lack of information can lead to doubts and hesitation to make sustainable choices. In some cases, companies may engage in “greenwashing,” making vague or false claims about the environmental benefits of their products, making consumers even more skeptical and uncertain in their purchasing decisions.

Literature review

Green marketing

Green marketing is a practice in which products or services are promoted based on the environmental benefits they provide. These products or services may themselves be environmentally friendly or may be produced in a manner that respects the environment.

Companies that apply green marketing aim to highlight their environmental commitment through green advertising, which focuses on promoting products that have one or more of the following characteristics:

- They are produced sustainably.
- They are produced using recyclable materials.
- They do not contain toxic substances.
- They are produced from renewable materials.
- There is no excessive use of packaging.
- Designed to be repairable and reusable (Roca. C, 2023).

Environmental advertising is an important aspect of green marketing that aims to encourage green purchases. Most consumers believe that environmental advertising increases their knowledge of green products and guides them to make informed purchasing decisions.(Abbasi. HU M & Qureshi. Sh. Q & Rizvan. M & Ahmed. A & Mehmood. F & Hashmi. F & Riaz. B & Nawaz. A, 2013).

Green marketing, also known as environmental marketing or eco-marketing, involves the promotion of products, services, or brands that are environmentally friendly or have a positive impact on the environment. This type of marketing uses practices that sustainable, eco-friendly materials, renewable energy sources and socially responsible production processes in marketing strategies.

The goal of green marketing is to attract environmentally conscious consumers and meet their needs for environmentally friendly products or services. This may include highlighting the product's eco-friendly features, demonstrating the company's commitment to sustainability, or educating consumers about the environmental benefits of choosing a particular product.

Green marketing emphasizes the environmental and social responsibility of businesses, while encouraging consumer interest in sustainability and environmental initiatives, such as renewable waste management or sustainable agricultural practices, to increase sales and create a positive brand image (Sloovi, 2024).

Greenwashing

Greenwashing is the act of making false or misleading claims about the environmental benefits of a product or practice. It can be a way for companies to continue or expand their polluting and related harmful behaviors, all while gaming the system or taking advantage of well-intentioned, sustainable-minded consumers. The term was actually coined in 1986 in an essay by environmentalist and then-student Jay Westerveld (Lindwall. C, 2023).

Greenwashing is a marketing manipulation practice used by businesses or organizations to make false or misleading claims about the environmental benefits of their products, services, or practices. This involves presenting a false image of or exaggerated environmental responsibility to create a greener and more sustainable image than can be justified by the business's actual actions or impact.

Greenwashing aims to deceive consumers into believing that a company is more environmentally friendly than it actually is, often to capitalize on the growing demand for environmentally friendly products and gain a competitive advantage. This practice can downplay real sustainability efforts and manipulate consumers into making the wrong product choices (Sloovi, 2024).

Consumer behavior

Consumer behavior includes the actions and decisions that individuals or households take when selecting, purchasing, using, and disposing of a product or service. This process is influenced by many psychological, sociological, and cultural factors.

This is a multi-stage process that includes identifying problems, gathering information, exploring options, making a purchase decision, and evaluating the post-purchase experience. During these stages, consumers may be influenced by factors such as: personal views and values, social norms, marketing campaigns, product features, and environmental conditions (Bhat. A, 2024).

Green products

A green product is a product designed to reduce its impact on the environment throughout its life cycle, using resources efficiently and minimizing waste. These products often contain non-toxic ingredients and are produced using environmentally friendly procedures, being

certified by recognized organizations. After psAfter their use, they continue to be beneficial to the environment (Sathyapriya. P & Sekar. P, 2020).

Results

Question:Do you know what green products and green marketing are?

59 people, or 84.3%, answered YES and another 11 people, or 15.7, answered NO.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for consumer awareness of green products and green marketing.

Do you know what green products and green marketing are?

		Frequency	percent	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Value	yes	59	84.3	84.3	84.3
	NO	11	15.7	15.7	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Question:Have you purchased any green products recently?

46 people, or 65.7% of them responded with the "YES" option and another 24 people, or 34.3% responded with the "NO" option.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for recent purchase of green products.

Have you purchased any green products recently?

		Frequency	percent	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Value	yes	46	65.7	65.7	65.7
	NO	24	34.3	34.3	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Question:How often do you buy green products?

46 piecessrecipients, or 65.7% of them responded with "sometimes"; 23 of them, or 32.9% responded with "often" and only 1 person, or 1.4% responded with "never".

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for the frequency of purchasing green products.

How often do you buy green products?

	Frequency	percent	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Value ever	46	65.7	65.7	65.7
FREQUENTLY	23	32.9	32.9	98.6
Never	1	1.4	1.4	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Question: If you have purchased green products recently, what category do they fall into?

43 participants, or 61.4%, say they have bought food; 18 recipients, or 25.7%, stated that they purchased pastrami products; 7 people, or 10%, purchased cosmetic products; 1 person, or 1.4%, purchased clothing and 1 other person, or 1.4%, did not purchase anything at all.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for the recently purchased green product category.

If you have purchased green products recently, what category do they fall into?

	Frequency	percent	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Value Food	43	61.4	61.4	61.4
Cleaning products	18	25.7	25.7	87.1
Cosmetic products	7	10.0	10.0	97.1
Other	1	1.4	1.4	98.6
5	1	1.4	1.4	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Question: Factors influencing the purchase of green products?

38 people, or 54.3%, say they buy green products because they protect the environment; 16 people, or 22.9%, chose alternative 2. yes, which is the increase in the value of the product, and the remaining 16 people, or 22.9% chose the last alternative, complacency.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics for factors influencing the purchase of green products.

Factors influencing the purchase of green products

		Frequency	percent	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Value	Protect the environment	38	54.3	54.3	54.3
	Increase in product value	16	22.9	22.9	77.1
	Self-satisfaction	16	22.9	22.9	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Question: What is the reason that companies are hesitant towards green products?

45 piecesstake, or 64.3% chose the first alternative "large investment"; 24, or 34.3%, chose the alternative "lack of government initiative" and 1 person, or 1.4% chose "lack of information".

Table 6: Descriptive statistics on the reasons why companies show hesitation towards green products.

What is the reason that companies are hesitant towards green products?

		Frequency	percent	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Value	Big investment	45	64.3	64.3	64.3
	Lack of government initiative	24	34.3	34.3	98.6
	Other	1	1.4	1.4	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Question: Which of the following internal factors influences you in purchasing green products?

18 people or 25.7% of them stated that motivation influences the purchase of green products and another 52 people, or 74.3%, chose the "personal values" alternative.

Table 7: Descriptive statistics for internal factors influencing the purchase of green products.

Which of the following internal factors influences you in purchasing green products?

	Frequency	percent	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Value motivation	18	25.7	25.7	25.7
Personal value	52	74.3	74.3	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Question:*Which of the following external factors influences you in purchasing green products?*

16 people, or 22.9%, are stated that packaging influences the purchase of green products; 50 people, or 71.4% stated that information influences the purchase of products and 4 people, or 5.7% stated that society influences the decision to purchase green products.

Table 8: Descriptive statistics for external factors influencing the purchase of green products.

Which of the following external factors influences you in purchasing green products?

	Frequency	percent	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Value PACKING	16	22.9	22.9	22.9
information	50	71.4	71.4	94.3
Friends	4	5.7	5.7	100.0
Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Question: Are you willing to pay more for green products?

37 parts recipients, or 52.9% responded with “YES” and 33 participants or 47.1% responded with “NO”.

Conclusions

1. The impact of monthly income on the purchase of green products

The results show that monthly income influences consumers' attitudes and behavior regarding the purchase of green products. This is consistent with the findings of previous literature, where various studies have shown that consumers with higher incomes tend to be

more aware and inclined to purchase ecological products. In our study, consumers with higher incomes showed a higher awareness of the health and environmental benefits of green products, as well as a greater knowledge of green product brands and certifications.

In comparison, lower-income consumers show lower awareness and have less information about green product brands and certifications. This result is consistent with behavioral economics theory, which suggests that higher-income consumers have more financial means and resources to make more sustainable and informed choices.

2. The influence of external factors on the purchase of green products

The results presented show that information is the main factor influencing the purchase of green products, followed by packaging and society. This is in line with existing literature, where it has been proven that information plays an essential role in educating consumers and increasing awareness of the benefits and importance of green products.

Packaging is also known to be an important factor influencing purchasing decisions. Green product packaging should not only be eco-friendly, but should also clearly communicate the product's environmental benefits. Society, although having a smaller impact compared to other factors, remains an important element. The influence of social norms and community support are known to encourage more sustainable behavior.

3. The impact of price on the purchase of green products

The results show that price is an important factor in consumers' decisions to purchase green products. More than half of the respondents (52.9%) are willing to pay more for green products, while the rest (47.1%) are not willing to pay more. This result shows a close divide and suggests that price is a significant barrier for many consumers.

Previous literature also shows that price is one of the main barriers to the adoption of green products. Consumers often perceive ecological products as more expensive and have doubts about the added value that these products offer compared to traditional ones. However, it is important to note that a significant proportion of consumers are willing to pay a higher price for products that they consider safer and more environmentally friendly.

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ВНЕДРЯВАНЕ НА ИЗКУСТВЕН ИНТЕЛЕКТ В ПУБЛИЧНИЯ СЕКТОР - МЕЖДУНАРОДНИТЕ ПРАКТИКИ

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Резюме: *Настоящото изследване представя международни подходи и добри практики за внедряване на изкуствения интелект (ИИ) в публичния сектор на някои водещи в държави. Чрез сравнителен анализ се идентифицират общи структурни предизвикателства – недостиг на експертиза, ограничения в инфраструктурата и данните, етични и регулаторни рискове – както и различия в управленските подходи и стратегическите приоритети. Резултатите показват, че успешните практики комбинират гъвкава регулация, целенасочени инвестиции и системно развитие на капацитет. Очертани са тенденции, които формират международните стандарти за ефективно и отговорно прилагане на ИИ в публичната администрация. Те са отправна точка за дефиниране на българската политика за внедряване на ИИ в публичния сектор.*

Ключови думи: изкуствен интелект, добри практики, публичен сектор

JEL: O33, H83, O31, D83

IMPLEMENTATION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR – INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES

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Abstract: *This study presents international approaches and best practices for the implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) in the public sector of selected leading countries. Through a comparative analysis, common structural challenges are identified—such as a lack of expertise, limitations in infrastructure and data, as well as ethical and regulatory risks—alongside differences in governance approaches and strategic priorities. The results indicate that successful practices combine flexible regulation, targeted investments, and systematic capacity development. Key trends are outlined that shape international standards for the effective and responsible application of AI in public administration. These trends serve as a foundation for defining Bulgaria’s policy on AI implementation in the public sector.*

Keywords: artificial intelligence, best practices, public sector

JEL: O33, H83, O31, D83

Въведение

През последното десетилетие изкуственият интелект (ИИ) се утвърди като една от най-значимите технологии на XXI век, оказваща дълбоко въздействие върху икономиката, управлението и обществените отношения (Babšek, et al., 2025). Докато първоначално ИИ се развива и се прилага предимно в частния сектор като инструмент за оптимизация, автоматизация и конкурентно предимство, днес неговото значение за публичния сектор е безспорно и стратегическо (Tveita, 2025). Правителствата по света все по-ясно осъзнават, че ИИ не е просто технологична иновация, а системен лост за повишаване на административната ефективност, подобряване на качеството на публичните услуги и справяне с дълбоки структурни и социални предизвикателства (Babšek, et al., 2025). В този контекст публичният сектор се изправя пред двойно предизвикателство. От една страна, той има задачата да създава регулаторни и етични рамки, които да гарантират безопасното, справедливо и отговорно използване на ИИ в обществото. От друга страна, самата публична администрация се превръща във все по-активен потребител и разработчик на ИИ решения, от автоматизация на рутинни административни процеси и интелигентно управление на данни, до подпомагане на вземането на решения в сложни области като здравеопазване, социална политика, сигурност и екологична устойчивост (Haesevoets, et al., 2025). Настоящият доклад изследва внедряването на ИИ в публичния сектор чрез сравнителен анализ на международни практики в група от водещи държави,

които задават глобалните тенденции в тази област. Анализът обхваща Япония, Франция, Естония, Южна Корея, Канада, Обединеното кралство, Германия, Сингапур и Съединените американски щати. Тези държави са избрани не само поради техния икономически и технологичен напредък, но и поради разнообразието на управленски подходи и регулаторни философии, които прилагат при използването на ИИ в публичното управление. Методологичният подход на изследването се основава на качествен сравнителен анализ, като ограниченията произтичат от кабинетния характер. Целта на доклада е да се изведат общи закономерности, структурни проблеми и ефективни решения, които се проявяват независимо от географския, културния и институционалния контекст и които трябва да бъдат отчитани при внедряването на иновации, базирани на ИИ, в публичния сектор.

1. Опитът на държави извън Европейския съюз

Подходът на Япония към внедряването на ИИ в публичния сектор се откроява като един от най-завършените в международен план. Той е неразривно свързан с националната визия „Общество 5.0“ (Society 5.0), която надхвърля традиционното разбиране за цифровизация и утвърждава ИИ като инструмент за решаване на дълбоки социални и икономически предизвикателства, включително застаряването на населението, недостига на работна сила и нарастващия натиск върху публичните системи. За разлика от стратегии, при които ИИ се възприема предимно като средство за повишаване на административната ефективност, японският подход го интегрира в по-широка философия за социално развитие, насочена към подобряване на качеството на живот и дългосрочната конкурентоспособност на икономиката. Стратегическата рамка на Япония поставя силен акцент върху практическото внедряване на ИИ в реални административни и обществени процеси, като същевременно поддържа висока степен на координация между държавата, бизнеса и научноизследователската общност. Водеща институционална роля в този процес има Министерството на икономиката, търговията и промишлеността. Еволюцията на японските стратегии показва преминаване от първоначален фокус върху научноизследователската и развойна дейност (R&D) към по-зрял модел, при който R&D остава ключов елемент, но е допълнен от целенасочени усилия за внедряване, мащабиране и интеграция на ИИ в съществуващите публични системи. Тази трансформация отразява разбирането, че технологичният напредък е устойчив само когато е съпроводен от институционални промени и организационен

капацитет. Важен аспект е и ориентацията към международна оперативна съвместимост, като страната активно участва в глобални формати за сътрудничество и разработване на правила и норми в рамките на Организацията за икономическо сътрудничество и развитие, Г-7 и други инициативи. Наред с това подходът разкрива и структурни ограничения, свързани с недостиг на експертиза в повечето министерства, концентрация на знания в ограничен кръг институции и зависимост от краткосрочни кадрови трансфери, което възпрепятства натрупването на институционална памет. Недостатъчното внимание към етичните аспекти и управлението на риска на този етап се компенсира чрез мерки за укрепване на човешкия капитал и регулаторен подход, основан на „меко право“. Приетият през 2025 г. Закон за насърчаване на ИИ отразява тази философия, като стимулира практическото приложение, докато се подготвя цялостна законодателна рамка (Ichikawa, 2025).

Подходът на Република Корея към внедряването на ИИ в публичния сектор се характеризира с ясно изразена ориентация към трансформацията на държавното управление и изграждането на интегрирани, проактивни и ориентирани към гражданите публични услуги. При корейския подход ИИ не се разглежда като изолирана технологична иновация, а като системен инструмент за реорганизация на административните процеси и за изграждане на дигитално правителство, способно да предвижда обществените нужди. Централно място заемат инициативите за интеграция и управление на данни чрез платформи като Digital Platform Government и Government24, които позволяват по-висока координация между институциите. Особено значение се отдава на доверието, прозрачността и етичността при използването на ИИ, като технологиите се прилагат в рамка, насочена към защита на правата и обществената легитимност на цифровото управление. Научноизследователската и развойна дейност остава ключов елемент, но с подчертана практическа насоченост, като ИИ инициативите подлежат на системна оценка по отношение на публичната стойност, приобщаването и ефективността. Корейският подход включва и механизми за осигуряване на равнопоставен достъп до изчислителна мощ и облачна инфраструктура, което намалява вътрешните дигитални различия в публичния сектор. Практиката разкрива предизвикателства, свързани с управленската координация, остарели законодателни изисквания и ограничения в развитието на човешкия капитал. В отговор страната предприема мерки за модернизация на регулаторната рамка, въвеждане на многогодишни механизми за финансиране и създаване на публичен регистър на

използваните ИИ системи за с цел повишаване на прозрачността и общественото доверие (OECD, 2025).

Сингапур се утвърждава като една от държавите с най-последователен и прагматичен подход към внедряването на ИИ в публичния сектор, при който технологичните иновации са тясно обвързани с националните цели за обществено благосъстояние, икономически растеж и социална стабилност. ИИ се прилага целенасочено в ключови сектори като здравеопазване, транспорт, сигурност и образование, където подпомага прехода към превантивни, персонализирани и устойчиви модели на публични услуги. Наред с практическото приложение, Сингапур поставя силен акцент върху етиката, управлението на риска и доверието чрез инструменти като AI Verify и Model AI Governance Framework, както и чрез активни инвестиции в човешкия капитал и адаптацията на работната сила. На международно равнище страната се позиционира като активен участник във формирането на норми и посредник, който насърчава регионалното и глобалното сътрудничество в областта на управлението на ИИ, отразявайки разбирането, че устойчивото и отговорно му развитие изисква координация, споделяне на знания и доверие отвъд националните граници (Singapore, 2024).

Канадският подход за внедряване на ИИ в публичния сектор се характеризира с прагматичен, рисково-ориентиран подход, който съчетава технологични иновации с ясно формулирани етични и управленски рамки. ИИ се използва целенасочено за повишаване на административната ефективност и качеството на публичните услуги, като същевременно се запазва водещата роля на човешката експертиза. На оперативно равнище ИИ намира приложение в обработката на административни случаи, където федерални институции като Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada използват модели за автоматизиран тираж на заявления, ускоряващи рутинните процедури и подпомага откриването на измами. В сферата на обслужването на гражданите и бизнеса генеративни инструменти като AgPal Chat улесняват достъпа до сложна регулаторна и програмна информация, докато вътрешни виртуални асистенти в публичната администрация оптимизират управлението на човешките ресурси и намаляват административните грешки. Паралелно с това ИИ се използва за аналитични цели с висока обществена значимост, включително в статистическия анализ на данни за общественото здраве и в киберсигурността чрез машинно обучение за откриване на заплахи срещу критичната инфраструктура. Наред с тези ползи, се идентифицират ключови предизвикателства, свързани с етичните рискове, защитата на личните данни,

необходимостта от междуинституционална координация и интеграцията на ИИ с работната сила. В отговор правителството развива цялостна стратегия за ИИ във федералната публична служба, която въвежда предпазни механизми, насърчава споделянето на учене и експериментирането и се прилага в синхрон с националната стратегия за данни. Така Канада утвърждава подход, при който ИИ е разглеждан като инструмент за подпомагане на публичното управление, а не като негов заместител, в рамките на стабилна институционална и правна среда. В този контекст канадският опит служи като преход към по-широкия анализ на внедряването на ИИ в други държави, където балансът между иновации, правна сигурност и обществено доверие е също толкова определящ (Government of Canada, 2025).

Подходът на САЩ към използването на ИИ в публичния сектор е силно децентрализиран и движен от практическите нужди на федералните агенции, щатските администрации и местните власти. Прилага се широко в области като националната сигурност, киберсигурността, анализа на големи масиви от данни и автоматизацията на административни процеси, включително в данъчната администрация, социалните услуги и правоприлагането. Федерални структури използват алгоритмични системи за откриване на измами, прогнозиране на рискове и подпомагане на вземането на решения, като акцентът е поставен върху ефективността и възможността за разширяване. Същевременно американският подход изправя публичната администрация пред значими предизвикателства, свързани с фрагментацията на регулаторната рамка, неравномерното качество на данните и високата чувствителност на обществото към въпросите за наблюдение, дискриминация и прозрачност на алгоритмите. В отговор федералната политика постепенно се консолидира около принципи за отговорно използване на ИИ, включително изисквания за оценка на въздействието, човешки контрол върху критични решения и повишена отчетност на публичните институции. Така САЩ оформят подход, при който ИИ е мощен инструмент за публично управление, но неговото използване остава обект на интензивен правен и обществен дебат (The White House, 2025).

Обединеното кралство следва по-координиран и нормативно ориентиран подход към внедряването на ИИ в публичния сектор, като интегрира технологичните иновации в рамките на ясна управленска и етична архитектура. ИИ се прилага активно в здравеопазването чрез Националната здравна служба, където подпомага ранната диагностика, персонализирането на лечението и оптимизацията на работните процеси. Паралелно с това публичната администрация използва ИИ за автоматизация на рутинни

дейности, анализ на данни и подобряване на обслужването на гражданите чрез чатботове и виртуални асистенти. Основните предизвикателства пред подхода са свързани с недостига на специализирани кадри, качеството и съвместимостта на данните и необходимостта от поддържане на високо обществено доверие. В отговор държавата инвестира в развитие на вътрешен капацитет, въвежда принципно ориентирана регулаторна рамка и създава централизирани структури за подкрепа на ведомствата, които осигуряват методически насоки и инструменти за оценка на етичните и социалните ефекти на ИИ. В този смисъл Обединеното кралство се утвърждава като пример за системно и предпазливо внедряване, при което технологичният напредък е подчинен на принципите на отчетност, прозрачност и защита на обществения интерес (Office, 2024).

2. Внедряване на изкуствен интелект в държави от Европейския съюз

Франция се стреми да трансформира публичната администрация и услугите чрез ИИ, като фокусът е върху автоматизация, прогнозиране и анализ, публична сигурност и правни инструменти. Използва се за ускоряване на административните процеси, прогнозиране на икономически рискове като фалити на фирми, картографиране и наблюдение на безопасността на масови събития чрез видеоанализ. Правителството разработва инструменти, които премахват идентифициращата информация и създава база данни с предварително обучени модели, които могат да се използват многократно в различни ведомства. Основните предизвикателства включват инфраструктурни нужди, бюрократични пречки, недостиг на експертни кадри и необходимост от обучение. В отговор държавата инвестира над 109 милиарда евро в ИИ инфраструктура, опростява административните процедури, създава нисковъглеродни ИИ-сайтове, развива таланти чрез обучение, стимули за експертни профили и организира централна подкрепа чрез „Lab IA“, насърчаваща „учене чрез правене“ с пилотни проекти (Élysée, 2025).

Естония се отличава с иновативен подход за интеграция на ИИ чрез виртуалната асистентска мрежа „Bürokratt“, която осигурява унифициран достъп до всички публични услуги чрез диалог на естествен език. Инициативата обединява вътрешната администрация и данните от различни системи като X-Road, като автоматизира рутинни процеси и освобождава човешкия ресурс за по-сложни задачи. Основните предизвикателства са качеството и наличността на данни, етични и правни рамки и развитие на експертен капацитет. Решенията включват постепенно развитие на „Bürokratt“ като федеративна модулна система, проекти за езикови и отворени данни,

обучение и сътрудничество, както и непрекъснато стратегическо планиране чрез Националната стратегия за ИИ (2024–2026) (Kratid, 2025).

Германия използва ИИ за повишаване на ефективността на публичния сектор и справяне с ключови предизвикателства като здравеопазване, индустриална ефективност и устойчивост на околната среда. ИИ се прилага за ускоряване на диагностика и разработка на лекарства, подпомагане на зелен преход в енергетиката, транспорта и селското стопанство. Проблемите включват ниско ниво на дигитализация, ограничен достъп до данни, липса на координация между инициативите, недостатъчен ИИ талант и социални рискове, свързани с автоматизацията. В отговор Германия предприема стратегическа промяна на националната ИИ политика с фокус върху ключови сектори, осигурява координация на високо политическо ниво, инвестира в инфраструктура, въвежда отворени данни и регулаторни насоки за безопасно използване, развива уменията на държавните служители и засилва прозрачността и общественото доверие чрез включване на заинтересованите страни (OECD, 2024).

3. Ключови предизвикателства

Анализът на международните практики за внедряване на ИИ в публичния сектор показва, че независимо от географските, културните и икономическите различия, страните се сблъскват с три основни групи предизвикателства: капацитет, данни и управление. Недостигът на квалифицирани специалисти по ИИ в публичния сектор се оказва предизвикателство за много държави, включително Франция, Южна Корея, Великобритания, Германия, Естония и Япония. Правителствата трудно се конкурират с частния сектор по отношение на заплащането и привличането на учени по данни и ИИ специалисти, като паралелно липсва и достатъчно обучен персонал в самите администрации, способен да разбира и ефективно използва новите технологии. Този структурен капацитетен дефицит ограничава развитието и интеграцията на ИИ решения в публичните услуги. Ключов фактор за успешното внедряване на ИИ е и качеството, наличността и достъпността на данните. Държави като Естония, Южна Корея, Великобритания, Германия и САЩ, посочват именно липсата на адекватна инфраструктура за съхранение и обмен на данни, несъвместими формати и остарели законодателни изисквания като основни пречки пред автоматизирания обмен на информация. Същевременно успешната интеграция на ИИ изисква значителни

инвестиции в изчислителна мощност, центрове за данни и енергийна инфраструктура, за да се осигури устойчивото развитие на технологиите, каквато необходимост отбелязват Франция, САЩ и Южна Корея. Внедряването на ИИ не може да бъде отделено от изграждането на обществено доверие, като етика и управление се оказват неразделна част от процеса. Управлението на етичните рискове, предотвратяването на пристрастия, осигуряването на прозрачност и отчетност, както и защитата на личните данни, са предизвикателства, с които се сблъскват Канада, Великобритания, Германия, Сингапур и САЩ. Опитът на Япония показва, че първоначалният фокус върху иновациите води до по-слабо развитие на етичните и управленски рамки, което подчертава необходимостта от последващи мерки за укрепване на институционалния контрол.

4. Приложимост на добрите практики в български контекст

България може да извлече поуки от международния опит, като адаптира успешните стратегии за изграждане на капацитет, модернизация на услугите и гъвкаво управление. Вместо да се конкурира пряко с частния сектор по отношение на заплащане, публичният сектор може да развие „екосистема за таланти“ и подход „учене чрез практика“. Паралелно с това е необходима системна вътрешна подготовка на държавните служители чрез мащабни програми за повишаване на квалификацията, както се прилага в Германия и Великобритания, като се ограничи ротацията на персонала в ИИ и дигитални роли, за да се запази институционалното знание, което Южна Корея и Канада демонстрират като успешна практика. За да бъде ефективно внедряването на ИИ, е възможно различни инициативи и обучения да бъдат координирани в рамките на централна структура, подобна на френската „Lab IA“, която да организира, координира и подпомага стартирането на ИИ пилотни проекти, улеснявайки обмена на опит и сътрудничеството между различните администрации. Модернизацията на публичните услуги следва да бъде стратегически насочена към улесняване на гражданите чрез единна точка за достъп до всички услуги, както показва естонската мрежа „Bürokratt“. Чрез интегриране на съществуващите информационни системи, например Единната електронна съобщителна среда, България може да преодолее сложността на административните процеси и да осигури безхартиено и автоматизирано споделяне на данни, подкрепено от законодателни реформи, които премахват изискванията за физически документи и подписи. В същото време е необходимо управление, което съчетава иновациите с

изграждането на доверие. Гъвкавите регулаторни подходи, като японския „soft-law“ подход, позволяват въвеждането на насоки и етични рамки, които стимулират доброволното участие на бизнеса и ускоряват внедряването на нови технологии, докато публичният опис на ИИ системите, както правят Южна Корея и Сингапур, повишава прозрачността и улеснява мониторинга на риска. Освен това, използването на регулаторни „sandbox“ тестови среди, практикувано в САЩ, позволява тестване и оценка на новите ИИ решения в контролирана среда, преди те да бъдат имплементирани в реалната администрация. Общата визия, извлечена от опита на водещите държави, показва, че ИИ трябва да се разглежда като ключов инструмент за решаване на най-належащите обществени проблеми – от повишаване на ефективността на администрацията и справяне със социални предизвикателства до подобряване на здравеопазването и регионалното развитие. България следва да дефинира своите приоритети и да изгради стратегия, която да използва ИИ системно, устойчиво и отговорно.

Заклучение

Внедряването на ИИ в публичния сектор е сложен мрежови процес с участието на множество институционални и обществени актьори. Моделът на петорната спирала (Quintuple Helix Model), включващ публичния сектор, бизнеса, академичните среди, гражданското общество и екологичната среда, предоставя адекватна концептуална рамка за анализ на тази сложност (Carayannis & Campbell, 2010). Прилагането на модела и работата в мрежа създават условия за системно споделяне на знания, трансфер на иновации и непрекъснато учене, които са ключови за устойчивото внедряване на ИИ в административната работа (Carayannis, et al., 2018). Мрежовото сътрудничество повишава институционалния капацитет и намалява рисковете, свързани с прилагането на сложни технологии в публичния сектор (Mergel, 2019). Същевременно мрежите улесняват интегрирането на ИИ решенията с етични, социални и екологични изисквания, което е критично за тяхната обществена легитимност и дългосрочна устойчивост (Criado & Gil-Garcia, 2019). Мрежовото сътрудничество в контекста на създаването и внедряването на публични и социални иновации показват, че отворените иновационни екосистеми и транснационалните мрежи ускоряват разпространението на добри практики и управленски стандарти в областта на ИИ (Bekkers & Tummers, 2018). В този

контекст мрежовото взаимодействие, интерпретирано през призмата на модела на петорната спирала трябва да се разглежда като основен управленски принцип за отговорната и устойчива дигитална трансформация на публичния сектор, базирана на ИИ.

Спонсорство

Този доклад е част от изследване по проект № КП-06-Н65/10 от 12.12.2022 г. „Формални и неформални иновационни мрежи”, финансиран от Фонд „Научни изследвания“.

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A STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN MANAGING STRESS AMONG YOUTH IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract: *In recent years, the use of technology has increased significantly in all aspects of daily life, transforming the ways in which people communicate, learn and work. This digital transformation has also affected the way in which stress is managed, especially among young people. In this way, the focus is on the process of finding personalized solutions that address emotional and psychological challenges. Artificial intelligence (AI) plays an increasingly strategic role in shaping the way in which young people cope with academic, social and personal pressures.”*

Although AI offers valuable tools such as personalized learning, mental health applications and efficient communication, its impact on psychological well-being and stress levels remains unclear. On the one hand, AI can help reduce stress by providing timely assistance and on the other hand, it can cause negative effects such as digital fatigue, social isolation, technostress, etc. This study aims to provide a strategic overview of the role of AI in stress management among young people within the broader digital ecosystem. Also, the second aim is to provide key points of the need for strategic frameworks that balance technological innovation with emotional and social well-being.”

To achieve this, a scoping review of the existing scientific literature was conducted, analysing previous studies addressing this topic. The review helped identify the benefits and challenges presented by AI, as well as research gaps in this area. The findings highlight the importance of developing digital strategies that promote responsible and mindful use of AI to increase resilience and psychological health among young people in an increasingly digital world.” The recommendations from the study emphasize the importance of a balanced approach that combines the intelligent use of artificial intelligence with strategies that support the emotional and social well-being of young people in an increasingly digital reality.

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Keywords: artificial Intelligence, stress management, psychological well-being

JEL: I12, O33, J13, M15

Introduction

Digital technology has transformed the way how young people interact with the world around them, affecting not only social and educational aspects, but also psychological well-being. The use of smartphones, social networks and digital learning environments has brought new opportunities for communication and access to information, but has also raised concerns about stress, anxiety and reduced self-esteem. Studies show that intensive use of technology can be linked to mental health problems, including depression and social isolation (Vagka et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2021; Rauschenberg et al., 2021).

The impact of digital objects on the psycho-emotional well-being of young people constitutes a crucial dimension in assessing the effects of technology on their daily lives. Continuous exposure to digital devices, social networking applications and interactive platforms directly affects levels of personal satisfaction, self-esteem, social belonging and emotional stability. Interaction with technology can enhance feelings of support and social connectedness, but it can also increase stress, anxiety, and social pressures created by the norms of digital communication and presentation. For this reason, the search for ways to manage stress and improve well-being through digital interventions has assumed great importance.

In this context, the main goal of this study is to provide a strategic understanding of the ways in which artificial intelligence is used to address stress in young people, by examining digital interventions, supportive applications, and technological solutions that can improve psychological well-being in the digital age. By integrating the findings of the contemporary literature, this study aims to provide a balanced perspective on the risks and opportunities that digital technologies bring to young people, as well as to identify effective strategies for stress management and mental health promotion.

1.Literature Review

Over the past decade, the scientific literature on youth mental health has shifted significantly towards analysing the impact of digital technologies and the psycho-emotional mechanisms they trigger, especially in the context of stress and AI-mediated interactions. With the intensification of the use of digital devices and social platforms, researchers have found that the relationship between youth and technology is complex, multidimensional, and often ambivalent. Excessive use of smartphones and social networks has been linked to addiction, anxiety, depression, and decreased self-esteem, reflecting significant challenges to youth's psycho-emotional well-being (Vagka et al., 2024; Vogesh et al., 2024; Alqahtani et al., 2024).

The social and psychological impacts of technology have become even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies by Liu et al. (2021) and Rauschenberg et al. (2021) show that social isolation, learning shifted to digital environments, and excessive screen exposure contributed to increased academic stress, physical tension, and symptoms of anxiety and depression in young people. The findings of Liu et al. (2021) particularly highlight that the constant use of digital devices and the lack of social interaction negatively affect both visual

well-being and emotional balance. In line with these results, Vagka et al. (2024) found that excessive smartphone use and intensive involvement in social networks in young people are closely associated with high levels of nomophobia, depression, anxiety, stress, and low self-esteem. This highlights the need for targeted psychoeducational interventions and strategies for managing digital use, given that technology can act as an important source of chronic stress in young people. An additional important dimension in the literature is related to the impact of technology on adolescents' body perception and physical identity. Alqahtani et al. (2024) show that smartphone use is associated with body image distortion (BID) and inappropriate weight loss behaviours. Exposure to unrealistic aesthetic standards, digital filters, and body models promoted on social media contributes to the distortion of personal perception and increased psychological pressure. These results highlight that digital technologies not only affect psych-emotional components, but also the construction of physical identity and self-image, highlighting the need for awareness programs, parental guidance, and a more responsible role by digital companies in the management of visual content.

Overall, the contemporary literature suggests that digital technology impacts young people's mental and social health in multiple ways: by increasing access to information and interaction, but also by generating risks related to stress, digital addiction, aesthetic pressures, and social isolation. These findings provide the basis for further exploring the strategic role that artificial intelligence can play in stress management and in creating safer, more inclusive, and psychologically resilient digital environments for young people.

1.1. Strategies for Managing Stress in Young People in the Digital Age

Contemporary literature shows that, in addition to identifying stress and the psychology of technology use, there are also different strategies for managing it. Where the Scoping Review article shows that strategically designed digital displays, embedded in artificial intelligence algorithms, legitimate in monitoring mental health, identifying good skills and suggesting preventive measures for young people (Vagka et al., 2024; Liu20 al., 2024; Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, scientific interest in the links between young people's stress and the daily environment has been intense, prompting a movement towards studying new monitoring techniques, between devices and stress management. Within this context, the literature is exploring how artificial intelligence systems—such as predictive risk assessment, its anxiety detection algorithms, chatbots—can serve as strategic tools in addressing new psychology technologies. This strategic perspective emphasizes the need for a deeper understanding of how AI can complement existing practices. traditional mental health services, adapting to faster, more personalized and more accessible health for the new generation in the digital age. Taylor et al. (2024) present a protocol for a new skill for young people, in order to improve their social, emotional and learning skills, showing the potential of technology to reinforce social emotional skills, a key dimension of stress management in the digital age.

Meanwhile, Akhtar et al. (2024) highlighting the barriers they have due to the feeling of attention, young people's mental health. In this context, scalable digital specifications, such as the STARS (Scalable Technology for Adolescents and Youth to Reduce Stress) program, As a promising strategy to access psychology. This highlights the fact that they use in chatbots increased in this direction and address sustainable challenges in their challenges, contributing to their emotional well-being of young people and support systems positive with good resources. A, Philip et al. (2020) introduce the smartphone KANOP, which uses an AI virtual agent for better sleep during isolation. They highlight the importance of digital technology and virtual agents as tools for psychology and treatment of new and emerging technologies. This consensus of the literature suggests that the strategic integration of artificial intelligence into digital environments can provide innovative solutions for stress management, combining advanced monitoring, personalized and unchangeable devices to improve the mental health of young people in the digital age.

2. Methodology

This section presents a similar methodological approach to this study, detailing the scoping review process, data-driven strategies, and similar analytical techniques that synthesized existing literature on digital technology, artificial intelligence, and its impact on stress management among young people in the digital age.

A broad literature search was conducted based on PubM data, including new studies published between 2020 and 2025. Digital technology is evolving at a rapid pace, with recent developments including the use of supported chatbots, personalized, and online mental health platforms that young people can leverage to grow as digital natives. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has spurred a surge in research on the impact of social isolation and technology on psychological well-being, making it the latest in a series of studies to provide a comprehensive overview of the important psychological, emotional, and behavioural effects of digital technology on young people. This initial search yielded 190 articles, all of which were initially filtered based on title and abstract, reducing the number to 49 articles. Further filtering, on inclusion and exclusion criteria, tailored to the study purpose and keywords, reduced the list to 19 articles. The criteria only identified that empirical studies addressing the role of technology, in the technology of artificial intelligence and stress management of young people should be included. Finally, a full-text review of the remaining articles led to the inclusion of 14 studies, which form the main evidence base for this review of the field (Vagka et al., 2024;

Liu et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2024; Akhtar et al., 2024; Akhtar et al., 2024; Akhtar et al.). The methodological approach involved extracting data systems, looking at study characteristics such as different age groups, different types of digital devices, use of AI, stress-related outcomes and reported psychological effects. Analytical techniques in the synthesis of accounts, to change the common theme, current strategies and gaps related to their integration for monitoring and managing stress in young people. This multi-stage and transparent approach to a strong and comprehensive synthesis of evidence, relying on a clear understanding of the high technology and strong authority in AI can implement security for mental health and stress management in young people. The study also included a mutual perspective, considering differences in sociocultural contexts and technology to recommend global relevance.

Study Limitations

- ❖ The literature review was limited to PubMed, which may not include other important technological resources (e.g. IEEE).
- ❖ Small number of recent studies addressing IA + stress + youth.
- ❖ Large heterogeneity in methodological and technological approaches to IA.

3. Results

The review of articles focuses on systems that highlight that it is high, including those in artificial intelligence, have high potential to positively impact the mental health and stress management of young people. The studies result in a wide range of approaches and strategies, including a smartphone component, emotional support chatbots, and self-guided digital programs. Hoffmann et al. (2025) present a protocol for a self-guided digital service for promoting the health of young people, tested through a randomized control trial (RCT). This study highlights that self-guided digital interventions have the potential to be quickly and personalized for direct access devices. The trial aims to assess the effectiveness of digital services to provide a methodological basis for RCTs of sports, evidence that they use this service as a potential accessory to young people's mental health resources and stress management. Taylor et al. (2024) present. The study of a major importance, which is important digital for mental health, showing the potential of a technology to strengthen social skills and emotions for managing effectiveness in the digital age. Akhtar et al. (204) come to a WHO consensus on addressing stress and good health of young people who have come to low and middle life. The study to mark- STARS (Scalable Technology for Adolescents and Youth Reduce Stress), a digital self-help program aimed at reducing stress and improving emotional

well-being. The use of chatbots in this program increases in relation to the address and address key digital challenges, indicating that its deployment is scalable to support the protection system with different resources. Filipi et al. (2020) present on the smartphone KANOPEE, which uses an AI virtual agent for sleep-related sleep disorders during isolation. The study showed that the intervention was feasible and acceptable, highlighting the importance of digital technology and virtual agents for psychological symptoms and new skills for young people and adults. In summary, the results of the strategic digital outcomes, especially those with AI and can have personalized, affordable and accessible skills for stress management and promoting the mental health of young people.

4. Discussion of results

Many studies have examined the impact of technology and digital skills on young people. Ren, Guo and Li (2025) showed that digital competence helps improve self-efficacy, but high levels of stress can weaken this effect. On the other hand, Ibrahim et al. (2024) found that digital skills can reduce academic stress by strengthening the impact of emotional intelligence, although self-regulation did not show a mediating effect. These results indicate that the development of digital skills is a key element for stress management in young people.

Kalinkara & Talan's (2025) study found a mediating complex between media, academic self-efficacy and social sensitivity, highlighting the need for goals to manage technology use.

To address these challenges, many studies have examined the effectiveness of digital skills. Programs such as RS have been shown to reduce stress and anxiety in young people, appearing in personalized and scalable STA symptoms (Akh et al., 024; de Graaff et al., 2025). Filipi et al. (2020) showed that members of the AI for insomnia business can do well-being, although participation remains a challenge. Researchers Hoffmann et al. (2025) and Bäckström et al. (2025). Digital interventions, according to Taylor et al. (2024), can strengthen social and emotional skills, contributing to young people's psychological well-being and coping with the stress of everyday life. In summary, the existing literature shows a link between technology use, stress and psychological well-being in young people. Digital competence and emotional intelligence can function as a shield against stress, while uncontrolled smartphone and social media use increases the risk of psychological problems. Good digital interventions can show promise for well-being, although human participation and personalization may not be the main challenges.

5. Conclusion

This study provides a clear insight into the role of digital and artificial intelligence in stress management and promoting the health of young people in the digital age. The analysis of the literature and empirical studies of digital technology, included in environments, chatbots and self-guided services, personalized and unreliable possibilities for monitoring mental health, identifying students and preventive chat devices. The importance of such a time is not only in the context that young people have access to traditional psychological services, but also in the emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, where social isolation increases symptoms of anxiety and depression. The results related to the effectiveness of personalization, interaction and social influence that are in their situation, alleviating the psycho-emotional problem and strengthening the emotional and social skills of young people. Furthermore, emotions that address the negative impacts of social media use reinforce a sense of belonging and self-efficacy related to others. From a strategic perspective, using artificial intelligence in these worldly things that use their approach and adaptation in a personalized way, integrating traditional mental health practices with modern technology. This approach is not only innovative but also addresses the complex challenges of young people's mental health in diverse cultural and socio-economic settings. In summary, the study findings highlight the potential of digital and AI-based technologies as strategic tools for promoting mental health and stress management in young people, providing a solid foundation for further research and for those who are effective policymakers in their careers.

Recommendations

- ✚ Fully personalized digital development: Apps and chatbots should be designed to adapt to the individual care of young people, including social care, stress health and real-time mental health monitoring.
- ✚ Integration of artificial intelligence into mental health strategies: The use of predictive algorithms and AI tools can serve to identify symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression, enabling them to be treated quickly and effectively.
- ✚ Training and engagement: To ensure the adoption and sustainability of digital, young people should be involved in their activity at the design stages and provided with guidance on use combined with mental health education.

- ✚ Scaling up the environment of the environment with the best: Digital platforms should be accessible and scalable resources for healthy self-care, needing good health and improving treatment.

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MARKETING IN THE AGE OF AI MEDIATION

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Adriyan Dinev²

Abstract: *The rise of generative artificial intelligence is transforming how consumers search for and purchase products. With the emergence of AI assistants, shopping is expected to become increasingly “AI-mediated,” as algorithms actively shape decision-making and recommendation systems are shifting from passive tools to influential intermediaries. Using an exploratory approach based on social listening, search listening, and question extraction, this study examines public discourse and behavior related to AI mediated shopping. The findings reveal an asymmetry in public interest: online discussions are largely driven by marketers, technology and other business professionals, while consumer interest remains limited, exploratory, and episodic. This suggests that the current transformation of commerce is driven more by industry expectations than by consumer demand.*

Keywords: AI shopping, AI Mediation, Consumer Behavior, E-commerce

JEL: M31, L81, O33

1. Introduction

Recent advances in artificial intelligence have fundamentally transformed the way consumers make decisions. While early e-commerce relied on user-initiated search and manual comparisons, the modern landscape is increasingly defined by the assistance of artificial intelligence in product search. Algorithms not only recommend products, but also compare prices in a short time and even compare features. This condenses information for consumers to what is most important, saving them a lot of time. Nowadays, more and more companies are incorporating automated systems that actively intervene in the consumer

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shopping experience, often involving them in the decision-making process. Even large AI platforms are integrating their algorithms to be connected to online search engines.

AI algorithms are not just supporting the toolkit in this period of digital transformation, they are shaping the information environment. This is shifting authority from human cognitive intent to algorithmic interaction. Industry forecasts highlight the scale of this shift. The global market for AI shopping assistants is expected to grow. However, market expansion statistics often mask the complexity of actual implementation. Sometimes a number of factors come into play, such as human resources, finances, operational complexity, and even integration knowledge. Although academic literature has begun to explore factors such as trust and perceived usefulness, there is still a lack of clarity about how this phenomenon is unfolding in public discourse in real time. Is the rise of AI agents driven by genuine consumer demand or is it a structural shift imposed by supply-side innovation? This article addresses this gap by using social and search listening techniques to map the current state of AI-mediated shopping. By contrasting public sector narratives with the curiosity of private consumers, the study aims to clarify whether consumers are truly ready to embrace the role of the “algorithmic consumer” defined in recent research.

2. Literature review

AI-Mediated Shopping: Conceptual Foundations

Recent advances in artificial intelligence have completely transformed the structure of the process by which consumers search for information, evaluate alternatives, and make purchasing decisions. While in the early years of modern e-commerce, brands relied primarily on consumer-initiated search and manual comparisons involving a mix of digital and physical media, today’s businesses are increasingly integrating automated systems with artificial intelligence directly into this process. The result is that consumers’ choices are no longer shaped by their cognitive intent and the brand’s influence on them, but by the interaction of algorithms and platforms through mediation.

In this context, the term “AI-mediated shopping” is used in this study to describe shopping processes in which AI systems actively intervene and shape consumer decision-making, rather than simply supporting it. AI-mediated shopping encompasses the use of conversational interfaces, recommendation algorithms, and predictive systems that influence the way options are presented, evaluated, and narrowed down before consumers make a purchase. While the

concept overlaps with related concepts such as “conversational commerce” and AI-assisted shopping, the focus here is on mediation—the process by which AI acts as an intermediary that restructures the information environment in which consumer choice is formed. A single, universally accepted definition has not yet been established in the academic literature, making the synthesized conceptual framework both necessary and appropriate for this study.

The academic literature provides a comprehensive overview of conversational AI in consumer feedback. Lopez-Lopez and Barra Iniesta (2025) present a systematic review and cluster analysis of 78 peer-reviewed articles on conversational AI in marketing and e-commerce (Lopez & Iniesta, 2025). Their results show that existing research to date has focused primarily on topics such as user engagement, sentiment analysis, trust, and technology adoption. Predictive analytics is also included. Taken together, this body of research suggests that conversational AI systems are increasingly being embedded in consumer-facing contexts, where they reduce cognitive effort, improve access to information, and influence evaluative judgments during online shopping. However, the authors also reveal an important limitation of the current literature. "Conversational AI" has largely been viewed as a decision-support tool designed to assist users, rather than an active mechanism capable of changing the authority of decision-making and preference formation. While factors such as trust, perceived usefulness, and adoption intention have been extensively studied, less attention has been paid to the long-term consequences of continued reliance on AI systems to filter information and prioritize options.

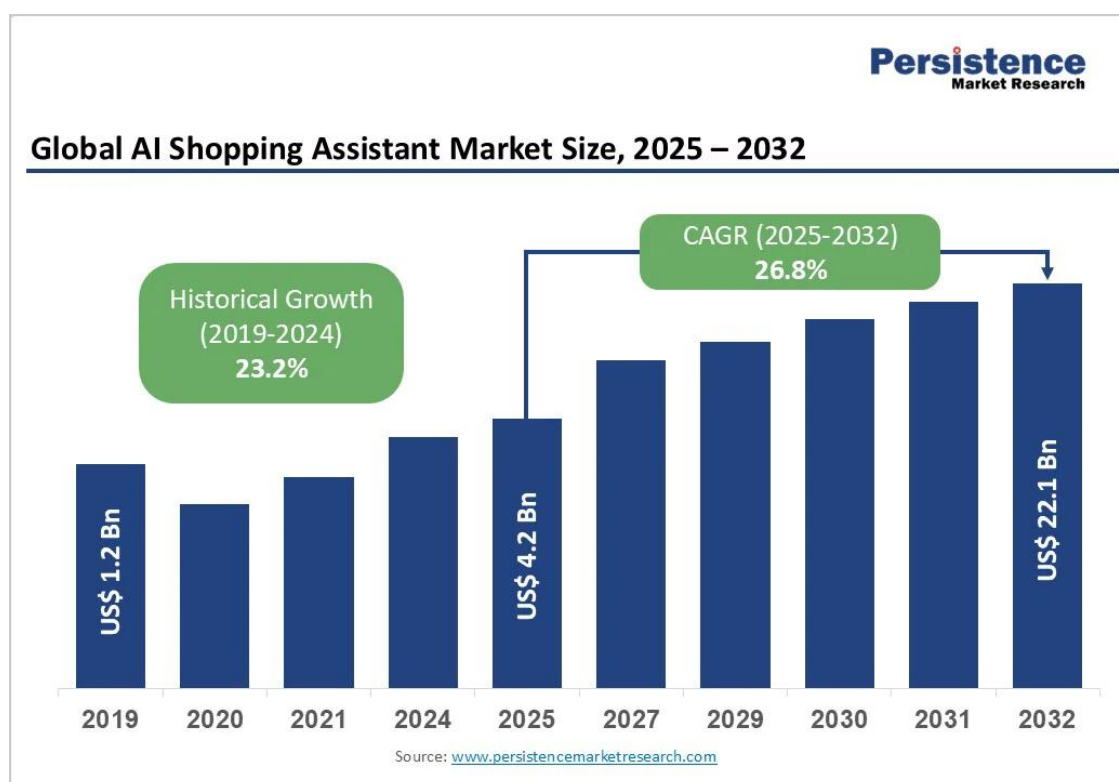
In his study, Sifat (2025) introduces the concept of the algorithmic consumer. He argues that algorithmic systems increasingly shape consumer preferences before they are consciously considered, by influencing the exposure, framing, and salience of information (Sifat, 2025). In this way, AI systems do not simply respond to consumer intent, but also participate in shaping it. This changes the traditional boundaries between information provision and decision-making. This insight is closely related to the idea of AI-mediated shopping, in which consumer choices are shaped through continuous interaction with algorithmic intermediaries.

Extending this perspective, Chinnaraju (2025) conceptualizes autonomous (agent) AI systems as active market participants that not only support consumer decision-making but also dynamically restructure segmentation, targeting, and personalization processes in real time (Chinnaraju, 2025). In this framework, consumer preferences are continuously inferred, updated, and acted upon by AI agents through the integration of machine learning, natural

language processing, and predictive analytics, often without direct human intervention. This reinforces the idea of AI-mediated shopping as an environment in which decision-making authority is gradually shifted from the consumer to algorithmic intermediaries that pre-select, prioritize, and optimize choice architectures prior to purchase.

In parallel with academic research, industry analyses provide additional contextual evidence of the growing role of AI in shopping environments. Market estimates suggest that the global AI shopping assistant market is expected to grow from approximately USD 4.2 billion in 2025 to over USD 22 billion by 2032, reflecting sustained double-digit growth and increasing integration of AI systems into digital commerce environments (Mali, 2025) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Global AI Shopping Assistant Market Growth (2019–2032)



Source: *Persistence Market Research, 2025*

The strong market growth illustrated in Figure 1 provides important contextual support for the increasing academic interest in AI-mediated shopping. However, market expansion alone does not explain how consumers perceive, accept, or interact with AI-driven systems in shopping environments. Empirical research suggests that consumer acceptance of AI-powered

shopping tools is not automatic and is shaped by a combination of psychological and technological factors.

In this regard, Nagy and Hajdú (2021) provide early empirical evidence on consumer acceptance of artificial intelligence in online shopping contexts. Using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), their study demonstrates that trust in AI-powered webshops and perceived usefulness play a more significant role in shaping consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions than perceived ease of use (Nagy & Hajdu, 2021). These findings reinforce the argument that AI-mediated shopping should not be conceptualized merely as a technological enhancement of e-commerce, but as a socio-technical system in which consumer trust, transparency, and perceived value are central to adoption.

3. Methodology

For the purposes of this study, a literature review was conducted and social listening and search listening analysis was employed in order to explore an emerging phenomenon - AI-mediated shopping, which meaning and consumer practices are not yet fully defined and cannot be effectively captured by regular survey instruments.

The study literature review covered current research on agentic consumers, AI-mediated decision-making and the agentic economy (Kumar, et al., 2024) (Bi, et al., 2025). The review is based upon peer-reviewed academic sources and industry reports published between 2022 and 2025 to capture theoretical and practical developments.

Social listening was used to analyze public online conversations related to AI-mediated shopping. Data were collected using a commercial social listening platform that aggregates publicly available content from multiple digital channels, including LinkedIn, Reddit, X/Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Sentiment analysis was performed automatically by the platform using natural language processing techniques and it is suitable for identifying patterns and trends in online discourse. Four core search queries were used:

- AI shopping assistant
- AI shopping agent
- ChatGPT shopping
- Agentic commerce

For each query, data were collected over a 30-day period, measuring:

- Total mention volume
- Conversation dynamics over time

- Platform distribution
- Sentiment analysis (positive, neutral, negative)
- Emerging topics and keywords

Search listening was conducted using Google Trends data to examine the dynamics of interest in AI shopping over time. Search interest was analyzed for the same four core terms over the past 12 months, at a global level and across all categories. In addition to social and search listening, the study employs the question mining tool “AlsoAsked” to analyze how users formulate their information needs related to AI-mediated shopping. These tools systematically extract and cluster questions generated by search engines in response to seed queries, reflecting common consumer inquiries and how consumers conceptualize AI mediated shopping.

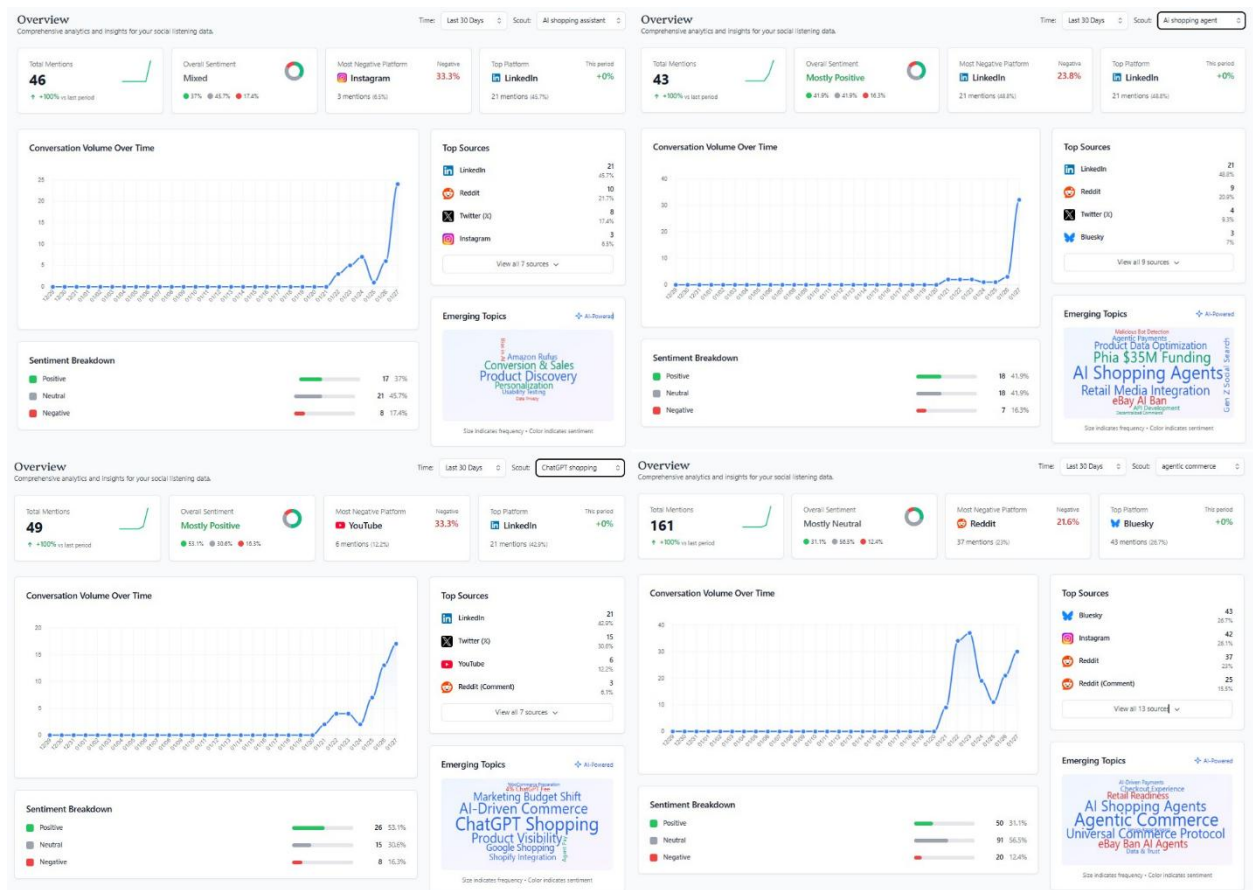
4. Analysis of results

4.1 Social listening overview for AI shopping–related concepts

Figure 2 presents a comparative social listening overview of four AI shopping–related concepts, with subpanels illustrating conversation volume, sentiment distribution and emerging topics.

Figure 2 - Social listening overview of AI shopping–related concepts

*(A) AI Shopping Assistant, (B) AI Shopping Agent, (C) ChatGPT Shopping and (D) Agentic Commerce. Each subpanel presents total mentions, sentiment breakdown, conversation dynamics, platform distribution, and emerging topics over a 30-day period.



Source: Google Trends, 2025

The social listening analysis indicates that the current discussion around AI shopping assistants, AI shopping agents and agentic commerce is predominantly supply-side in nature. Conversations are largely driven by businesses, marketers and technology professionals concerned with the discoverability of their products by AI models and the potential shifts in marketing investment, rather than by consumers sharing their lived shopping experiences. This suggests that AI-mediated shopping is shaping as a significant transformation for which firms are preparing in advance. This asymmetry implies that the transformation of commerce through AI mediation is, at this stage, led by supply-side expectations rather than demand-side pressure. Consumers do not yet publicly articulate concerns about systems they are not quite using.

4.2 Search listening overview for AI shopping-related concepts

Figure 3. Search interest over time for AI related terms (Google Trends, Worldwide)



Source: *Google Trends, 2025*

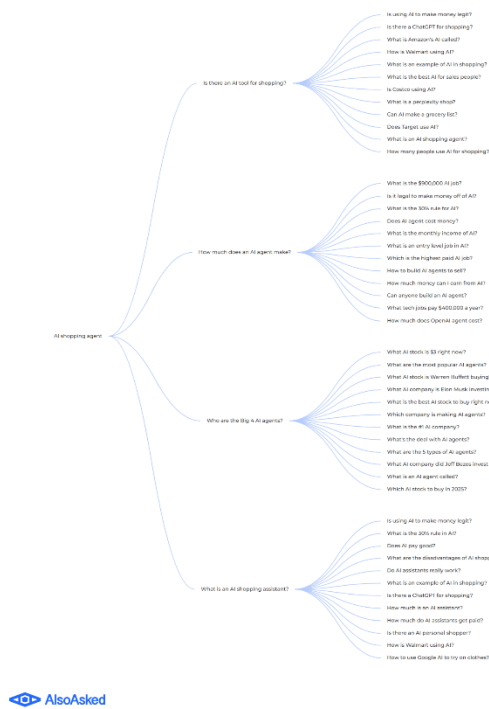
Google Trends measures interest towards a particular search term on a scale from 0 to 100, where 100 represents the highest popularity of a search term within a certain time period and geographical area. The data indicates the dynamics of attention over time, as sharp increases in the curve reflect spikes in interest, often driven by media events, product announcements or public discussions. Figure 3 presents global search interest during the past 12 months for the four AI shopping-related concepts. Interest was relatively low and stable during the first half of the period for all terms, then in the middle of 2025 a sharp increase began, probably related to the introduction of shopping features to ChatGPT by OpenAI in May, 2025. The observed search activity is characterized by pronounced spikes rather than smooth, continuous growth, indicating episodic attention rather than sustained consumer interest.

In line with the social listening data, the search trends lead to the conclusion that AI-mediated shopping is presently shaped by supply-side anticipation rather than consumer demand. Search interest spikes in moments of heightened media attention, while baseline interest remains low. This suggests that consumers are exposed to AI shopping concepts occasionally, largely through public announcements, rather than through sustained everyday use.

Figure 4. Semantic question maps related to AI-mediated shopping (AlsoAsked).

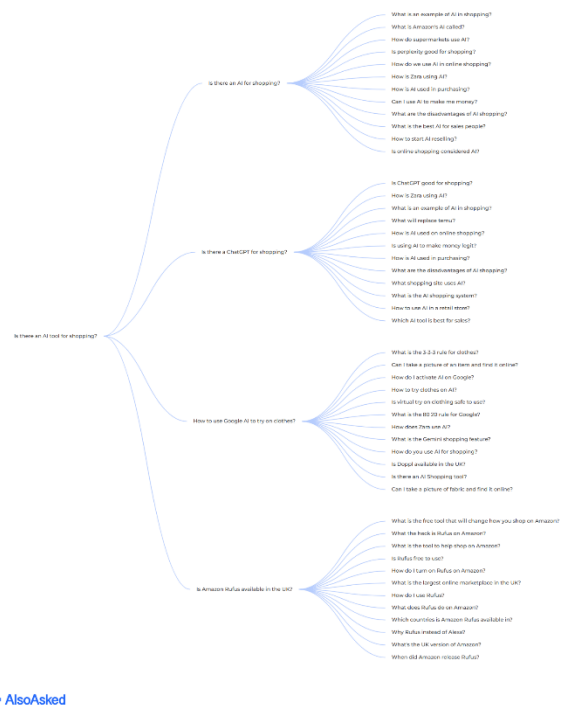
*(A) Question clusters associated with “AI shopping agent”, (B) Question clusters associated with “Is there an AI tool for shopping?”.

(A) AI Shopping Agent



AlsoAsked

(B) AI Tool for Shopping



AlsoAsked

Source: *AlsoAsked*, 2025

The question map related to AI shopping agents shows that a large part of the interest is currently driven by search for monetization opportunities. Many of the questions focus on the ability of AI agents to generate income, what kinds of job or businesses opportunities they would create and which are the leading companies or technologies in this area. This pattern suggests that people are still not perceiving AI shopping agents as tools for personal use, but rather as a potential way to earn money or to gain leverage in an emerging market.

The second question map reveals a different and more consumer-oriented type of interest. Users are interested in questions such as whether AI tools for shopping exist, how these tools can be used to search for products, try on clothes virtually and which well-known platforms already offer such features. These questions seem task-related and experimental rather than indicative of adoption of these new technologies. Consumers appear curious about how AI might make shopping easier or more convenient, but their interest remains exploratory in nature. Together, the two figures suggest that while economic interest in AI shopping agents is emerging rapidly, consumer use is still at an early stage, with focus on learning and experimentation rather than habitual behavior.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this study show a clear asymmetry between public discussions on the topic of AI-mediated shopping and how this topic is explored privately. Public online discourse, as captured by social listening, is dominated by business professionals, marketers, and technology experts who frame AI shopping assistants and agents primarily in terms of their potential for market disruption. These conversations focus on how AI mediation may reshape competition, marketing budgets and platform power, suggesting that firms are already preparing for a significant reshaping of commerce. In this public discourse, AI-mediated shopping is treated less as a consumer innovation and more as a structural shift that requires early positioning and strategic vision.

At the same time, search behavior and question-based analysis reveal a more personal and less visible dimension of interest in AI mediation. In private settings, individuals increasingly search for ways to understand, benefit from and participate in the forthcoming transformation. There is a growing interest in the monetization potential of AI shopping agents and how AI tools can improve everyday shopping experiences. These queries suggest that consumers may not yet openly discuss and AI-mediated shopping is still not part of their everyday behavior, but in the same time they are trying to make sense of its implications and explore how it could fit into their professional and personal lives.

These two forms of interest appear to be developing at different pace. Economic and professional interest in AI shopping agents is more developed and articulated, while consumer-oriented interest remains exploratory and task-focused. This mismatch hints that AI-mediated shopping is currently developing through supply-side anticipation and the curiosity of individual users rather than through consumer-driven demand. Until AI shopping technologies are widely adopted and integrated in the everyday lives of consumers, it remains difficult to predict how they would respond in practice.

6. Future Research Directions

One future direction of this study could be to quantitatively validate consumer readiness. Although this study identified a gap between industry advertising and consumer acceptance through digital discourse analysis, future research should use quantitative methods to statistically validate these trends. A large-scale study is needed to empirically test the “asymmetry hypothesis” suggested by social listening data. Such a study should measure

consumers' actual willingness to delegate decision-making authority to AI agents. By integrating constructs such as perceived usefulness and trust, researchers can quantify the specific threshold at which consumer curiosity turns into habitual dependence on AI mediation. Another direction is to conduct experimental analyses of algorithmic trust, which helps to understand the psychological mechanisms behind AI mediation.

As the literature and scholarship have not yet established in-depth approaches to this topic, future studies should use experimental designs. This would allow them to study how different types of AI agents affect consumer trust. For example, a controlled experiment could expose participants to different levels of AI autonomy, from passive recommendation tools to fully autonomous “agentic” shoppers. This would allow researchers to isolate the impact of “agency” on consumer trust and determine whether higher levels of AI autonomy undermine or enhance trust in the purchasing process.

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THE USE OF PPC IN E-MARKETING STRATEGY

Vaeld Zhezha¹

Abstract: *Pay-Per-Click (PPC) advertising is a pivotal element of modern e-marketing strategies, offering businesses a powerful tool to drive targeted traffic and achieve measurable results. PPC allows advertisers to pay only when their ad is clicked, ensuring efficient use of marketing budgets and immediate visibility on search engines and other online platforms. Advertisers control finances using targeting variables like demographics, keywords, or user behavior to reach target groups that are rightly chosen in relevance. The primary benefits of PPC in e-marketing include precise targeting capabilities, cost control, and enhanced brand visibility. Advertisers can leverage various targeting options, such as keywords, demographics, and user behavior, to reach the most relevant audience segments while managing their expenditure effectively. Successful PPC campaigns require well-defined strategies that encompass comprehensive keyword research, compelling ad copy, and optimized landing pages. Additionally, bid management and the use of ad extensions can significantly impact campaign performance. It is important to recognize the usefulness of various metrics in gauging PPC outcomes. Consider the Click-Through Rate (CTR) or the Conversion Rate; their value is not merely in their names, but in what they represent in terms of advertising efficacy. Not to mention, Cost-Per-Click (CPC), which can act as a litmus test for financial efficiency in ad spend. These metrics provide insights into ad performance and guide data-driven decision-making. Analyzing trends in these metrics reveals shifts in campaign dynamics and competition, highlighting the importance of adaptive strategies to maintain optimal performance and achieve marketing objectives.*

Keywords: Pay-Per-Click (PPC), E-Marketing, Targeting, Cost Control, Campaign Strategies, Click-Through Rate (CTR), Cost-Per-Click (CPC)

JEL: M31, M3, L86, L81, C81

Understanding PPC in E-Marketing

A Journey Through Time: Evolution and Growth

Since it first appeared, the area of advertising called pay-per-click (PPC) has changed significantly. In the late 1990s, a surge in importance for this model occurred. Search engines popped up—Yahoo! and Google being prime examples. And then, in the year 2000, Google introduced AdWords (now known as Google Ads)—an absolutely key moment for the industry. You see, they added fancy features so advertisers could target better, and they beefed up how users experience ads. Järvinen, J., & Karjaluoto, H. (2015)

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Over the passage of time, advertisement by way of pay-per-click (PPC) has expanded its boundaries, now intertwined with channels from social media, display networks, and even going as far as video ads. The advancement has broadened PPC's spectrum; now firms can interact with the public through diverse platforms online, to growth the sales. Lee, K., & Hong, J. (2020).

Click advertising is a key part of online sales strategies, Chaffey, D., & Ellis-Chadwick, F. (2019). helping companies bring guests to their online places in exchange for paying for clicks on their ads. One of the many good things about click advertising is fast visitor flow; unlike normal search methods, which need time to grow, the first option allows for business site visits as soon as the advertising is active. Also, there are choices for specific advertising, allowing for sharp targeting by group or interest, as in the case of the sports products competing market. Good click advertising setup depends on tools given by Google Ads and many social channels where salespeople make targeted ads that match their audience's specific inputs.

Introduction to PPC Campaigns

Pay-per-click (PPC) campaigns have emerged as one of the most widely used tools in online marketing. They are designed to bring prospective customers to a website, build brand awareness, reach new prospects, and generate sales or leads that result in an increased return on investment. Despite this widespread use, many practitioners using PPC online sponsored advertising incorrectly assume the campaigns can be implemented correctly without ongoing analysis, adjustment, and active management (Kundu, 2021).

Pay-per-click (PPC) campaigns refer to an online advertising model in which advertisers pay a fee each time their ad is clicked. PPC is often associated with search engines, but many other search engines and websites offer this advertising model. The purpose of a PPC ad campaign is exposure on search engine sponsored links or sidebar ads whenever an internet search is performed for keywords that correspond to the ad campaign predetermined using keyword analysis. The choice of keywords or phrases defines what search engine queries trigger the display of the ad message. An online advertisement PPC campaign can be designed to cover a whole range of keywords representing theme-related references to specific goods and services, or it can be designed to target very specific words or phrases. Advertisers set the monthly budget for the PPC campaign and bids to pay for clicks to the advertisement using those key phrases. (Almestarihi et al.2024)

PPC is a digital marketing model where advertisers pay a fee each time a user clicks on one of their ads. This fee is typically determined through an auction system, where advertisers compete for ad placement based on their bids and the relevance of their ads to the search query.

There are several popular PPC platforms, including:

- Google Ads: The most widely used PPC platform, allowing advertisers to target users based on their search terms, demographics, interests, and more.
- Microsoft Advertising: Similar to Google Ads, Microsoft Advertising targets users through the Bing search engine and other Microsoft properties.

- **Social Media Advertising:** Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn offer PPC advertising options that allow businesses to reach specific demographics and interests.
- **Display Advertising:** Display ads can be shown on various websites and apps, targeting users based on their browsing behavior and interests.

Advantages of PPC in E-Marketing

Online ads are a paid way of putting ads before people searching for related terms. This means that such ads give businesses instant notice and "clicks" to their websites. This is instant paid advertising compared to the normal way of advertising which needs longer wait times to get notice and interest. It is also a cheaper way of advertising: businesses bear costs when people click on their ads compared to normal media placements with fixed costs. Paid advertising marketing gives clear results and understandings, allowing marketers to see how helpful their campaigns are (Kapoor, Dwivedi, and Piercy, n.d., 2).

PPC offers numerous advantages for businesses looking to enhance their online presence:

Immediate Results - Unlike organic search strategies, which can take time to yield results, PPC campaigns can generate traffic almost instantly once they are launched.

PPC advertising, for its part, has this neat ability to make results happen right away, unlike organic search methods that take their sweet time.

Promptly, eye-catching PPC adverts have the ability, in order of priority, to attract possible clientele to the enterprise, maybe increasing traffic on the website. Timeliness is an important factor of visibility, such as for urgent promotions, product launches, or events requiring the speediest attention. PPC advertisements could appear in search results or even on social media platforms ClearTail Marketing (2024). On the same day, often after the necessary authorization, conversion of aspiring customers into clients could be swift enough without observing a delay.

Linked to the targeting of precise demographic groups in location-based areas on the map, and also during certain hours of the day, maximally adds to how effective PPC campaigns can be; it ensures advertisements are being shown to people who want to see them quickly. This method of precision-targeting somehow makes investments work better for returns; processes of real-time refitting adjustments can be based on how well-performance data is collected, and the campaigning effectiveness is then polished more and more finely.

The immediate results offered by PPC advertising provide businesses with a powerful tool to achieve quick visibility and drive traffic, making it an indispensable component of modern digital marketing strategies. o, wrapping it up, that's a good reason for its use.

Targeted Advertising - PPC allows for precise targeting based on various criteria such as location, time of day, and user demographics. This ensures that ads reach the most relevant audience.

Cost Control - Advertisers have control over their budgets, setting daily or monthly limits to avoid overspending. This flexibility allows businesses to allocate funds according to their marketing goals.

Digital advertising has emerged as a crucial component of marketing for the majority of enterprises. Numerous alternatives exist, encompassing display and search engine advertisements, as well as social media and video promotions, presenting extensive possibilities; however, they are accompanied by considerable risks. An inadequately formulated or implemented advertising strategy may result in substantial resource wastage and impede the expansion of small businesses. Effective cost management is an essential element in assessing the success of any online advertising initiative.. (Olson et al., 2021)

Cost management in digital advertising involves the selection of appropriate platforms, the formulation of efficient strategies, and the prudent oversight of advertising expenditures. It is imperative for any organization to achieve a favorable return on investment from its advertising initiatives.

Conversely, numerous firms engage in unfamiliar ventures without the requisite experience and understanding of the most effective tactics for their specific needs. Consequently, they risk depleting their budgets and missing out on valuable clientele, often without their awareness. Small enterprises frequently face the challenge of potentially overlooking significant growth opportunities through effective advertising, while larger corporations may find themselves in a situation where creative teams exhaust their budgets, resulting in diminished revenues and jeopardizing their reputation. (Olson et al., 2021)

Historically, there has been a significant oversight when it comes to the implementation of strategic approaches in advertising and marketing initiatives, as these crucial elements have often been neglected and left to mere happenstance.

However, it is entirely possible to establish an effective and thorough strategy, even when operating with very limited financial means. This can be achieved by utilizing various insights and suggestions presented within this text. Moreover, the landscape of online advertising is in a state of perpetual flux, primarily due to the emergence of new platforms and channels that frequently reshape the marketplace. As a result, maintaining effective cost control in online advertising requires ongoing adjustments and regular updates to stay in sync with industry trends and technological advancements.

Ultimately, the strategies and concepts outlined herein should be viewed not merely as a starting point but as a solid foundation upon which more sophisticated, carefully structured, and less daunting online advertising strategies can be built. By expanding on these initial ideas, marketers can foster a more confident and secure approach to navigating the complexities of the digital advertising world. (Kelley et al.2022)

Measurable Results - PPC campaigns provide detailed analytics, enabling marketers to track performance metrics such as clicks, conversions, and ROI. This data is essential for optimizing campaigns and improving future strategies.

Implementing and maintaining a successful PPC campaign requires an initial and ongoing analysis of measurable campaign results. Clicks to keyword-based ads do not, in general, guarantee that the visitors generated by these clicks are, in fact, prospective customers. Many of these clicks are incidental, i.e., made by internet searchers who, for whatever reason, were not interested in or capable of making a service or product purchase.

For example, a competitor could be trying to scout prices on services offered or a click could be made by someone searching for irrelevant content who misinterpreted the ad message. PPC campaigns by internet search engines often bring traffic but, at the same time, drive junk

clicks from queries that do not match the goods or services offered. Misclassification of click traffic can only be uncovered by analyzing PPC campaign results in terms of measurable values such as ad expenditure in ratio to the number of leads obtained, the number of purchases per month, or expenses on phone inquiries (Smith, 2020).

Newspapers, magazines, TV, outdoor advertising, and direct mail marketing are some of the conventional media used by organizations to create awareness about their brand. The internet contains the largest distribution network of information, which, for advertising purposes, includes email, smartphones, and other internet-enabled devices. This branch of brand positioning is popularly referred to as internet advertising, web advertising, online advertising, or e-advertising. (Lehdonvirta, 2022)

PPC campaigns are crucial in online marketing. They involve purchasing short-text ads to direct traffic to company websites. This method is popular and cost-effective, with ads typically including a 25-character heading and a 70-character text ad. To ensure success, organizations carefully evaluate essential factors.

Web advertisements or online advertisements are comparatively new and can be broadly classified into two categories, namely, direct lead generation and brand enhancement. Direct lead generation web advertisements aim at persuading consumers to take actionable steps, which eventually convert into sales or lead generation. This is usually accomplished using PPC campaigns, affiliate marketing, and other performance-based advertising platforms. Having an account on a social network is almost taken for granted, as everything from sharing life experiences to gossiping about other people can occur here, along with this same social network being an optimal space for advertisements.

The advantages of the first category are the target population, the restriction on the number of times an advertisement appears for the same individual, and the calculation of the exact number of users reached. In contrast, the advantages of the latter category are the landings on the fan page, the conduction of contests, and the increase in brand recognition. (Ibrahim et al.2020)

Effective PPC Campaign Strategies

Word search and selection in paid ads are extremely important since they control the appearance and meaning of the ads to the people who see them. The clicks and purchases are better when the right words are selected. Furthermore, the use of appealing ad words and design is vital for user participation. The use of correct amounts of money and the right plans for deals also play a part in the success of these campaigns. Features of digital marketing such as business goals and inner business study are crucial for the effective performance of these strategies .

Key Metrics Driving PPC Success

Paid Click advertising involves several stages like click rate, conversion rate, return on investment, etc. It is vital to track these stages since they show how well the ad grabs interest and makes money. It is also important to keep an eye on the quality score since it decides the position the ad appears and how much the advertiser pays for a click. The higher the quality score, the better spots the ads get for a smaller cost. Comparing or contrasting two or more ads to find out which one is better is testing. This action improves the performance of the ad and boosts the overall results of the campaign. In the current time where monitoring the

performance of Paid Click advertising is needed, this step is very important (Morgan and Gurner 2011, 13).

Emerging Trends Shaping Future PPC Advertising

Web ads use odd tech based on fake brains and computer thinking to make click-based ads better. The rise of voice searching changes how we should pick the words for click-based ads. Multichannel blending lets click-based ads work with other marketing ways and helps the shift from shoving ads to drawing in the crowd, as shown by changing ad methods in the last decade (Morgan and Gurner 2011, 12).

Conclusion

In short, a solid online marketing scheme needs to include paid ads as a key part. As the term suggests, this lets companies show their ads and pay for them only when people click. First, it lets you craft unique ad words. The perks of paid ads include, among others, its measurable effect, fast marketing effort, and cheaper prices. However, it should be a plan in a good online marketing scheme. It should also think about all the fundamentals of good ad campaigns, including measuring the key things

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AI OPPORTUNITIES IN DIGITAL MARKETING FOR TOURISM AND PROMOTION OF CULTURAL ATTRACTIONS

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Abstract: *Digital marketing, especially enriched with AI capabilities, promotes, facilitates access, expands the audience with interactive and attractive experiences on a global scale. AI can personalize experiences, prepare routes and recommendations tailored to tourists' preferences. It can generate personalized messages and advertisements, and include local legends and stories. Along with all these advantages, there are also some obstacles related to an ethical and respectful attitude to the past, the lack of specialists and funding for the implementation of new technologies, and others. The goal is to examine the possibilities and find suitable opportunities for applying AI in digital marketing for tourism.*

Keywords: AI, Digital Marketing, Tourism, ML, VR

JEL: C63, M31, O33

Introduction

Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) technologies in recent years have led to their widespread application in all spheres of the economy and public life (Aleksandrova, 2021). AI is entering many areas, including digital marketing. AI has been developing quite rapidly in the last few years (Messner, 2022). Generative AI has led to revolutionary changes, especially in the field of digital marketing (Verma et al., 2021). AI-powered language models, image generators, and chatbots can generate content on social networks, mobile applications, and websites, facilitating audience personalization and engagement (Gupta et al., 2024).

Bulgaria is focused on tourism and has a rich cultural heritage. Digital marketing, especially enriched with AI capabilities, promotes, facilitates access, and expands the audience with interactive and attractive experiences on a global scale. In combination with virtual reality (VR), tourist sites can be very attractive. But marketing can improve the entire tourist experience, based on AI predictions about the load of sites, recommend the most suitable time to visit and optimize the opening hours of sites. Using the possibilities of digital marketing, combined with AI technologies, offers a basis for the development of regions and the introduction of a smart urban environment. The development of regions is directly related to the provision of smart tourist

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services and destinations that are not only locally based, but allow for offering in different languages and in a form tailored to the looking audience. Intelligent development and marketing presentation of the region leads to an environment conducive to a sustainable lifestyle, optimal and effective management and progressive development.

Opportunities for using AI in tourism marketing

AI expands the possibilities of marketing with the introduction of applications that allow for a new way to present and promote cultural heritage. The first opportunity is related to **improving the tourist experience**. With the help of various mobile and web applications, a layer of interpretation can be added to the exhibits being viewed. This is possible thanks to AI-powered virtual assistants (Prasad et al., 2024). They can be used to add explanations when viewing the site, by integrating them into mobile applications, augmented reality (AR) devices or interactive kiosks (Ramon, 2022). Thus, tourists can receive answers to their questions in real time, with the information adapted to the needs and language of the tourist. They often offer routes and point out interesting elements about the site being viewed, and historical reconstructions can be made for the relevant site. Generative AI allows the creation of personalized stories and captivating experiences, or educational games, tailored to their age, interests or educational level. Natural language processing, AR and VR technologies, and generative AI models are used to offer historical, artistic, and symbolic explanations tailored to the profile, language, and preferences of tourists, increasing accessibility and personalization of the visit (Sánchez-Martín et al., 2025). AI also allows for sign language translation or text-to-speech, which also includes people with disabilities exploring the sites. Mobile applications and websites can use adaptive interfaces that change their content, structure, and level of complexity based on the cognitive profile, age, language, or abilities of the user.

Another opportunity for AI is directly related to the way **cultural heritage is documented and presented**. A large part of the library collection is being digitized, giving more people access to valuable documents and allowing them to conduct their own research. With AI technologies for computer vision (CV) and deep learning (DL), it is possible to explore huge amounts of collected materials. AI discovers new interesting stories that can attract the interest of tourists. In addition, with the CV technique, architectural elements can be captured and recognized (Folino et al., 2024), which allows for the classification of historical buildings and the discovery of new ones. With the help of CV and generative AI, partially destroyed objects can be restored and presented in a finished 3D form for tourists. The capabilities of AI to recognize and classify images allow the preservation and presentation of local customs, dances, etc. intangible heritage.

AI enables the preservation of **memories of events** and the creation of heritage, allowing local communities to actively participate in the generation of content, and is also able to extract stories for a given period from publications on the web. AI can include personal stories and narratives, integrating them into virtual tours (Lin, 2024). AI with natural language processing technology allows for the creation of documents from oral narratives, thus preserving memories of events or traditional knowledge, crafts and art. The knowledge thus accumulated can be processed with the mechanisms for DL and the region-specific color can be discovered, which can be the basis for its presentation and the creation of its business card.

Generative AI allows for the automatic **creation of content** for marketing purposes. For example, descriptions of cultural sites, for various publications or advertisements can be adapted according to the client's profile. In addition, AI also allows for the creation of 3D visualizations of sites. This allows for the continuous and rapid creation of content at lower costs. Another possibility of AI is the provision of **personalized suggestions** and recommendations. Depending on the data collected about the tourist's profile, AI can create suggestions for exploring sites specifically for him. AI collects data from multiple sources, such as browsing history, previous trips, comments left, geographic location or requested location, stated interests, real-time behavior, age, language, and information about nearby attractions, etc. Recommendations can be used to select trips and send personalized invitations to customers to join them. They can be added to mobile and web applications and displayed during special offers, ticket sales changes, etc. In marketing, events can be recommended based on previous searches or messages can be sent from campaigns with audience adaptation. This leads to higher user engagement and improves the user experience. These applications use AI technologies, semantic analysis, fuzzy logic, natural language processing, etc.

AI can analyze tourist profiles using clustering, intelligent segmentation, and data mining techniques. This can identify target groups with specific behavior patterns and preferences in large volumes of data. Not only can personalize offers be sent, but **new products can also be created** specifically for a given tourist profile. Museums can use the tourist profile and offer age-appropriate games for participants, or professional document reconstructions with the capabilities of AI to clean up problems in hard-to-read text. AI can analyze images and collect feedback on them. This allows you to find the photos that attract the most attention and select the ones suitable for advertising according to the audience.

AI can also be used for **continuous monitoring** and data collection on the condition of cultural sites or areas. For this purpose, AI technologies, IoT devices or sensors, and various models with ML or DL analyze the collected data. This way, imperceptible changes related to erosion, moisture,

pollution, etc. can be detected at an early stage. The impact of the flow of tourists on a given area or historical site can be assessed, and its volume can be optimized to limit its impact on the sites.

Benefits of AI in tourism marketing

AI allows for the analysis of large volumes of data, simulation of events and prediction of behavior. In tourism, the application of AI technologies improves experiences, making them more accessible, interactive and attractive, with the ability to attract underrepresented groups. Advantages of AI in tourism marketing can be summarized in several main groups, some of which are specific to the field of tourism (Fig. 1).

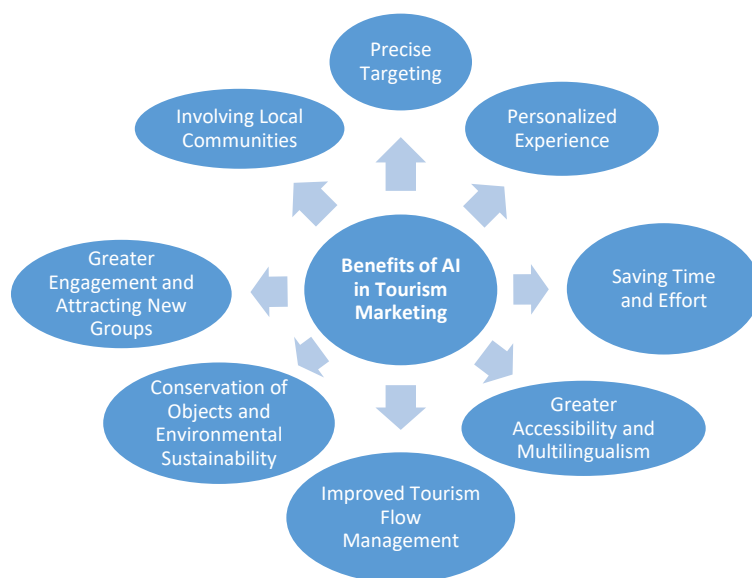


Figure 1: Benefits of using AI in digital marketing for tourism

The capabilities of AI for marketing come down to personalization for customers, such as messages, advertisements, offers and experiences. It facilitates the work of specialists with the automatic generation of content on various social platforms and sites. It allows for the prediction of customer behavior and assessment of the strength of different actions from the marketing mix for different target groups. This allows for the optimization of advertising campaigns and their targeting to target groups. In this way, costs can be optimized by targeting the most susceptible customers and appropriate target audiences. AI also allows for analyzing the behavior of individual customers and creating personalized advertising for the type of products they are interested in.

Interest and promotion is achieved with the capabilities of AI for digital storytelling. AI also allows for the presentation of content in a way that attracts unrepresented categories of potential customers who do not use classic advertising channels. AR and VR experiences, reconstructions and gamification attract interest and allow for familiarization and stimulation of the desire to learn about

culture and traditions. This can be achieved by achieving greater engagement with cultural heritage even among groups that traditionally do not show interest.

AI allows for continuous customer service and the inclusion of various intelligent assistants to facilitate access to the services offered, i.e. intelligent service. The site or advertising can be translated into different languages to increase the audience. The inclusion of chatbots and virtual assistants can simulate interaction with an employee.

Different experiences can be recommended to tourists and recommendations or itineraries can be personalized. Intelligent assistants can optimize routes based on the opening hours of tourist sites and the period of tourists' visit or based on the ticket budget.

With the help of AI, tourist behavior can be analyzed and the opening hours of different tourist sites can be optimized. AI also allows prices to be dynamically determined or adjusted according to the time range. Similar to traffic systems, tourist flow can be monitored, predicted and managed to reduce tourist congestion and ensure access to a given service by more tourists. Greater conservation of sites and a smaller ecological footprint can be achieved.

Finally, AI can collect and analyze data from many channels, such as comments, social networks, determine attitudes and sentiments based on the statements left and thus analyze online reputation and return feedback. This can be done for a specific site or used to determine the reputation of a given destination for a specific group of tourists.

AI can be used not only to study tourists, but also to improve contact with local communities in order to attract them to the implementation of various tourism projects. AI can be used to collect and analyze local crafts, culinary tastes, customs, legends or cultural features. It can also be used to predict the possibilities of settlements for receiving tourists by studying the bed capacity, capacity of water sources and the availability of other resources. It can also predict the maximum capacity for receiving tourists while maintaining ecological balance.

Explainable AI, together with decision support systems, provide an opportunity to improve sustainability by proposing policies for the region. They are based on the integration of cultural, economic and environmental data, together with established priorities for the community. They can collect data from residents' comments and assess the attitude towards one or another solution.

In order to realize the benefits of AI for tourism marketing and cultural heritage preservation, a number of stakeholders need to come together. These include tourism companies, as well as institutions such as the Ministry of Tourism, the administration of cultural sites, municipalities, marketing and IT companies, universities, influencers, and bloggers.

AI challenges in tourism marketing

Despite the numerous advantages of using AI in tourism and cultural heritage marketing, it poses some ethical and technical challenges, such as bias, data protection, scalability, lack of specialists, the need for community participation, etc.

An important challenge to the introduction of AI in the presentation of cultural heritage in tourism is the fear of **distorting cultural values**. This is possible if the AI is trained on unrepresentative data. It is advisable to involve specialists and representatives of local communities in the evaluation of the data used to train the AI. Concerns about the commodification of cultural heritage and the lack of respect for culture are also obstacles to the use of AI for content generation (Hernandez-Tamurejo, 2025).

Another possibility is the introduction of **prejudice** and the reinforcement of stereotypes. Historical training data may contain and lead to the reproduction of ethnic, gender, racial or class prejudices. Especially if a particular community is underrepresented in the training data. It is recommended to have professional oversight of the training data and to develop ethical frameworks to flag the detection of bias in the documents.

Personalizing the tourism experience by incorporating experiences based on the stories of local residents poses a risk of uninformed data collection and disclosure of personal data. In addition, a number of tourism platforms use data from customer profiles for marketing purposes, as well as collect secondary information about their behavior without their informed consent. This requires the inclusion of a customer opt-out option, anonymization mechanisms, access control and transparency (Zhu et al., 2023).

Another problem is the possibility that AI can reinforce **inequality** if it is not designed to be universally accessible. Vulnerable groups can be excluded due to language, technological or financial barriers. Therefore, it is recommended to use adaptive interfaces (Deng, 2025), which do not require new technological devices, but support diverse language translation and universal design. From a marketing perspective, it is also desirable to reach a larger audience.

Another challenge is the lack of **trust** in virtual assistants and AI-recommended routes and offers (Law et al., 2025). An opportunity to overcome such distrust is the use of explainable AI, which describes the reasons behind the suggestions.

Another problem is the **diversity of AI-supplied content**, when AI recommends the most popular site. This leads to a decrease in diversity, lack of customer interest and sustainability of tourism. A possible solution is the use of explainable AI, audits and human supervision (Fouad et al., 2024).

Often, when generating content for advertisements, games, videos and others, AI is guided by the interests of customers, with its goal being to promote cultural heritage. This leads to a one-sided presentation of culture and sometimes to a distortion of the idea of it. In addition, the **specificity of the region can be ignored**, and different sites can be presented in the same way. AI does not always correctly account for the nuances of human emotions, cultural differences, and personal preferences. In tourism, experience and emotional connection are key, and automated messages can sound impersonal. Since generative AI does not yet have the creativity of humans, it is advisable to set the AI's goals for specialists.

Integrating AI into tourism marketing poses ethical challenges. Addressing these challenges requires robust regulatory frameworks, community engagement, bias auditing, and inclusive governance that ensures that technologies enhance cultural value without compromising its integrity or equity.

The use of AI poses a number of technical challenges. A key challenge is AI's need for large volumes of high-quality data. In the field of cultural heritage, data is often fragmented, non-standardized, or copyrighted, limiting its widespread use for marketing purposes.

Data from different sources is incompatibilistic in formats and protocols, which hinders their integration into a large-scale project and limits the creation of personalized tourism experiences. The adoption of open standards is an opportunity to ensure technological sustainability (Aliyah et al., 2023).

Scalability of AI applications is difficult to ensure due to infrastructure, funding and lack of specialists (Correia, 2025). High maintenance and modernization **costs** compromise the sustainability of the different systems for individual museums and sites and deepen regional inequalities. The quality of the **infrastructure** in the region is also a problem. This increases inequalities in the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. A possible solution is the implementation of digital inclusion policies, continuous training and support for local innovation (Intissar et al., 2024).

AI classification algorithms give good results when applied to data known to the training population. However, if such an algorithm is used to classify data that is completely new, it may be incorrectly classified. Therefore, to ensure **transparency and reliability**, continuous verification with explainable AI, periodic audits and cross-validation techniques are recommended for these algorithms (Deng, 2025).

Since AI needs a lot of data and collects a rich customer base, it is often subject to malicious attacks. Therefore, ensuring the **security** of customer data of tourism organizations is a challenge for AI.

Information leaks lead to a loss of trust from customers and can be detrimental to the reputation of the organization. This requires, in addition to technical, additional measures to implement security policies, access control and handling of personal data.

Conceptual Model of an AI Platform for Digital Marketing in Tourism

The proposed conceptual scheme (Fig. 2) is based on the basic sequence of phases when working with AI algorithms. These phases do not depend on the chosen algorithm or type of AI, but are general enough and are necessary for any type of AI. They include receiving and collecting data from various sources, cleaning it and translating it into an appropriate format, performing data processing by the algorithm and presenting the results in a form suitable for use, as well as integrating with external systems in the Internet space so that the results can be used for subsequent analyses.

The first phase of data collection should ensure reliable and secure transmission of data collected from various sources. After data collection, it is often necessary for the data from the repository to be processed as it passes through cloud storage. The conceptual model uses a large language model to process unstructured data, such as scanned documents or handwritten notes, and to extract historical event data from natural language text. Business Intelligence Forecasting Modules can be used for various forecasts, both for marketing systems and for the administrative systems of individual sites, such as predicting tourist interest and seasonality. To overcome the lack of explainability, since some AI algorithms operate on the principle of a black box, Explainable AI was created. In the final phase, the results of the work of the intelligent platform can be integrated into Internet systems.

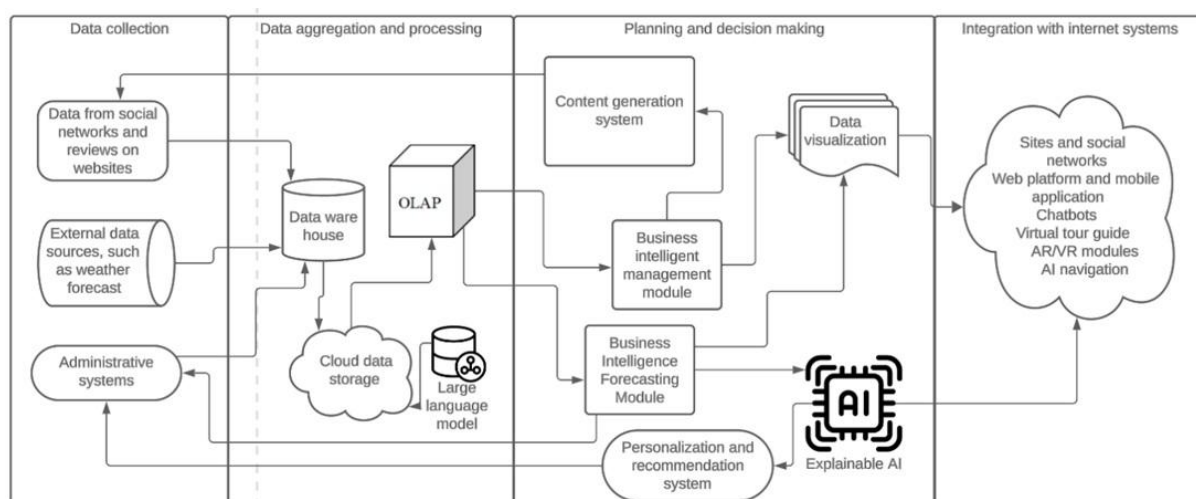


Figure 2: Conceptual model of an AI platform for the tourism sector

Conclusion

The results of the study confirm that AI plays a strategic role in tourism marketing by introducing new forms of conservation, interpretation and access to cultural heritage. The application of technologies such as machine learning, computer vision, generative models and recommendation systems has made it possible to optimize destination management, automate key processes and generate more personalized, immersive tourism experiences tailored to the needs of diverse audiences. In addition, AI removes language, sensory and cognitive barriers through inclusive solutions such as multilingual virtual assistants, adaptive interfaces and accessible platforms. However, the implementation of AI poses ethical and technical challenges. Therefore, it is essential to develop a platform that encompasses the different actors and to define the goals of the marketing system, such as sustainability, accessibility, equity and engagement. The challenges can be overcome with efforts at different levels by all actors. Combining AI marketing and excellent user design opens up new perspectives, increasing accessibility and engaging new groups of travelers from different generations.

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HOW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES HAVE CHANGED THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE: ANALYSIS OF WESTERN BALKANS – CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract: *The rapid advancement of digital technologies has profoundly reshaped the dynamics of democratic governance and how governments engage with citizens. However, in transitional regions such as the Western Balkans, the implementation of digital government remains in its formative stages. This study investigates how digitalization through e-governance platforms, social media, artificial intelligence, and data-driven decision-making has transformed state-citizen interactions, transparency, and political participation. Using comparative analysis and regional case studies, it explores both the opportunities and vulnerabilities arising from this digital transition. While digital tools have expanded civic engagement, accountability, and access to information, they have also generated new challenges, including disinformation, digital inequality, cybersecurity risks, and the politicization of online spaces. Drawing on data collected from six Western Balkan countries (Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro), the paper argues that the future of democratic governance in the region will depend on how effectively governments, civil society, and international partners harness technological innovation to strengthen democratic institutions and mitigate associated risks. Ultimately, the research underscores the need for coherent digital governance strategies and inclusive policies that balance technological progress with democratic resilience, but the most needed in WB6 countries is to adapt the law to the digital era.*

Keywords: digital technologies, democratic governance, Western Balkans

JEL: O33, O38, O380

Introduction

Digital technologies have become a central force shaping contemporary democratic governance. Governments increasingly rely on digital platforms to deliver public services, engage citizens, and enhance administrative efficiency. Simultaneously, citizens use digital tools, particularly social media platforms, to express political opinions, mobilize collectively, and demand accountability. While these developments have strengthened democratic practices in many consolidated democracies, their effects in transitional and hybrid regimes remain complex and uneven.

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The Western Balkans (WB6) that we have in this study, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, represent a region characterized by democratic fragility, ongoing institutional reforms, and aspirations for European Union (EU) integration. Digital transformation in these countries has accelerated over the past decade, largely driven by EU conditionality, donor assistance, and domestic modernization agendas. Nevertheless, democratic governance in the region continues to face persistent challenges, including weak rule of law, political polarization, limited media freedom, and low public trust in institutions.

This article examines how digital technologies are reshaping democratic governance in the Western Balkans by addressing three core questions:

1. How have digital technologies transformed state-citizen interactions in the WB6?
2. What democratic opportunities and risks emerge from digitalization in the region?
3. What legal, institutional, and policy reforms are required to ensure democratic resilience in the digital era?

Literature Review: Digital Technologies and Democratic Governance in the Western Balkans

A growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship examines how digital technologies reshape democratic governance by transforming political communication, participation, representation, and institutional structures. This literature conceptualizes the relationship between digital technologies and democracy through multiple analytical lenses, including e-governance, e-participation, technological citizenship, and the digital public sphere (Norris, 2001; Fountain, 2001; Gilardi, 2022). Digitalization is increasingly understood not merely as a technical process, but as a socio-political transformation that reconfigures how citizens access information, interact with public authorities, and engage in collective decision-making. Digital technologies are used in European countries to involve more citizens also in budget issues, using platforms such as e-budgetary.

Recent research emphasizes that digital technologies affect the entire policy cycle, from agenda-setting and issue framing to policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. According to (Gilardi, 2022), digital technologies reshape political processes by altering communication patterns between citizens and political elites, challenging traditional intermediaries such as political parties and legacy media. Digital platforms are also used by political parties to increase people's engagement. While these developments hold normative promise for more inclusive, transparent, and responsive governance, empirical studies consistently highlight tensions between democratic ideals and actual outcomes, particularly in contexts characterized by weak institutions and uneven digital capacity, and we have those two characteristics in Western Balkan countries.

1. Digital Technologies and the Transformation of State–Citizen Interactions in the WB6

In the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), digital technologies have primarily transformed state–citizen interactions through the expansion of e-government services, online administrative platforms, and digital communication channels. Early expectations, influenced by modernization and new public management theories, viewed e-government as a tool to reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies, curb corruption, and strengthen trust in public institutions (Norris, 2001; Fountain, 2001).

Empirical evidence suggests that digitalization in the WB6 has improved access to public services and enhanced administrative efficiency, particularly in tax administration, civil registries, business registration, and social services. Online portals and one-stop digital services have lowered

transaction costs for citizens and reduced direct contact with public officials, thereby limiting opportunities for petty corruption. However, the literature also notes that these improvements are uneven across countries and sectors, reflecting disparities in institutional capacity, political commitment, and digital infrastructure. These platforms are more prevalent at the national level than at the local level.

Beyond service delivery, digital platforms have altered modes of political communication and consultation. Governments increasingly use online surveys, consultation portals, and social media channels to solicit citizen input and disseminate information. Yet studies indicate that these interactions often remain one-directional and instrumental, prioritizing information provision over genuine deliberation or co-decision (Helen Marhetts et al, 2016; Gilardi, 2022). In hybrid and semi-democratic regimes, such as several WB6 states, digital tools may enhance the appearance of responsiveness without substantially redistributing decision-making power.

2. Democratic Opportunities and Risks Emerging from Digitalization

The academic literature identifies several democratic opportunities associated with digital transformation. Digital technologies can lower barriers to political participation by reducing the costs associated with time, mobility, and access to information. E-participation mechanisms, such as online consultations, collaborative platforms, and crowdsourced policymaking, have the potential to broaden inclusion and facilitate more continuous forms of citizen engagement beyond electoral cycles (Legard, S., & Goldfrank, B, 2021), (Smith, G, 2009). In the Western Balkans, where trust in political institutions remains low, such tools may offer alternative channels for engagement, particularly for younger and urban populations. The youngest generation using these tools seeks to sign their opinions to mark somehow.

Digitalization has also been widely associated with enhanced transparency and accountability, particularly through expanded public access to government data, legislative proceedings, and policy outcomes. Open data initiatives and digital transparency tools reduce information asymmetries between public authorities and citizens by making budgetary allocations, public procurement processes, and administrative decisions more visible and traceable (Fung, 2007); Meijer, A., Curtin, D., & Hillebrandt, M, 2012). In the Western Balkans, recent initiatives to establish open data portals and to digitize public sector records have enhanced both the accessibility and usability of fiscal and administrative information, thereby increasing the capacity of civil society organizations, investigative journalists, and other accountability actors to scrutinize government performance and public decision-making. Mostly, the open data portals are created using European funds, or donors who want to impact on democracy in these countries.

From a governance perspective, digital transparency mechanisms can reinforce both horizontal accountabilities, by enabling oversight institutions and peer agencies to scrutinize executive action, and societal responsibility, by empowering non-state actors to hold public officials accountable through public scrutiny and advocacy (Bovens, 2007; Fox, J. A, 2015). This function is particularly significant in political contexts where formal accountability institutions are weak, politicized, or resource-constrained. However, the literature also cautions that transparency gains are contingent upon data quality, institutional responsiveness, and the existence of actors capable of translating information into accountability pressures, underscoring that digital openness alone does not automatically produce democratic accountability (Meijer, A., Curtin, D., & Hillebrandt, M, 2012), (Fox, J. A, 2015).

At the same time, the literature consistently warns of significant democratic risks. One of the most frequently cited challenges is the digital divide. Unequal access to digital infrastructure and digital literacy reproduces existing socio-economic inequalities, systematically excluding rural populations, older citizens, and marginalized groups from digital participation (Umar Congge et al, 2023). In the Western Balkans, disparities in internet access and digital skills remain substantial, limiting the inclusiveness of e-participation initiatives.

A second major risk concerns representativeness and bias. Empirical studies demonstrate that e-participation platforms tend to attract citizens who are already politically engaged and technologically proficient, resulting in skewed participation patterns and overrepresentation of certain demographic groups (Marcello Mariani & Yogesh K.Dwivedi, 2024). According to a previous study that we have conducted on e-participatory budget, we notice that only the citizens who work in public administration or are related to political parties have information on this. This undermines the democratic legitimacy of digital participation processes and raises questions about whose voices are amplified in digitally mediated governance.

A further risk is the phenomenon of “pseudo-participation.” (Bokyong Shin et al, J., 2024) show that many digital participation platforms prioritize the collection of citizen inputs without establishing clear mechanisms to integrate these contributions into decision-making processes. When citizen engagement does not influence policy outcomes, participation becomes symbolic rather than substantive, potentially eroding trust and political efficacy. This risk is particularly salient in the Western Balkans, where political elites may use digital tools to legitimize predetermined decisions rather than to genuinely share power.

Finally, scholars highlight risks related to political manipulation, surveillance, and control. Digital platforms can be used to manage discourse, marginalize dissenting voices, and selectively amplify supportive narratives, especially in contexts with weak regulatory oversight and limited media freedom (Helen Marhetts et al, 2016). These dynamics align with broader concerns about “digital authoritarianism,” where technologies intended to enhance participation are repurposed to consolidate political control. In Albania, during the period January-March 2025, a public consultation questionnaire was distributed by the government of Albania, called the “National Consultation,” organized by the Council of Ministers with the aim of hearing citizens’ opinions on important issues concerning the country’s development. This was an open process for all Albanian citizens over the age of 18. It was part of an initiative called the National Consultation, and the analysis of the responses was expected to inform further policymaking by the government. However, this questionnaire was accompanied by political debates, as the opposition claimed that it served to approve certain issues in the interest of the majority in an improper way and was practically just being used. Many people did not respond out of fear of control over their answers, as the questionnaire was sent by post to individuals' homes (Kryeministria, 2025).

3. Legal, Institutional, and Policy Reforms for Democratic Resilience

The literature converges on the argument that democratic outcomes of digitalization are not technologically determined but depend on legal, institutional, and policy frameworks. To ensure democratic resilience in the digital era, scholars emphasize the need for robust legal protections of digital rights, including data protection, privacy, freedom of expression, and transparency in algorithmic decision-making (Kitchin, 2014).

In the Western Balkans, alignment with European Union digital governance standards such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), open government principles, and interoperability

frameworks is frequently identified as a critical reform pathway (Sigma, 2024). Strengthening independent oversight bodies, data protection authorities, and regulatory agencies is essential to prevent misuse of digital technologies by state actors.

Institutionally, research underscores the importance of administrative capacity, inter-agency coordination, and digital skills within the public sector. Without adequate human and organizational resources, digital reforms risk remaining fragmented and superficial. Equally important is investment in digital literacy and civic education to enable citizens to engage meaningfully with digital governance tools (Gardenier, 2024).

Finally, policy-oriented scholarship advocates for hybrid participation models that combine digital and offline mechanisms. Such approaches can mitigate exclusion risks and enhance representativeness while preserving the efficiency gains of digitalization. Embedding clear feedback loops where governments explain how citizen input influences policy outcomes is identified as a key condition for transforming digital participation into a source of democratic legitimacy rather than symbolic consultation.

Methodology

Research Design and Methodological Approach

This study has a **comparative, qualitative research design**, supplemented by structured secondary data analysis, to investigate how digital technologies are reshaping democratic governance in the Western Balkans. The methodological approach is informed by interpretive and institutional perspectives in political science and public administration, which emphasize that technological change does not produce uniform political outcomes but interacts with existing institutional arrangements, power relations, and socio-political contexts and economic political one (Fountain, 2001; Gilardi, 2022).

Given the explanatory nature of the research questions, a qualitative-dominant design is particularly appropriate. As argued by (Smith, G, 2009), (Norris, 2001), qualitative approaches are well-suited to examining how digital participation mechanisms operate in practice, how citizens and institutions interpret them, and how they affect democratic legitimacy beyond measurable outputs. The study therefore prioritizes depth of analysis over causal generalization, aiming to identify patterns, mechanisms, and contextual constraints shaping digital democratic governance in transitional settings.

Methodological Limitations

The study faces several limitations. First, reliance on secondary data restricts insight into informal political practices and citizen perceptions that could be captured through interviews or surveys. Second, uneven data availability and reporting standards across WB6 countries limit direct comparability in certain policy areas. Finally, as a qualitative study, the findings are analytically rather than statistically generalizable.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a solid foundation for understanding how digital technologies interact with democratic governance in transitional contexts and offers empirically grounded insights relevant for both academic debate and policy design.

Comparative Case Selection

The research focuses on six countries of the Western Balkans: **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia** (WB6). Case selection follows a **most-similar systems design** (MSSD), a comparative strategy commonly used in political science to control for structural similarities while explaining variation in outcomes (Przeworski & Teune, 1970).

The reason why we analyse only these countries is that they share several defining characteristics: post-socialist political legacies, relatively young democratic institutions, hybrid or semi-democratic governance structures, and strong external influence through European Union accession conditionality. All of them want to be part of European Union. At the same time, they differ in levels of digital government development, political competition, administrative capacity, and media freedom. This combination allows for meaningful comparison of how similar digital technologies produce divergent democratic effects depending on national institutional and political contexts (Gilardi, 2022), (Legard, S., & Goldfrank, B, 2021).

Data Sources and Collection Methods

To ensure analytical robustness and validity, the study relies on **data triangulation**, combining multiple qualitative and documentary sources (Denzin, 2012):

1. **Policy, Legal, and Strategic Documents;** National legislation on e-government, data protection, digital participation, and electronic identification was systematically reviewed for each WB6 country. In addition, national digitalization strategies, public administration reform plans, and EU accession progress reports were analyzed to assess institutional commitments and regulatory alignment with European digital governance standards, particularly the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and open government principles (OECD/SIGMA, 2023).
2. **Institutional and International Reports;** Comparative assessments from international organizations and civil society actors, including OECD/SIGMA (2023) and the Open Society Foundations (2022), provided structured data on digital government maturity, open data practices, and civic technology initiatives. These sources were used to contextualize national developments within broader regional trends and to identify common structural constraints affecting democratic outcomes.
3. **Academic Literature and Conceptual Frameworks;** Peer-reviewed scholarly works on digital democracy, e-participation, and technological citizenship informed both the analytical framework and the interpretation of empirical findings (Norris, 2001; Marhetts et al., 2016; Gilardi, 2022; Shin et al., 2024). The literature was used not only descriptively but also analytically, to assess whether observed practices align with normative expectations of democratic participation, transparency, and accountability.

Analytical Framework and Data Analysis

The analysis is structured around a **thematic analytical framework** derived from the literature on democratic governance and digitalization. Data were interpreted along five core analytical dimensions:

1. **State–Citizen Interaction:** examining how digital platforms transform administrative service delivery, communication, and consultation mechanisms (Fountain, 2001; Norris, 2001).

2. **Democratic Participation:** assessing the scope, inclusiveness, and representativeness of e-participation tools such as online consultations, e-petitions, and digital feedback mechanisms (Smith, 2009; Legard & Hovik, 2022).
 3. **Transparency and Accountability:** evaluating the role of open data initiatives, digital access to information, and online oversight mechanisms in strengthening democratic accountability (OSF, 2022).
 4. **Risks and Democratic Vulnerabilities:** identifying challenges related to digital inequality, disinformation, pseudo-participation, surveillance, and political manipulation (Mariani, 2024; Shin et al., 2024; Umar Congge et al., 2023).
 5. **Legal and Institutional Resilience:** analyzing the adequacy of regulatory frameworks, oversight institutions, and administrative capacity to govern digital technologies democratically (Kitchin, 2014; Gilardi, 2022).
- Comparative analysis was conducted by first examining each country individually and then identifying cross-national similarities and divergences. This approach allows for the identification of both **regional patterns** and **country-specific dynamics**, avoiding technological determinism and highlighting the political nature of digital governance outcomes. The table below presents key statistics on the relationship between digitalization and democratic governance across Western Balkan countries. It includes the share of internet users (2023), UN e-Government Development Index (latest dataset), Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (2023), and Freedom House's Freedom in the World scores and status (2024). Together, these indicators provide a comparative overview of digital access, institutional digital development, and democratic freedoms in the region.

Table 1: Digitalization and Democracy Indicators in the Western Balkans (2023–2024)

Country	Internet users (% of population, 2023)	EGDI (UN e-Gov) [score] (latest UN dataset)	Democracy Index (EIU, 2023) [score 0-10]	Freedom in the World (Freedom	Freedom House status (2024)
Albania	83,1	0,8	6,28	68	Partly Free
Serbia	85,4	0,8618	6,33	56	Partly Free
Kosovo	96,6	n/a	n/a	60	Partly Free
Montenegro	89,8	0,7211	6,67	69	Partly Free
Bosnia & Herzegovina	83,4	0,6329	5	51	Partly Free
North Macedonia	87,2	0,7	6,03	67	Partly Free

Source: ITU / World Bank; Economist Intelligence Unit; Freedom House

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

To enhance **internal validity**, the study employs methodological triangulation and consistent application of analytical categories across cases. Reliability is supported through the use of publicly available, authoritative data sources and well-established conceptual frameworks. While the study

does not involve primary data collection with human subjects, ethical considerations remain relevant, particularly in interpreting sensitive issues related to surveillance, political control, and citizen rights in digitally mediated environments.

Conclusion

This study has examined how digital technologies are reshaping democratic governance in the Western Balkans by transforming state–citizen interactions, expanding new avenues for participation, and simultaneously generating novel democratic risks. Drawing on comparative analysis across the WB6 countries—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia—the findings confirm that digitalization constitutes neither an inherently democratizing nor a purely technocratic process. Rather, its democratic effects are deeply contingent upon legal frameworks, institutional capacity, political will, and levels of digital inclusion.

The analysis demonstrates that digital technologies have contributed to measurable improvements in administrative efficiency, service accessibility, and transparency, particularly through the expansion of e-government platforms and open data initiatives. In several WB6 countries, online public services have reduced bureaucratic discretion and transaction costs, offering modest gains in accountability and citizen trust. These developments align with early expectations in the literature that digital government can strengthen governance performance in transitional settings (Norris, 2001; Fountain, 2001).

However, the findings also reveal a persistent gap between **formal digital participation mechanisms** and their **substantive democratic impact**. While governments increasingly deploy online consultations, e-petitions, and digital feedback tools, these mechanisms often function in a consultative or symbolic manner rather than as channels for meaningful influence over policy outcomes. In line with recent scholarship on pseudo-participation, citizen inputs are frequently collected without transparent procedures for integration into decision-making processes, undermining political efficacy and trust (Shin et al., 2024).

The study further underscores that digitalization has introduced new vulnerabilities into already fragile democratic environments. Digital inequality remains a major structural constraint, as uneven access to digital infrastructure and skills systematically excludes rural populations, older citizens, and socio-economically marginalized groups from digital participation (Umar Congge et al., 2023). Consequently, e-participation in the WB6 tends to be dominated by politically engaged and digitally literate citizens, raising concerns about representativeness and democratic legitimacy (Mariani, 2024).

Moreover, the research highlights the political risks associated with weak regulatory oversight. In several cases, digital platforms have been used not only to enhance transparency but also to manage political communication, marginalize dissent, and shape public discourse in ways that favor incumbents. These dynamics reflect broader concerns about the instrumentalization of digital technologies in hybrid regimes, where digital tools coexist with democratic institutions but are not consistently governed by democratic norms (Gilardi, 2022; Marhetts et al., 2016).

Taken together, the findings support the central argument of this study: the future of democratic governance in the Western Balkans will depend less on technological adoption itself and more on the **quality of democratic governance surrounding digitalization**. Without coherent legal frameworks, institutional safeguards, and inclusive participation strategies, digital transformation risks reinforcing existing power asymmetries rather than fostering democratic resilience.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings and theoretical insights of this study, several policy-oriented recommendations can be advanced to strengthen democratic governance in the digital era across the Western Balkans.

Strengthening Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

First, WB6 countries should prioritize the **harmonization and modernization of legal frameworks** governing digital participation, data protection, and electronic identification. While progress has been made in aligning with EU standards such as the GDPR, gaps remain in the formal recognition of digital civic actions, including e-petitions and legally binding electronic signatures. Clear legal provisions are essential to ensure that digital participation mechanisms have tangible political consequences rather than symbolic status (Kitchin, 2014; OECD/SIGMA, 2023).

In parallel, stronger and more independent oversight institutions—such as data protection authorities and regulatory agencies—are needed to prevent the misuse of digital technologies for surveillance, political manipulation, or selective enforcement. Legal clarity and institutional independence are crucial preconditions for democratic trust in digital governance.

Enhancing the Quality and Impact of E-Participation

Second, governments should move beyond the quantitative expansion of e-participation tools and focus on their **qualitative democratic impact**. This requires embedding digital participation mechanisms within formal policy-making procedures and establishing transparent feedback loops that explain how citizen input influences final decisions. Without such mechanisms, participation risks remaining performative and may contribute to political disengagement rather than empowerment (Smith, 2009; Shin et al., 2024).

Hybrid participation models that combine digital and offline engagement should be promoted to enhance inclusiveness and deliberative quality. Such models are particularly important in contexts characterized by digital divides and low institutional trust, as they allow broader segments of society to participate meaningfully in governance processes (Legard & Hovik, 2022).

Addressing Digital Inequality and Capacity Gaps

Third, targeted investments in **digital infrastructure, skills, and civic education** are essential to mitigate exclusionary effects of digital governance. Public digital literacy campaigns should be designed to reach rural populations, older citizens, and marginalized groups, ensuring that digital participation does not become the privilege of a narrow socio-economic elite. Strengthening digital skills within public administrations is equally important to ensure that digital tools are implemented consistently and responsibly (Gardenier, 2024).

Fostering Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Finally, democratic digital governance in the Western Balkans would benefit from stronger collaboration between **governments, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and technology developers**. Co-designing civic technology tools with users and watchdog actors can enhance transparency, usability, and democratic legitimacy. International partners, particularly the European Union, should continue to support such initiatives by linking digital transformation more explicitly to democratic conditionality rather than administrative efficiency alone.

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AI-POWERED VISUAL MARKETING CONTENT: MANUAL VS AI-ASSISTED LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: *AI-powered visual content marketing is attracting growing attention from marketers, designers, and consumers. Through manual and AI-assisted literature reviews, this paper outlines key methodological considerations for assessing AI-powered images. The approach involves a manual analysis of scientific articles, focusing on the research aim, stimuli, outcomes, participants, and results. The same procedure is applied to ChatGPT 5.2 Plus. The results are nearly identical: AI-powered images often outperform human-made images; however, performance varies across product categories, disclosure procedures, and AI models. This study can serve as a reference methodological framework for future research on the quality and performance of visual marketing content.*

Keywords: visual marketing content, AI-powered images, customer responses

JEL: M

Introduction

Visual content marketing is gaining popularity, especially as digital channels (websites, blogs, social media platforms) have evolved and individuals increasingly express their identities, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors visually rather than verbally. In this context, the role of design has become essential not only for graphic designers and marketers (Murár & Kubovics, 2023) but also for consumers themselves. Generative AI is enhancing creativity by offering new tools for the synthetic design of visual marketing content. The current discussion focuses on comparing „AI-powered“ and „human-made“ visual content and how each type influences customer responses. The aim of this paper is to outline key methodological aspects for assessing AI-powered visual content through manual and AI-assisted literature reviews.

Literature background

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence design tools enables people from diverse backgrounds to create their own visual content projects. Therefore, visual content design literacy is now essential for both marketers and consumers. The reviewed scientific articles examine two aspects of AI-powered visual content design: its creation and perception across categories, including food (Arvaj et al., 2025; Califano & Spence, 2024), drinks, medical aesthetics products, public services (Zhang & Hur, 2025), destinations, and other tourism products (Bui et al., 2024; Hou et al., 2025). Hartmann et al. (2025) adopt a different approach to explore AI-powered visual marketing content – not by product category but by application, based on data source (firm-generated content [FGC] vs user-generated content [UGC]) and marketing objectives (call to action vs brand identity).

Creation of visual content

Regarding the creation of visual content, the primary focus is on using AI tools to present products visually. Generative AI can quickly manipulate and adapt visual content for multiple audiences and

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purposes (Heitmann et al., 2025). AI-powered visual content is often perceived as more innovative than human-made visual content (Chen et al., 2025). However, the literature indicates that AI-generated images, particularly for complex products, often lack technical accuracy and detail, including inappropriate texture, color, shape, and composition (Arvaj et al., 2025). In addition, Murár and Kubovics (2023) observe that AI-generated images may not reflect pure human qualities such as emotions and empathy, and they can also be inadequate for specific contexts that AI does not fully understand. On the other hand, applying AI models for content production is associated with significant cost reduction. Hartmann et al. (2025) compared the cost per image created by a human freelancer, stock photos, and different AI models and observed extremely high differences in prices (USD): freelancer (100), stock photo (9), Midjourney v6 (0.07), Firefly 2 (0.05), DALL-E (0.04), Imagen 2 (0.02), Realistic Vision (0.00026), SDXL Turbo (0.00005). Regardless of the costs, different AI models for constructing and deconstructing images can provide varying results – sometimes satisfying, sometimes not – for different types of products and design objectives (Hartmann et al., 2025).

Perception of visual content

Key questions about the perception of visual content include the following: „Do people distinguish between AI-generated and human-made images?“, „How does disclosing the origin of the image (AI-generated or human-made) impact human perceptions?“ (Califano & Spence, 2024); „How do AI-generated visual design elements affect user acceptance?“ (Wei & Chen, 2025); „How does AI-generated visual content differ from human-made visual content in terms of marketing performance?“ (Hartmann et al., 2025; Heitmann et al., 2025). Overall, recent research provides empirical evidence that AI-powered (synthetic) images can compete with and even outperform human-made images in perceived quality, realism, aesthetics, creativity, attitudes, prompt following, click-through rate, and other metrics, though these results vary by factors such as product category (food, drinks, medical aesthetics products, public services, destinations, etc.), processing level (unprocessed, processed, ultra-processed), image source (FGC or UGC), marketing objectives (call to action or brand identity), and the type of AI model used for synthetic image generation (Arvaj et al., 2025; Califano & Spence, 2024; Hartmann et al., 2025; Zhang & Hur, 2025). In some cases, customers tend to evaluate AI-generated images as more visually appealing (Arvaj et al., 2025). AI-powered visual content can also match or exceed human-made content in marketing performance (Heitmann et al., 2025).

Despite clear structural, color, shape, and texture differences, people do not always distinguish between AI-powered and human-made images without explicit disclosure (Arvaj et al., 2025; Califano & Spence, 2024; Hou et al., 2025). They often prefer synthetic images as more visually appealing, but once the source is disclosed, human-made images receive more credit (Arvaj et al., 2025; Califano & Spence, 2024; Chilupuri et al., 2025). Consumers can recognize an image's synthetic origin yet still favor it over a human-made image when the origin is not disclosed (Califano & Spence, 2024; Hartmann et al., 2025). Once the human-made origin of an image is disclosed, this strengthens its appeal, whereas disclosing the synthetic origin of an image mitigates its impact on customer perceptions (Califano & Spence, 2024; Owen & Roberts, 2024; Zhang & Hur, 2025). Perceived authenticity of AI-powered images without disclosure is also reported as significant in the tourism context (Bui et al., 2024). For product categories with lower customer involvement (e.g., food, drinks), AI-powered images are often preferred, whereas for categories with higher customer involvement and greater reliance on trust (e.g., medical aesthetics products, public services), human-made images are preferred (Zhang & Hur, 2025). Zhang and Hur (2025) also found that disclosing the motivations (privacy protection, cost efficiency, visual appeal) for using AI-powered images can elicit more favorable (privacy protection), less favorable (cost efficiency), or neutral (visual appeal) customer responses.

In summary, AI tools for visual design are often considered revolutionary for the better because they improve efficiency (Wei & Chen, 2025); unleash human creativity (Hartmann et al., 2025; Wei & Chen, 2025); enhance innovation and design quality (Murár & Kubovics, 2023); reduce design production costs (Hartmann et al., 2025); simplify and speed up content creation (Murár & Kubovics, 2023) and visual design ideation, including brainstorming, concept creation, sketching, prototyping, and visualization (Owen & Roberts, 2024); and provide flexibility for quick adaptations, relevance for different audiences, personalization, automation, and the creation of unconventional designs (Heitmann et al., 2025; Murár & Kubovics, 2023). On the other hand, AI-powered visual content is associated with negative connotations, including concerns about authenticity, trust, misinformation, and visual inaccuracy (Hou et al., 2025; Murár & Kubovics, 2023; Zhang & Hur, 2025).

Although the number of AI tools for design in marketing is constantly growing, the impact of AI-powered visual marketing content on consumer behavior and marketing performance remains underexplored. The existing literature provides empirical evidence from various studies, yet it still does not suggest a common methodology for comparative research in the AI-powered visual content marketing domain.

Methodology

The goal of this paper is to propose a common methodology for comparative research on AI-powered visual content marketing, drawing on existing studies. Accordingly, a comparative literature review is conducted using the following procedure: 1) an initial set of articles, highly relevant to the topic, is identified; 2) a detailed content analysis of the abstracts is conducted to identify key themes regarding the purpose, methodology, and findings of existing research; 3) nine open-source full-text articles are carefully read, and their content is coded into categories such as „purpose“, „methodology“, and „results“; 4) four articles (Arvaj et al., 2025; Califano & Spence, 2024; Hartmann et al., 2025; Zhang & Hur, 2025) that meet the following criteria: strong marketing focus, empirical evidence, methodological similarities, are selected for detailed manual content analysis and methodological comparison; 5) a coding procedure is applied to research aim, stimuli, outcomes, participants, and results; 6) interpretive summaries for each variable are organized in a comparison table by author and study; 7) the same methodology is prompted in ChatGPT 5.2 Plus, and the following instruction is added: *I am going to upload the 4 articles that I analyse in depth. Please, follow my methodology and create 5 tables which compare the four articles on the following criteria: Table 1 (source, study, research aim); Table 2 (source, study, stimuli); Table 3 (source, study, outcomes); Table 4 (source, study, type of participants, number of participants); Table 5 (source, study, results).* After the first result, the following clarification is added: *Rework the tables as follows: 1. Follow the order Hartmann, Zhang, Califano, Arvaj; 2. Include separate rows for each study in every article.*; 8) the content of the manual and the AI-assisted literature review tables is compared; 9) in conclusion, a reference methodological research procedure is proposed for future research on AI-powered visual marketing content and customer responses to it.

Results and discussion

The methodological content analyses includes four scientific articles, namely: „The power of generative marketing: „Can generative AI create superhuman visual marketing content?“; „The impact of generative AI images on consumer attitudes in advertising“; „Assessing the visual appeal of real/AI-generated food images“; „Analysis of relevance and appeal of visual presentation of meat products generated using artificial intelligence“. All of them are with

experimental research designs and include more than one study. The total number of individual studies under investigation is 12.

Research aim

Generally, the research aim of all studies is to investigate how AI-powered visual marketing content differs from human-made visual marketing content with respect to content production (features, costs, tools, etc.) and content consumption (customer responses such as perceived quality, realism, aesthetics, attitudes, behavioral intentions, etc.). Comparing the results of the manual and AI-assisted literature reviews, it can be concluded that the outcomes are nearly identical in meaning. The AI outputs are slightly shorter and more general, but they capture the essence of the topic with high precision. AI, even better than a human researcher, not only identifies the studies in each research paper but also names them accordingly, which helps readers quickly scan and understand the type of each study.

Table 1: Research aim: manual vs AI-assisted literature review

Source	Study	Research aim (MANUAL review)	Research aim (AI review)
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Manual: Study 1 AI: Study 1 (<i>Lab, perceptual</i>)	„The aim of Study 1 is to investigate if AI-generated images can achieve similar perceptual ratings as human-made images in terms of quality, realism, and aesthetics across common visual marketing applications.“ (p.16)	<i>To test whether AI-generated marketing images reach or exceed human-made images in perceived quality, realism, and aesthetics across marketing contexts.</i>
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Manual: Study 2 AI: Study 2 (<i>Ad pretest</i>)	The aim of Study 2 is to investigate „effectiveness and efficiency of AI-generated marketing imagery compared to commissioned human freelancers’ work“ (p.23). The AI models and the freelancers are given identical creative briefs. Study 2 adds marketing metrics (ad attitudes and purchase intentions) and production metrics (production costs and cost savings) to assess AI-powered vs. human-made visual content.	<i>To compare AI models and human freelancers on marketing-relevant outcomes (perception, attitude, behavioral intention, prompt following) under identical creative briefs.</i>
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Manual: Study 3 AI: Study 3 (<i>Field A/B test</i>)	The aim of Study 3 is to investigate the „real-world performance of AI-generated banner ads compared with a professional human-made stock photo“ (p.24). The performance metric is the click-through-rate (CTR).	<i>To test whether AI-generated banner ads achieve comparable or higher click-through rates than professional human-made stock images.</i>
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Manual: Study 1 AI: Study 1 (<i>No disclosure</i>)	The aim of Study 1 is to investigate „responses and attitudes toward AI-generated versus human-made images across both commercial and public service advertising contexts“ (p.6) without disclosing the source of the image.	<i>To test whether AI-generated and human-made ad images differ in trust, attitude, preference, and purchase intention when image source is not disclosed.</i>
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Manual: Study 2 AI: Study 2 (<i>Disclosure</i>)	The aim of Study 2 is to investigate „responses and attitudes toward AI-generated versus human-made images across both commercial and public service advertising contexts“ (p.6) with explicit disclosure of the image source.	<i>To examine how explicit disclosure of AI vs. human origin affects evaluations of ad images.</i>
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Manual: Study 3 AI: Study 3 (<i>Motivation framing</i>)	The aim of Study 3 is to investigate „responses and attitudes toward AI-generated versus human-made images across both commercial and public service advertising contexts“ (p.6) with disclosure of different motivations such as „cost efficiency, privacy protection, and visual appeal“ (p.7) for AI advertising.	<i>To test whether stated motivations for AI use (privacy, visual appeal, cost efficiency) moderate negative disclosure effects.</i>
Califano & Spence (2024)	Manual: Study 1A AI: Study 1A (<i>Joint evaluation</i>)	The aim of Study 1A is to investigate whether people discriminate between AI-powered and human-made unprocessed food images. Studies 1A,B,C have the same objective, but adopt different research procedures.	<i>To test whether participants can correctly identify AI-generated food images when compared side-by-side with real images.</i>

Califano & Spence (2024)	Manual: Study 1B AI: Study 1B (Single image)	The aim of Study 1A is to investigate whether people discriminate between AI-powered and human-made food images. Studies 1A,B,C have the same objective, but adopt different research procedures.	<i>To assess recognition accuracy of AI vs. real food images when evaluated independently.</i>
Califano & Spence (2024)	Manual: Study 1C AI: Study 1C (Confidence rating)	The aim of Study 1A is to investigate whether people discriminate between AI-powered and human-made food images. Studies 1A,B,C have the same objective, but adopt different research procedures.	<i>To measure confidence in authenticity judgments for AI vs. real food images.</i>
Califano & Spence (2024)	Manual: Study 2 AI: Study 2 (Disclosure & appeal)	The aim of study 2 is to investigate whether disclosing information about the image's origin (AI-powered vs human-made) would influence people's perceptions about how appetizing different foods are.	<i>To examine how labeling (real vs. AI) affects perceived appeal of food images across processing levels.</i>
Arvaj et al. (2025)	Manual: Study 1: Preliminary AI: Preliminary expert study	The aim of Study 1 is to investigate the professional accuracy (color, texture, and characteristic features) of AI-powered images.	<i>To evaluate professional adequacy of AI-generated meat images regarding realism, color, texture, and recognizability.</i>
Arvaj et al. (2025)	Manual: Study 2: Main AI: Main consumer study	The aim of Study 2 is to investigate „whether GenAI creates images that are at least as appealing to consumers as camera-taken photographs“ (p.2).	<i>To compare consumer visual preference between AI-generated and photographed meat product images.</i>

Source: Author's summaries and ChatGPT 5.2 Plus outputs

Stimuli

AI-powered and human-made images of various products serve as stimuli across all twelve studies. The human-made images are either photographs from copyright-free databases/stock photos (Califano & Spence, 2024; Hartmann et al., 2025), real product photographs taken with a camera (Arvaj et al., 2025), or images of official advertisements (Zhang & Hur, 2025). As to the AI-powered images, they are generated from human-made images by the use of different AI models, following one of the three procedures: 1) Text-to-image for the Hartmann et al. (2025) Study 2, which starts with a textual brief; 2) Human-made image to AI-powered image, using CLIP interrogator to convert the human-made image to a textual description, and then using AI models to generate synthetic images from the corresponding textual description (Hartmann et al., 2025; Zhang & Hur, 2025); 3) AI-powered image generated from photographic input and a textual prompt directly with the AI model. The textual prompt is like „replicate this photo“ (Califano & Spence, 2024, p.2) or like „prepared meat product on a white plate on a white background“ (Arvaj et al., 2025, p.6)

The authors select different types of images for their stimuli. Arvaj et al. (2025) include 15 human-made photographs of cooked and cured meat products. They then apply Firefly 3 to generate 15 synthetic images of the same products. Califano and Spence (2024) use 15 photographs of unprocessed, processed, and ultra-processed foods (milk, potato, apple, carrot, peanut). They then apply DALL-E 3 to generate 15 synthetic images of the same products. Zhang and Hur (2025) select 3 advertisements: one for coffee, one for a medical aesthetics product, and one for a public service. They then apply DALL-E 3, Midjourney v6, and Dream Up to generate 9 synthetic images (3 human-made images x 3 AI models) for each advertisement image. Finally, Hartmann et al. (2025), for Study 1, build a large database of 2400 human-made photos divided into four groups according to their data source (firm-generated content vs. user-generated content) and marketing objective (call to action vs. brand identity). For Study 2, they use 4 human-made images – 1 for each of the four previously

mentioned categories, and for Study 3, they include 1 human-made stock photo image. For each study, the authors apply 7 AI models (DALL-E 3, Midjourney v6, Firefly 2, Imagen 2, Imagine, SDXL Turbo, Realistic Vision) to generate corresponding synthetic images for each human-made image. In this case, the AI literature review provides better results than the manual literature review. AI not only precisely identifies the number and type (AI-powered and human-made) of images used in the research as stimuli but also provides additional information, such as how they are created, what products they represent, and how they are labeled prior to evaluation.

Table 2: Stimuli: manual vs AI-assisted literature review

Source	Study	Stimuli	AI models
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Study 1	Manual: 2,400 human-made images; 10,320 synthetic images AI: 2,400 real marketing images; 10,320 AI-generated sibling images from 7 AI models based on textual descriptions of originals.	DALL-E 3, Midjourney v6, Firefly 2 Imagen 2, Imagine, SDXL Turbo, Realistic Vision
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Study 2	Manual: 4 human-made images; 28 synthetic images (7AI models x 4) AI: 4 creative briefs (brand banner, product decal, selfie, action shot); 4 human-made images + 28 AI-generated images (7 models × 4 briefs).	DALL-E 3, Midjourney v6, Firefly 2 Imagen 2, Imagine, SDXL Turbo, Realistic Vision
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Study 3	Manual: 1 human-made image, 7 synthetic images (7AI models x 1) AI: 7 AI-generated banner ads vs. 1 professional stock photo used in real online advertising campaign.	DALL-E 3, Midjourney v6, Firefly 2 Imagen 2, Imagine, SDXL Turbo, Realistic Vision
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Study 1	Manual: 10 advertisement images, including 9 AI-generated images (produced by three different text-to-image models based on three original human-made advertisement images) and 1 human-made image. AI: Ads for coffee, medical aesthetics, and public service; AI images generated from textual descriptions of benchmark ads.	DALL-E 3, Midjourney v6, Dream Up
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Study 2	Manual: 10 advertisement images, including 9 AI-generated images (produced by three different text-to-image models based on three original human-made advertisement images) and 1 human-made image. AI: Same ad categories; images labeled as AI-generated or human-made prior to evaluation.	DALL-E 3, Midjourney v6, Dream Up
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Study 3	Manual: 10 advertisement images, including 9 AI-generated images (produced by three different text-to-image models based on three original human-made advertisement images) and 1 human-made image. AI: Same ads with disclosure plus manipulation of AI-use motivation (privacy, visual appeal, cost efficiency).	DALL-E 3, Midjourney v6, Dream Up
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 1A	Manual: 30 photos (a pair of 15 human/15 AI) AI: 30 food images: 15 real photos and 15 AI recreations (DALL-E 3) across unprocessed, processed, ultra-processed foods.	DALL-E 3
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 1B	Manual: 30 photos (a pair of 15 human/15 AI) AI: 30 food images: 15 real photos and 15 AI recreations (DALL-E 3) across unprocessed, processed, ultra-processed foods.	DALL-E 3
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 1C	Manual: 30 photos (a pair of 15 human/15 AI) AI: 30 food images: 15 real photos and 15 AI recreations (DALL-E 3) across unprocessed, processed, ultra-processed foods.	DALL-E 3
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 2	Manual: 30 photos (a pair of 15 human/15 AI) - same as study 1 AI: Same 30 images with unlabeled, labeled, or mislabeled source conditions.	DALL-E 3
Arvaj et al. (2025)	Study 1: Preliminary	Manual: 10 AI-generated images of cooked and cured meat products AI: AI-generated images of 10 meat products created with Adobe Firefly 3, some using reference photos.	Firefly 3
Arvaj et al. (2025)	Study 2: Main	Manual: 30 photos (a pair of 15 human/15 AI) AI: 15 pairs of images: real photographs vs. AI-generated images of meat dishes (e.g., burger, schnitzel, prosciutto, steak).	Firefly 3

Source: Author's summaries and ChatGPT 5.2 Plus outputs

Outcomes

The evaluation of the raters' responses to AI-powered and human-made images is based on perceptual, behavioral (perceptions, attitudes, purchase intention), and marketing performance (clicks, impressions) metrics. The evaluation scale is typically a 7-point Likert scale (1 = lowest,

7 = highest) or, in some cases, a binary preference choice per pair of images. As shown in Table 3, professional raters are asked to provide their opinions on the value of images from the creators' or technical viewpoints regarding quality, realism, and aesthetics (Hartmann et al., 2025), as well as visual adequacy (Arvaj et al., 2025). Public raters, by contrast, evaluate the images' perceptual and behavioral dimensions. Hartmann et al., (2025) use 10 dependent variables across four dimensions, namely *perception* (quality, realism, aesthetics, and ad creativity), *attitude* (ad attitude and brand attitude), *behavioral intention* (purchase intention and social media engagement), and *prompt following* (image-text alignment and brand recognition). In their list of outcomes, Zhang and Hur (2025) include *attitude*, *preference*, *trust*, and *purchase intention*. Califano and Spence (2024) examine a *confidence score for perceived image authenticity* and a *palatability score*, whereas Arvaj et al. (2025) examine only *aesthetic preferences* for AI-powered or human-made images of meat products. In this case, again, the AI-assisted literature review slightly outperforms the manual literature review. It not only accurately describes the dimensions of the outcomes but also, in some instances, provides additional information on data collection and research procedures.

Table 3: Outcomes: manual vs AI-assisted literature review

Source	Study	Outcomes (dependent variables)
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Study 1	Manual: Quality, Realism, Aesthetics AI: <i>Perceived quality, realism, aesthetics (human ratings + algorithmic assessments).</i>
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Study 2	Manual: Perception (quality, realism, aesthetics, and ad creativity), Attitude (ad attitude and brand attitude), Behavioral intention (purchase intention and social media engagement), Prompt following (image-text alignment and brand recognition) AI: <i>Perception (quality, realism, aesthetics, creativity), attitudes, behavioral intentions, prompt following.</i>
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Study 3	Manual: Click-through rate (CTR): clicks / impressions AI: <i>Click-through rate (CTR).</i>
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Study 1	Manual: Attitude, Preference, Trust, Purchase Intention AI: <i>Attitude, trust, preference, purchase intention.</i>
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Study 2	Manual: Attitude, Preference, Trust, Purchase Intention AI: <i>Same outcomes under disclosure.</i>
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Study 3	Manual: Attitude, Preference, Trust, Purchase Intention AI: <i>Same outcomes, moderated by AI-use motivation framing.</i>
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 1A	Manual: Confidence score for perceived image authenticity AI: <i>Correct identification of AI vs. real images.</i>
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 1B	Manual: Confidence score for perceived image authenticity AI: <i>Recognition accuracy for single images.</i>
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 1C	Manual: Confidence score for perceived image authenticity AI: <i>Confidence in authenticity judgment (9-point scale).</i>
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 2	Manual: Palatability score AI: <i>Perceived appeal/appetizing ratings under labeling conditions.</i>
Arvaj et al. (2025)	Study 1: Preliminary	Manual: Professional visual adequacy of the products (product color, texture, presentation, overall visual appeal). AI: <i>Professional ratings of realism, color accuracy, texture, structure, recognizability.</i>
Arvaj et al. (2025)	Study 2: Main	Manual: Aesthetic preferences (attractiveness) AI: <i>Binary preference choice (AI vs. photo).</i>

Source: Author's summaries and ChatGPT 5.2 Plus outputs

Participants

All twelve studies collect information from either professional experts or public raters (or both). The professional raters are few in number and assess the technical aspects of visual content, including color, texture, shape, and composition. Hartmann et al. (2025) recruit 10 professional raters from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), and Arvaj et al. (2025) rely on 22 professional food-technology experts. Except for Study 3 by Hartmann et al. (2025), which uses Meta's online marketing platform (A/B testing) to track visitors' CTRs, all other studies use public raters to complete online surveys. The number of participants varies across studies (Table

4), and their average age ranges from 40 to 45 years. In most cases, participants are recruited through panel platforms, such as Prolific and Credamo.

Participants in the studies rate a fixed set of images (AI-powered and human-made). Different studies adopt different approaches to expose participants to the images: joint evaluation (AI-powered and human-made images are presented in pairs/side by side in randomized positions); single evaluation (images are presented one by one); image source disclosed (AI-powered or human-made); image source not disclosed (AI-powered or human-made); AI-powered image motivations disclosed or not disclosed, etc. Participants are divided into groups based on the image groupings to be tested. For example, Hartmann et al. (2025) divide their 1,575 participants into four groups, one for each of the four conditions (user-generated content, firm-generated content, call to action content, brand identity content). Similarly, Zhang and Hur (2025) divide participants in Study 1 into three groups for coffee, medical aesthetics, and public service advertisements. In Study 2, the authors divide the participants into two groups. Participants in the first group are shown the images and informed that they are human in origin, whereas participants in the second group are shown the images and informed that they are synthetic in origin. Finally, in Study 3, the participants are divided into four groups – one for each of the three AI usage motivations (cost efficiency, privacy protection, visual appeal) and one control group (human-made image). In Study 2, Arvaj et al. (2025) also divide their participants into two groups, but with different introductory instructions than those applied by Zhang and Hur (2025). This time, group A participants are informed that the survey requires preference judgments between AI-powered and human-made images, whereas group B participants are not informed of this (AI is not mentioned). The participants are not divided into groups when they are asked to identify the origin of the image – human or AI, or to reveal their appetizing preferences (Califano & Spence, 2024). In this case, the AI-assisted and manual literature reviews yield almost identical results.

Table 4: Participants: manual vs AI-assisted literature review

Source	Study	Type of participants	Type of participants AI	Number of participants	Number of participants AI
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Study 1	Professional raters (Amazon)	Online panel participants rating images	10	254,400 ratings (image-level)
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Study 2	Public raters (Prolific)	Prolific panel participants	1,575	1,575
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Study 3	Meta users	Real ad viewers	173,022 impressions	173,022 impressions
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Study 1	Public raters (Credamo)	Adult participants	130	130
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Study 2	Public raters (Credamo)	Adult participants	81	79
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Study 3	Public raters (Credamo)	Adult participants	209	209
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 1A	Public raters (Prolific Academic)	UK adults via Prolific	100	100
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 1B	Public raters (Prolific Academic)	UK adults via Prolific	100	100
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 1C	Public raters (Prolific Academic)	UK adults via Prolific	99	99
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 2	Public raters (Prolific Academic)	UK adults via Prolific	297	297
Arvaj et al. (2025)	Study 1: Preliminary	Professional food-technology experts		22	

			Food industry professionals		22
Arvaj et al. (2025)	Study 2: Main	Public raters	General public	366	Several hundred

Source: Author's summaries and ChatGPT 5.2 Plus outputs

Results

The general conclusions from the four studies are that AI-generated images can outperform human-made images in both visual perception and marketing performance. This effect is influenced by factors such as the type of AI model used to generate synthetic images, the type of product depicted, the disclosure of the image's synthetic origin, and the motivations for using an AI-powered image, including privacy protection, visual appeal, and cost efficiency. For low-involvement product categories, AI-powered images are more appropriate, whereas for high-involvement product categories, human-made images are more appropriate. In different cases, different AI models provide the best results, but overall, the highest-rated models are Firefly 2, DALL-E 3, and Midjourney v6. Although some AI-powered images can receive lower ratings from industry professionals, the same images may receive higher scores from the general public. Table 5 summarizes the key empirical findings of the four studies under investigation. In this case, the AI-assisted and manual literature reviews yield results that are identical in meaning. Because it is shorter and more focused, the AI output helps the reader quickly understand the end result; however, some additional aspects of the manual review may be useful for further methodological and managerial purposes.

Table 5: Results: manual vs AI-assisted literature review

Source	Study	Results (MANUAL)	Results (AI)
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Study 1	Image quality from nearly 60% of the tested AI models significantly surpasses that of human-made images. The highest-quality images are generated by Firefly 2, and the most realistic images are generated by Realistic Vision. All AI models produce AI images that outperform human-made images in aesthetic appeal, with Firefly 2 and Realistic Vision in first place. Overall, the best-rated AI models can produce AI-powered images that outperform human-made images in perceived quality, realism, and aesthetics from a professional perspective.	<i>Best AI models surpassed human images in aesthetics and often in quality and realism; model choice strongly affected outcomes.</i>
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Study 2	From a consumer perspective, DALL-E 3, in first place, followed by Midjourney v6, produces the best AI images, outperforming those created by freelancers across most observed marketing metrics. Regarding perceptual dimensions, AI-powered images' aesthetic appeal is rated higher than that of the freelancer's images for all AI models, while perceived quality and realism are higher for AI images generated with DALL-E 3 and Midjourney v6 for quality and with Midjourney v6 and Imagen 2 for realism. Another finding is that AI models follow instructions precisely, unlike some human freelancers, who sometimes misunderstand the creative brief and work in an entirely unintended direction.	<i>DALL-E 3 and Midjourney outperformed freelancers on several marketing metrics and were far more cost-efficient.</i>
Hartmann et al. (2025)	Study 3	The best-performing banner ad is generated by DALL-E 3 and significantly outperforms a professionally produced stock photo. The conclusion is that the best AI models can generate synthetic images that, in real-world settings, demonstrate better marketing performance than high-quality photographs produced by humans.	<i>AI banner ads achieved higher CTR than professional stock photos.</i>
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Study 1	For the low-involvement category (coffee), consumers prefer AI-powered ads to human-made ads. On the contrary, for the high-involvement categories (medical aesthetic products and public services), consumers prefer human-	<i>No significant differences between AI and human</i>

		made ads to AI-powered ads. Another finding is that consumers hold similar attitudes toward both AI-powered and human-generated images when unaware of the image's origin.	<i>images when source undisclosed.</i>
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Study 2	When consumers are informed about the origins of images, they prefer human-made images to AI-powered images.	<i>Disclosure significantly reduced trust and attitudes toward AI-generated images.</i>
Zhang & Hur (2025)	Study 3	Disclosing the specific motivations for using AI-powered images can have different effects on consumers' perceptions. „Privacy protection“ motivation is considered favorable and leads to consumers' attitudes similar to human-made images. „Visual appeal“ almost does not motivate consumers to prefer an AI image to a human image. „Cost efficiency“ leads to a decline in consumer preferences for AI-powered images in comparison with human-made images, as consumers may make associations with a decline in quality.	<i>Privacy motivation mitigated negative effects; cost-efficiency framing worsened trust and purchase intention.</i>
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 1A	The AI-powered origin of ultra-processed foods was recognized by a significantly higher proportion of the audience than that of unprocessed and processed foods. Older participants are less likely to identify the AI origin of an image.	<i>Participants generally distinguished AI from real images; recognition higher for ultra-processed foods; recognition decreased with age.</i>
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 1B	The AI-powered images of different foods have different origin identification rate ranging from 26 % for AI-powered image of a processed apple (apple sauce) to 93 % for ultra-processed peanut (chocolate peanut treats). The AI-powered origin of ultra-processed foods was recognized by a significantly higher proportion of the audience than that of unprocessed and processed foods. Older participants are less likely to identify the AI origin of an image.	<i>Participants generally distinguished AI from real images; recognition higher for ultra-processed foods; recognition decreased with age.</i>
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 1C	The food's processing level (unprocessed, processed, or ultra-processed) influences consumer confidence in the photo's authenticity. Confidence is higher for real photos and lower for processed and especially ultra-processed photos. Older consumers are less confident in the authenticity of the photos.	<i>Participants generally distinguished AI from real images; recognition higher for ultra-processed foods; recognition decreased with age.</i>
Califano & Spence (2024)	Study 2	When the AI origin of a food image is not disclosed, it is perceived as more appetizing than a real photo. When the AI origin of a food image is disclosed, it is perceived as equally appetizing as a real photo. When the images (AI-powered and human-made) were mislabeled, participants rate those photos they believe are human as more appetizing.	<i>Without disclosure AI images were preferred; with disclosure real images were preferred or equal; mislabeling reversed preferences.</i>
Arvaj et al. (2025)	Study 1: Preliminary	The food experts identify the main problems with AI meat images, especially the more complex ones, associated with inappropriate or unnatural color and texture of the meat, inadequate plate composition, or other details. The professional accuracy of the images varies for different products.	<i>AI images showed frequent technical inaccuracies, especially for complex meat products.</i>
Arvaj et al. (2025)	Study 2: Main	The non-expert raters rank AI-powered images by product, and in many cases, their votes differ from those of the professional raters. Even images with inadequate features get high scores from the public raters.	<i>AI images preferred for 14 of 15 products; strongest when reference photos were used during generation.</i>

Source: Author's summaries and ChatGPT 5.2 Plus outputs

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current literature on AI-powered visual marketing content presents empirical evidence that AI-generated content competes with and often outperforms human-made visual content. Although professional experts find some synthetic images visually inadequate due to inappropriate features such as texture, color, shape, and composition, as well as contextual bias, consumers still prefer these images in many cases. Consumers often do not distinguish between AI-powered and human-made images when the image's origin is not disclosed. Once the origin is disclosed, the same consumers are more likely to tolerate human-made images. Disclosing the motivations for using AI models can influence consumers' perceptions and behaviors in different ways - positively (privacy protection), negatively (cost efficiency), or neutrally (visual appeal). Consumers' perceptions and behavioral responses to AI-powered visual content are also influenced

by factors such as product category, degree of processing, product complexity, and the AI model used to generate the synthetic image. Older adults are less likely to recognize AI-powered images than younger adults. The AI-assisted literature review is almost identical to the manual one and, in some cases, it slightly outperforms it. For this reason, it can be very useful for quickly comparing existing research methodologies, which serve as a guiding reference for future research.

Based on the results of the comparative literature review, the following research procedure can be proposed: 1) to assess AI-powered visual marketing content, use human-made marketing content as a reference; 2) use human-made images or textual briefs as a basis to generate synthetic images by applying different AI image-generation models; 3) choose how the images will be presented for evaluation (in pairs or one by one, with disclosure of certain conditions, or without disclosure); 4) select dependent variables measuring technical adequacy, consumer preferences, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors, as well as marketing performance; 5) recruit participants for an experiment - both professionals and consumers; 6) apply appropriate statistical methods for data analysis; 7) report the results, compare them with the results of previous studies, and explain the possible reasons for them. This procedure can be used to evaluate all types of visual marketing content to identify the most appropriate forms for specific target audiences.

Acknowledgements

ChatGPT 5.2 Plus is used for the AI-assisted literature review, and the results are presented in the tables under „AI review“ as they are generated by the model. Grammarly Pro is used for proofreading purposes.

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BUILDING ALBANIA'S TOURISM IDENTITY: THEORETICAL INSIGHTS ON BRAND AMBASSADOR INFLUENCE

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Abstract: *Brand ambassadors are increasingly used in tourism promotion to influence perceptions of destinations, yet the theoretical mechanisms by which they shape destination image remain underexplored, particularly in emerging markets such as Albania. This paper develops a theoretical framework to explain how brand ambassadors can shape the image of a tourism destination and influence traveler's intention to visit. Theory suggests that the credibility of a brand ambassador (expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness) increases the level of perceived authenticity and the sense of personal connection that audiences develop with them. These factors are expected to improve both the cognitive (knowledge-based) and affective (emotional) image of a destination, which then strengthens travel intention. The framework also considers the role of digital engagement, such as social media interaction and online user responses, which may strengthen or weaken the ambassador's impact. Albania is presented as a relevant example of an emerging tourism destination where this theoretical model can offer new insights. This paper contributes by providing a clear conceptual foundation for future research and by highlighting how brand ambassadors can influence destination promotion in contexts with low international visibility.*

Keywords: brand ambassador, tourism, promotion, awareness, social media

JEL: M31; M37; Z32; Z33

1. Introduction

In a world full with travel options (Kamruzzaman et al. 2020), tourism destinations are under pressure to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Leal et al. 2022). As destinations compete intensely for travelers' attention, preferences, and loyalty, differentiation is no longer achieved solely through physical resources or geographical features. Instead, it increasingly depends on how destinations are perceived, narrated, and experienced through marketing communication. Within this highly competitive environment, destination image has emerged as a strategic asset that can be deliberately shaped, reinforced, or transformed through targeted marketing strategies. Among these strategies, Brand Ambassador strategy marketing has emerged as a particularly influential mechanism. Brand ambassadors, such as residents, influencers, visitors, and other stakeholders act as credible narrators who communicate destination meanings through personal stories, visual content, and lived experiences. Unlike conventional advertising, ambassador-driven communication relies on authenticity, trust, and

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social proximity, allowing destinations to reposition themselves and reach new market segments. Through digital platforms, these ambassadors can significantly alter how a destination is imagined, shifting it from being unknown, stereotyped, or negatively perceived to one that is attractive, distinctive, and emotionally engaging. Consequently, in a context where travelers face an overwhelming number of destination choices, marketing especially through brand ambassadors, has the power not only to promote destinations but to reshape their identity and influence travel decisions, redefining a destination's place in the global tourism market.

Within this broader context, Albania represents a particularly relevant case. Tourism in Albania has experienced substantial growth over the past decade, emerging as a key driver of economic development and international visibility. Historically underdeveloped in comparison to neighboring Mediterranean destinations, Albania's tourism sector has become one of the fastest-growing segments of the national economy, contributing significantly to employment, foreign exchange earnings, and regional development. At the same time, this rapid expansion presents challenges related to infrastructure capacity, sustainability, and image management. Albania's combination of rising tourist demand, rich natural and cultural assets, and evolving digital promotion practices makes it an illustrative context for examining how brand ambassadors can shape destination image and influence travelers' intention to visit. Positioned at the intersection of cultural heritage, natural attractions, and a rapidly modernizing tourism sector, Albania faces the dual challenge of overcoming outdated stereotypes while constructing an appealing and coherent destination identity for international audiences.

Despite the growing use of brand ambassadors in tourism, research on their strategic role in emerging destinations remains limited. While established tourism markets have long integrated ambassadors into destination branding efforts, contexts such as Albania require deeper theoretical examination. Specifically, how do ambassadors help construct a coherent destination identity? Through what mechanisms do they shape perceptions and travel intentions? And which ambassador qualities are most effective in culturally diverse international markets?

2. Literature Review

Destination branding is defined as “the set of marketing activities that (1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, wordmark, or other graphic that readily identifies and differentiate a destination; (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitors and the destination; (4) that reduce consumer search cost and perceived risk. Collectively, these activities serve to create a destination image that positively influences consumer destination choice” (Blain et al. 2005).

In an increasingly competitive tourism marketplace and under rapidly changing global conditions (Garanti et al., 2024), destinations are required not only to differentiate themselves but also to adopt branding approaches that generate positive environmental, social, and economic outcomes. Destination image remains a central construct because it links communication to traveler decision-making. Digital content affects how people imagine destinations before visiting, shaping cognitive beliefs (what the destination is like), affective evaluations (how it feels), and conative outcomes (intentions to visit, recommend, or revisit).

Within this evolving branding landscape, brand ambassadors have gained increasing prominence as key actors in destination branding processes. Recent theories conceptualizes brand ambassadors as more than paid endorsers, positioning them instead as cultural intermediaries who participate actively in the co-creation of brand meaning and community identification. Rachmad's Brand Ambassadorial Evolution Theory underscores this shift by emphasizing that contemporary ambassadors function as storytellers, community members, and custodians of brand values, whose effectiveness depends on authenticity, relatability, and long-term engagement rather than short-term promotional visibility (Rachmad, 2023). This reconceptualization frames ambassadorship as a relational and identity-forming process, rather than a purely transactional marketing tool. Ambassadors are increasingly central actors in destination meaning-making because they provide visible, repeated, and socially validated narratives about place.

The term "brand ambassador" is used in a broad sense to describe actors who represent the destination publicly and influence how others perceive it. In practice, tourism brand ambassadors include:

- (1) residents who advocate for their destination through hospitality behaviors and online/offline word-of-mouth; Residents are widely recognized as core stakeholders in destination branding because they "live the brand," deliver the visitor experience, and communicate destination meanings through everyday interactions. Zhao et al. (2022), frames resident ambassadorship as an engagement behavior rather than a passive attitude, emphasizing concrete actions such as recommending the destination, defending it, and promoting it through social networks. Second, it links ambassadorship to social identity and social exchange logics, implying that residents are more willing to advocate when the brand reflects "who we are" and when tourism is perceived to generate fair benefits. Third, it provides a bridge between destination branding and governance: if residents perceive tourism development as unequal or disruptive, ambassadorship may weaken, fragment, or even turn into negative word-of-mouth.
- (2) visitors whose UGC provides peer-to-peer endorsements; Travelers routinely rely on peer-produced content (reviews, videos, photos, posts) when forming destination images, evaluating risk, and making decisions.
- (3) professional influencers/content creators contracted or informally aligned with destinations; The most visible contemporary form of tourism brand ambassadorship is the social media influencer, particularly in visually dominant platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Influencers matter because they translate destinations into aspirational narratives through imagery, storytelling, and perceived lifestyle proximity. Research increasingly examines influencer influence through psychological mechanisms such as social comparison, identity signaling, and parasocial trust. According to Asdecker (2022), exposure to travel-related content posted by professional Instagram influencers affects followers' intention to visit destinations. Contemporary studies support the fact that the main characteristics of a brand ambassador must be credibility and authenticity, perceived as genuineness of content, which mediates the effect of endorsements on attitude and behavioural intention. (Audrezet et al., 2020; Widaningsih et al., 2025). In tourism, travelers rely heavily on perceived authenticity due to experiential risk and symbolic consumption of places; thus, ambassadors who appear authentic can significantly influence destination image and visit intention. (Kim et al., 2021; Aboalganam et al., 2025)

Parasocial interaction (one-sided emotional ties audiences form with media personalities) further explains how followers develop personal bonds that translate into trust and influence. Research in tourism demonstrates that parasocial intimacy with travel influencers increases information acceptance and intention to visit promoted destinations. These mechanisms are especially salient in digital-first promotion environments where ambassadors cultivate ongoing, seemingly personal interaction with followers. (Serrano-Malebrán et al., 2025; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Widaningsih et al., 2025).

(4) *other stakeholders (local businesses, diaspora networks, cultural actors)* who reinforce destination narratives through their social networks.

3. Opportunities and risks of using Brand Ambassadors to build Albania's tourism identity

The increasing reliance on brand ambassadors in destination marketing presents both significant opportunities and notable risks for emerging tourism destinations such as Albania. As Albania's tourism sector expands rapidly and gains international visibility, particularly through digital platforms, brand ambassadors, including influencers, residents, visitors, and diaspora members, have become central actors in shaping how the country is perceived abroad. According to (Noti, 2024), Albania's tourism image is still in a formative stage, making branding choices particularly consequential for long-term positioning.

One of the main opportunities of ambassador-driven branding is its potential to enhance authenticity and credibility. Unlike traditional promotional campaigns, ambassador narratives are rooted in personal experience and peer-to-peer communication, which increases trust and emotional engagement. User-generated and ambassador-driven content positively influences destination image and visit intention by reducing perceived risk and increasing emotional resonance (Aboalghanam et al., 2025; Wei et al., 2025). Albanian tourism research similarly highlights authenticity and lived experience as critical elements for strengthening Albania's international tourism appeal (Noti, 2024).

Brand ambassadors also play a crucial role in storytelling and identity construction. Destination branding is increasingly understood as a process of narrative co-creation rather than top-down message delivery (Tran et al., 2022). For Albania, ambassadors can translate abstract branding goals into culturally grounded stories about hospitality, heritage, gastronomy, landscapes, and everyday life. Lushi and Budini (2024) demonstrate that Albania's image in new media is strongly shaped by visual and narrative representations produced by non-institutional actors, underscoring the strategic relevance of ambassador storytelling in shaping destination meaning. Another opportunity lies in market diversification and product differentiation. Influencers and digital creators often address niche audiences, such as cultural tourists, adventure travelers, or digital nomads, allowing destinations to reach specific segments more effectively. Research on influencer marketing in tourism confirms that well-matched ambassadors can shape perceptions and influence travel intentions within targeted markets (Kilipiris et al., 2023). This aligns with Albanian strategic priorities that emphasize diversification beyond mass coastal tourism and the promotion of inland, cultural, and year-round tourism products (Marku, 2014; Noti, 2024). Finally, ambassador-based strategies support continuous and cost-efficient digital communication. Social media has transformed ambassadors into constant communicators who interact with audiences through comments, live content, and community engagement. For Albania, whose tourism promotion increasingly relies on Instagram and TikTok visibility, such sustained digital presence contributes to brand awareness and destination memorability (Lushi & Budini, 2024; Widaningsih et al., 2025).

Despite these advantages, ambassador-based destination branding also entails notable risks. A key challenge concerns the loss of narrative control. While co-creation enhances authenticity, it can also fragment destination identity if ambassador narratives are inconsistent with official branding objectives (Tran et al., 2022). Uncoordinated digital promotion may result in a fragmented or superficial representation of Albania's tourism identity, particularly when driven by viral trends rather than strategic vision (Noti, 2024).

Another risk involves over-commercialization and declining authenticity. If ambassadors prioritize promotional incentives over genuine experiences, content may appear staged, reducing trust and persuasive impact. This concern is particularly relevant for Albania, where authenticity and perceived "untouchedness" constitute core components of its tourism attractiveness (Lushi & Budini, 2024). Empirical evidence confirms that perceived authenticity is a decisive factor influencing destination image and visit intention (Aboalganam et al., 2025). Ambassador-driven visibility also carries risks related to overtourism and spatial concentration. Influencer content, especially when amplified through geotagging, can direct disproportionate attention to specific destinations, increasing environmental and social pressure. Research on sustainable destination promotion cautions that influencer-driven demand can undermine sustainability objectives if not strategically managed (Kilipiris et al., 2023). Given Albania's uneven infrastructure development and fragile coastal and heritage sites, such risks are particularly salient (Noti, 2024).

Finally, governance and reputational risks must be considered. Ambassadors operate as semi-autonomous actors, and their behavior or controversies can directly affect destination image. Albanian tourism studies emphasize the need for stronger coordination between public institutions, local communities, and promotional actors to ensure that tourism branding supports sustainable development and community well-being (Noti, 2024).

4. Conclusions and recommendations

This study demonstrates that brand ambassadors are no longer peripheral promotional figures, but have evolved into active narrators and identity constructors within contemporary destination branding. Rather than serving solely as "faces of the brand," modern ambassadors function as storytellers, community participants, and co-creators of destination meaning in digitally mediated spaces. This evolution aligns with broader scholarly perspectives emphasizing stakeholder participation and social co-creation in destination branding (Tran et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022).

Albania's National Tourism Strategy 2024–2030 underscores the importance of Destination Marketing as one of its six strategic pillars and situates effective marketing at the heart of sustainable tourism development and competitive positioning in regional and global markets. The strategy reflects the government's aim to transform Albania into a more formalized, diversified, and sustainable tourism destination by 2030, with marketing playing a role in amplifying destination narratives and attracting increased tourism demand. In this strategic context, ambassadors are uniquely positioned to operationalize the strategy's marketing ambitions by translating abstract destination goals into tangible narratives that resonate with target audiences. Their role is particularly relevant given the strategy's emphasis on sustainability, product innovation, and regional diversification, elements that require authentic, localized narratives rather than generic promotional content. By participating in digital communities and amplifying authentic experiences, ambassadors support key strategy elements such as differentiated destination identity, expanded visibility across multiple source markets, and enhanced visitor perceptions.

Ambassadors also address identified strategic gaps. The draft strategy highlights a lack of an integrated and data-supported marketing system and a need for better coordination among stakeholders to strengthen Albania's positioning in international markets. Ambassador networks, when strategically coordinated, can help bridge this gap by generating continuous, credible content that supports sustained destination visibility and aligns with broader marketing goals. Their interactive relationships with audiences also complement the strategy's sustainable growth principles by fostering ongoing dialogue and responsiveness to tourism trends.

Ambassadors embody narratives (adventure, heritage authenticity, gastronomy) that, when consistently projected, become part of the destination's symbolic repertoire.

Recent destination studies show that coordinated influencer campaigns can increase awareness and short-term visitation metrics but occasionally fail to improve long-term destination reputation without authentic narratives and local alignment. (Rosalina et al., 2025; Avramidis, 2024).

Further studies indicate that match quality (fit between influencer, message format, and product) and perceived expertise/intimacy moderate the effect of influencer content on visit intention.

Reviews focused on digital influencers in tourism find consistent evidence that micro-influencers often produce higher engagement and perceived authenticity, whereas macro-influencers yield larger reach; synergistic mixes are recommended depending on campaign goals.

These findings suggest that ambassadors are effective when selection, message format, and campaign objectives are aligned, and when authenticity is demonstrably present in content.

To align brand ambassador strategies with the National Tourism Strategy 2024–2030 and maximize their impact on destination image and traveler intention, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Integrate ambassadors into the official destination marketing pillar

Since the strategy explicitly positions destination marketing as central to achieving increased competitiveness and sustainability, ambassadors should be formally embedded within the national marketing framework rather than treated as isolated promotional agents. Such integration ensures that ambassador narratives support the official strategic vision and contribute to coherent long-term identity building.

2. Use ambassadors to support sustainable, regionally diverse branding

The strategy divides Albania into six tourism regions and seeks to highlight diverse offerings beyond “sun and sea.” Ambassadors can help operationalize this regional diversification by producing and amplifying content that showcases not only coastal experiences but also mountain tourism, cultural heritage, gastronomy, and rural landscapes. Targeted ambassador campaigns in specific regions will align with the strategy's objective of increasing year-round visitation and dispersing tourism benefits more evenly.

3. Strengthen marketing coordination through structured ambassador networks

The strategy identifies the absence of a formal coordination mechanism among stakeholders as a barrier to effective marketing. Destination managers should therefore establish structured ambassador networks that involve public agencies, local communities, private sector partners, and ambassadors themselves. Regular planning meetings, shared content calendars, and co-created campaign planning can help ensure that ambassador messaging aligns with national and regional marketing priorities.

4. Provide ambassadors with brand orientation and cultural training

To ensure that ambassador narratives reflect the strategy's sustainability and identity goals, ambassadors should receive orientation on Albania's tourism brand vision, cultural heritage priorities, and sustainability principles. Training programs can help ambassadors produce content that not only attracts interest but also reinforces the values emphasized in the strategy, such as quality services, cultural authenticity, and inclusive growth. For emerging destinations with low global awareness, strategically chosen ambassadors can fast-track the transfer of desirable meanings and reposition the place in target audiences' cognitive maps. Studies on influencer-driven food and cultural tourism illustrate how such transfers reshape local place-branding (e.g., food-tourism models). (Okumus et al., 2018; Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019; Kim et al., 2021).

5. *Integrate ambassador contributions to data-driven marketing analytics*

Given the strategy's call for data-supported marketing systems, ambassador-generated digital content should be integrated into analytics frameworks to track performance, audience engagement, and sentiment. Measuring ambassador impact on destination image and travel intention can provide actionable insights for refining marketing investments and improving alignment with national tourism objectives.

6. *Foster long-term ambassador relationships*

Consistent with the strategy's emphasis on building a sustainable tourism sector to 2030, long-term partnerships with ambassadors should be prioritized over transactional, short-term campaigns. Ambassadors who understand and internalize the destination identity and strategic vision are better positioned to produce authentic, emotionally resonant content that strengthens Albania's brand equity over time.

For Albania, the balance between opportunity and risk depends largely on strategic coordination and governance. Destination branding must be integrated with sustainability, regional development, and stakeholder inclusion to ensure long-term benefits (Noti, 2024). Brand ambassadors should therefore be embedded within a coherent national tourism branding framework that aligns digital storytelling with cultural authenticity, sustainability principles, and regional diversification goals.

By investing in long-term ambassador relationships, providing cultural and sustainability education, and ensuring alignment with national branding objectives, Albania can utilize ambassador-driven communication to strengthen destination image, influence travelers' intention to visit, and support sustainable tourism development.

Aligning ambassador roles with structured marketing goals, such as those defined in the strategy's Destination Marketing pillar, will enhance their effectiveness in influencing both destination image and traveler intention in a globally competitive tourism landscape.

As Albania continues to strengthen its international tourism identity, policymakers and industry leaders must balance economic ambitions with cultural and environmental stewardship.

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МАРКЕТИНГОВИ ОБЕЩАНИЯ И ЛОГИСТИЧНА РЕАЛНОСТ: ПОСЛЕДНАТА МИЛЯ КАТО КРИТИЧЕН ФАКТОР В ОМНИКАНАЛНАТА ТЪРГОВИЯ

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Резюме: Всеизвестен факт е, че в основата на омниканалната търговия пред потребителите стои очакването за удобство – да могат свободно да избират кога, откъде и по какъв начин да пазаруват, без да усещат преминаването между каналите за комуникация и реализиране на покупките. Това изисква кохерентност между маркетинговите послания и реалното изпълнение на търговските и логистичните операции. На свой ред последната миля на доставката придобива ключово значение, тъй като представлява директния контакт на потребителя с продукта и оценката му за цялостния процес на покупко-продажбата. В този смисъл тя се явява критичен компонент на клиентското преживяване, който пряко влияе върху удовлетвореността, повторната покупка и лоялността към търговеца.

Ключови думи: омниканален маркетинг, омниканална търговия, последна миля на доставката, автоматични пощенски станции, потребителско преживяване

JEL: L81; M31

MARKETING PROMISES AND LOGISTICS REALITY: THE LAST MILE AS A CRITICAL FACTOR IN OMNICHANNEL RETAILING

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Abstract: It is widely acknowledged that omnichannel retailing is fundamentally based on consumers' expectations of convenience, namely the ability to choose when, where, and how to shop without perceiving transitions between communication and purchasing channels. This requires consistency between marketing messages and the actual execution of commercial and logistics operations. In this context, last-mile delivery plays a critical role, as it represents the direct interaction between the consumer and the product, as well as the basis for evaluating the overall purchasing process. Therefore, it constitutes a key component of the customer experience, directly influencing customer satisfaction, repeat purchase behavior, and customer loyalty.

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Keywords: omnichannel marketing, omnichannel retailing, last-mile delivery, automated parcel lockers, customer experience

JEL: L81; M31

Въведение

В последните години се наблюдава ускорена дигитализация на търговските процеси в съответствие с променящото се потребителско поведение. Потребителите все по-често комбинират различни точки на контакт в процеса на вземане на решение за покупка и последващата му реализация. Границите между онлайн и офлайн каналите за достъп до търговците постепенно се сливат. Това изправя търговията на дребно през съществени трансформации, което налага преосмисляне на традиционните маркетингови, търговски и логистични модели. Омниканалността се утвърждава като стратегическа рамка за създаване на клиентско преживяване.

Въпреки нарастващия интерес към темата, в научната литература често се наблюдава смесване на понятията омниканален маркетинг и омниканална търговия, което затруднява както теоретичния анализ, така и практическото прилагане на омниканалните стратегии. Наред с това, значението на логистичните процеси, в т.ч. последната миля на доставката, често остава подценено, въпреки че именно тя представлява критичната точка, в която маркетинговите обещания се материализират в потребителско преживяване.

Настоящата статия има за цел да изясни разликата между омниканален маркетинг и омниканална търговия, като постави акцент върху значението на последната миля на доставката като свързващо звено между маркетинговите комуникации, търговските операции и логистичното изпълнение. Отделя се внимание на автоматичните пощенски станции като гъвкаво решение в последната миля, което допринася за повишаване на омниканалното потребителско преживяване и конкурентоспособността на търговците в условията на омниканална търговия.

Омниканален маркетинг $\neq$ Омниканална търговия

Омниканален маркетинг

Омниканалността изисква от търговците да предоставят информация за продаваните от тях продукти както в онлайн, така и в офлайн среда. Това отчасти е продиктувано и от поведението на потребителите, които в зависимост от лекотата, с която набират нужната им информация преди вземането на решение за покупка, избират и начина, по който да купят стоката – дали онлайн или след посещение във физически магазин на търговеца (Gao and Su, 2016).

Управлението на информационните потоци между каналите се превръща в стратегически инструмент за повишаване на конкурентоспособността. Търговците се фокусират не просто върху управление на информацията в каналите, чрез които оперират, а върху координация и синхронизация между информация, обещание за потребителско преживяване и подтикване към вземане на решение за покупка. Именно тук намира проявление важността на омниканалния маркетинг, който поставя акцент върху съгласуваност на посланията, визуална идентичност и персонализиране на офертите във всички канали за комуникация с крайните потребители (социални медии – Facebook, Instagram, TikTok; Google; имейл кампании; банери; изскачащи известия, които се появяват директно на мобилните устройства на потребителите; офлайн реклама във вестници, списания, брошури, билбордове и др.) (Marketing Evolution, 2026). По този начин се създава маркетингово обещание към клиента: марката е разпознаваема, надеждна и достъпна, независимо от избрания канал за покупка. Тази интеграция подпомага вземането на решения от потребителя и улеснява навигацията между различните точки на контакт, като същевременно укрепва лоялността към търговеца.

Важно е да се отбележи, че при омниканалния маркетинг търговската фирма поставя клиента в центъра на бизнес стратегията си. Чрез предлагане на последователно и персонализирано изживяване във всички точки на контакт, търговецът се стреми да отговори на очакванията на клиентите и да изгради по-силни взаимоотношения с тях (Osak, 2023, p. 35). По този начин чрез омниканалния маркетинг, от една страна, търговецът е в състояние да постигне синергия между каналите и точките на контакт, като цели да увеличи продажбите във физическите си магазини и да ги направи по-привлекателни за потребителите (Gerea et al., 2021, p. 1), а от друга, благодарение на интеграцията на дигиталните технологии в каналите за реализация, той съумява да предотвратява безкрайното преминаване от един канал в друг и улеснява процеса на вземане на решение за покупка при шоуруминг или уебрумунг. (Gomes et al., 2024, p. 5)

Следва да се подчертае и необходимостта търговецът целенасочено да стимулира ангажираността на клиентите си, посредством прилагането на въздействащи маркетингови послания. Обичайно те изграждат у потребителя очакване за удобство, че след като процесът на покупка е лесен и интуитивен, то и обслужването, последващата доставка, проследяването на пратката и евентуалното връщане на стоката ще бъдат също толкова безпроблемни. В този смисъл интегрираното потребителско преживяване във всички точки на контакт допринася за намаляване на когнитивните и времевите разходи за потребителите и за повишаване на доверието към търговеца и възприеманата стойност. По този начин омниканалният маркетинг формира обещание към потребителя, което впоследствие търговските и логистичните процеси следва да изпълнят.

Омниканална търговия

През последното десетилетие търговците претърпяват динамични бизнес трансформации, при които търговията излиза извън стените на физическите магазини и преминава към омниканален модел. В съвременната търговия на дребно омниканалният подход започва да преобладава, въпреки че остава сложен за прилагане от търговците. Прави впечатление, че по време на ковид пандемията фирмите насочиха инвестициите си в дигитализация и изграждане на онлайн инфраструктура с цел поддържане на взаимоотношенията с потребителите, повишаване на тяхната ангажираност и увеличаване на продажбите чрез онлайн канали. В периода след пандемията обаче търговците се изправят пред предизвикателството да преоценят маркетинговата ефективност на офлайн каналите си, с цел оптимизиране на разходите и максимизиране на печалбата. (Cai and Choi, 2023, p. 1) Сред основните приоритети пред търговците се открояват повишаването на удовлетвореността на клиентите, съкращаването на времето за обслужване, развитието на каналите за самообслужване и увеличаването на степента на автоматизация на бизнес процесите.

Добре реализираната омниканална стратегия носи множество ползи за търговците — от по-висока оперативна ефективност до увеличени приходи. Постигането ѝ обаче изисква активното участие на маркетинговите отдели за предоставяне на съгласувани и последователни послания към целевите аудитории, както и тясно сътрудничество с логистичните екипи, базирано на анализ на данни за потребителското поведение, наличностите, изпълнението на доставките и клиентското преживяване в рамките на омниканалната среда. Преодоляването на пропуските между отделите може да бъде

предизвикателство, но прилагането на технологично ориентирани подходи позволява на търговците да реализират пълния потенциал на омниканалната доставка. (Catania, 2023)

За разлика от добре познатата крос- и мултиканална търговия, омниканалният модел не се фокусира толкова върху наличието на множество канали за достигане до потребителите, колкото върху тяхната интеграция в единна търговска и информационна система. Това налага висока степен на координация между търговските операции, управлението на наличностите, изпълнението на поръчките и процесите по доставка и връщане на стоки. Омниканалната търговия отразява реалното потребителско поведение, при което клиентите комбинират онлайн и офлайн канали в различните етапи на процеса на покупка. Ефективността на този модел зависи в значителна степен от способността на търговците да изпълняват обещанията на маркетинга чрез добре организирани търговски и логистични процеси.

В обобщение на казаното дотук, следва да се направи ясно разграничаване между понятията омниканален маркетинг и омниканална търговия, тъй като, макар и взаимосвързани, те изпълняват различни функции в рамките на бизнес стратегията на търговските фирми.

Омниканалният маркетинг се отнася до начина, по който търговецът комуникира с потребителите чрез различни точки на контакт – реклама, имейл кампании, социални медии, push-известия, уебсайт и др., като основният фокус е върху съгласуваността на посланията, цялостното преживяване и формирането на устойчиво възприятие за бранда. Неговата цел е потребителят да получава навременна, достоверна и изчерпателна информация, която да му носи стойност и положителна емоция, независимо от използвания канал.

Омниканалната търговия, от своя страна, обхваща организацията на самия продажбен процес, включително управлението на поръчките, наличностите и доставките във всички канали. Тук фокусът се измества към търговските и логистичните процеси, управлението на склада, изпълнението на поръчките и последната миля на доставката. Целта е да се осигури непрекъснат процес на пазаруване, при който клиентът може свободно да преминава между онлайн и офлайн среда, с достъп до актуална информация за наличности и цени, възможност за проследяване и удобни опции за доставка и връщане.

Потребителите

По данни на Националния статистически институт в края на 2025 година 92,8% от българските домакинства имат достъп до интернет, като 51,2% от тях пазаруват онлайн за лични цели. През 2025 г. 86,5% от хората на възраст между 16 и 74 навършени години използват интернет всекидневно или поне веднъж седмично на работа, вкъщи или на друго място, като относителният им дял нараства с 4,6% в сравнение с предходната 2024 година. Макар че 75,6% от потребителите най-често използват интернет с цел комуникация, 47% от анкетираните споделят, че търсят информация за стоки или услуги преди да вземат решение за покупка, а 14,7% използват глобалната мрежа, за да продават лични вещи, стоки или услуги чрез различни уебсайтове или приложения. Най-предпочитаното устройство за достъп до интернет остава смартфонът, който се използва от 85,5% от лицата, а 34,5% от анкетираните използват лаптоп. (НСИ, 2026)

Посочените емпирични данни за дигиталното поведение на потребителите в България ясно очертават предпоставките за развитие на омниканалния маркетинг и търговия. Високият дял на домакинствата с достъп до интернет и редовната му употреба са ясно доказателство за устойчивата дигитализация на населението. Същевременно високият процент потребители, които използват глобалната мрежа за търсене на информация за стоки и услуги преди покупка, потвърждава необходимостта от интеграция между онлайн и офлайн каналите на търговците. Доминиращата роля на смартфоните като средство за достъп до интернет, от една страна, допълнително засилва очакванията на потребителите за непрекъснатост на потребителското преживяване, а от друга - подчертава значимостта на омниканалните стратегии на търговците, които трябва да осигуряват това преживяване във всички точки на контакт, а не само в дигиталните канали. Таблица 1 по-долу систематизира основните омниканални активности на потребителите и съответстващите действия на търговците.

Таблица 1: Омниканални активности на потребителите и търговците

Омниканални активности на потребителите	Омниканални активности на търговците
Търсене на информация през различни канали: • showrooming / webrooming; • сравняване на информация за цени и ревюта.	Интегрирани маркетингови комуникации: • единни послания във всички канали; • синхронизирани кампании онлайн/офлайн; • персонализирани оферти.

Комбиниране на канали при покупката: • започване на покупка в един канал, завършване в друг - click&collect; • паралелно използване на мобилни приложения, уеб сайтове, посещение в магазин.	Интегрирани търговски системи: • единен продуктов каталог; • наличности в реално време; • интеграция между ERP, CRM, e-commerce и POS.
Избор на канал за доставка: • доставка до адрес; • офис на куриер; • автоматична пощенска станция; • pick-up point или магазин на търговеца.	Омниканални логистични решения: • партньорска мрежа от куриери; • собствени pick-up локации; • автоматични пощенски станции; • оптимизация на маршрути.
Проследяване и контрол на поръчката: • проследяване на пратка; • получаване на известия (push/sms/email); • възможност за промяна в условията на доставка.	Дигитални услуги за управление на поръчките: • централизирана система за проследяване; • автоматични известия; • гъвкави опции за промяна на доставката.
Омниканално поведение след покупката: • връщане онлайн или в магазин; • споделяне на отзиви/ревята; • участие в програми за лоялност.	Омниканално обслужване и лоялност • единна програма за лоялност във всички канали; • единна клиентска поддръжка и мониторинг на поведението; • управление на обратната логистика.

Източник: авторът въз основа на Cai & Choi (2023), Gerea et al. (2021) и Gao & Su (2016)

Обобщавайки данните от таблицата, е важно да се отбележи, че потребителите взаимодействат с търговците чрез множество канали, стремейки се да запазят контрол върху целия процес на покупка. В отговор търговците синхронизират маркетинговите, търговските и логистичните си дейности, за да осигурят удобство, бързина и прозрачност във всички точки на контакт. Така омниканалната търговия се утвърждава като стратегически подход за адаптиране към промененото потребителско поведение и средство за постигане на устойчиво конкурентно предимство.

Последната миля на доставката като изпълнител на маркетинговите обещания

Ефективното управление на последната миля на доставката придобива ключово значение за реализиране на обещанията, заложи в омниканалната стратегия, тъй като интегрира маркетинговите послания, търговските операции и логистичните процеси. Тук се осъществява директният контакт на потребителя с продукта и оценката му за цялостния процес на покупко-продажбата. Именно това определя последната миля на доставката като най-сложният и скъпоструващ етап от веригата за доставки (Brown and Guiffreda, 2014), като се очаква до 2027 г. световният пазар за услуги в последната миля да надхвърли 200 млрд. щатски долара. Растежът се дължи главно на нарастващия обем на онлайн поръчките (Statista, 2025).

Ако последната миля на доставката не отговаря на очакванията на потребителите (например при забавяне на пратки, затруднена комуникация с куриери, дълги срокове на доставка или липса на актуализации), това води до разрыв между очакваното и реалното клиентско преживяване (Chuyen et al., 2025, p. 794; Vakulenko et al., 2019, p. 314), което влияе негативно върху удовлетвореността и лоялността към търговеца. Следващата таблица 2 нагледно систематизира някои потенциално възникващи разминавания между маркетинговите обещания и логистичното изпълнение в условията на омниканална търговия, както и техните ефекти върху потребителското преживяване.

Таблица 2: Потенциални разрыви между маркетинговите обещания и логистичното изпълнение в омниканалната търговия

Маркетингово обещание	Потребителски очаквания	Потенциални ограничения	Потенциален ефект върху потребителя
Бърза доставка	Доставка в рамките на обявен срок	Забавяне поради ограничен капацитет, натоварване, липса на оптимизация	Разочарование, недоверие, отказ от бъдещи покупки
Удобен избор на канали за получаване	Възможност за избор между доставка до адрес, офис на куриер, АПС или физически магазин на търговеца	Слабо развита мрежа офиси/АПС на куриер или магазини на търговеца	Усещане за ограничен избор, неудобство, негативно преживяване
Проследяване в реално време	Точна информация за местоположение, час и място на доставка	Неточно състояние, липса на актуализация, забавени известия	Несигурност, необходимост от контакт с куриер или отдел за обслужване на клиенти
Гъвкавост и контрол	Възможност за промяна на адрес/час/канал за доставка	Ограничени системни възможности за промени, невъзможност за изпълнение от страна на куриера	Усещане за липса на контрол, стрес, неудобство
Омниканално преживяване	Еднакво качество на информацията, цените, наличностите онлайн и офлайн	Несъответствия в цени, наличности, срокове за доставка между каналите	Загуба на доверие към търговеца, отказ от бъдещи покупки
Лесно връщане и замяна	Възможност за връщане и замяна във всеки канал	Усложнени процедури, различни политики, ограничен брой места/начини за връщане	Недоволство, по-ниска вероятност за повторна покупка
Омниканално обслужване	Единна клиентска поддръжка за всички канали	Различни правила, липса на синхронизация на информацията между системите	Повторни запитвания, напрежение, неудовлетвореност, негативни отзиви

Източник: авторът въз основа на Vakulenko et al. (2019), Gerea et al. (2021) и Ocak (2025)

Идентифицираните несъответствия потвърждават, че успешното прилагане на омниканалната стратегия е възможно единствено при ефективна координация между маркетинговите комуникации и логистичните процеси (Осак, 2025). Един от начините за справяне с това предизвикателство е търговецът да предоставя възможност за избор между различни канали за получаване на поръчката - доставка до адрес, офис на куриер, автоматична пощенска станция или pick-up локация. По този начин той позволява на потребителя да упражнява контрол върху процеса, оптимизирайки личното си време. Таблица 3 по-долу систематизира основните предимства и ограничения, с които се сблъскват потребителите при избора на канал за доставка, както и евентуалното отрицателно клиентско преживяване, което произтича от този избор.

Таблица 3: Сравнителна характеристика на каналите в последната миля на доставката и клиентското преживяване

Канал за доставка	Предимства за потребителя	Недостатъци и ограничения	Възможни проблеми, водещи до негативно преживяване
Доставка до адрес	Максимално удобство - продуктът идва при клиента; Подходящо за тежки и/или обемни пратки.	Необходимост клиентът да е на адреса; Ограничена гъвкавост във времето на доставка; Нужда от контакт с куриера.	Закъснения и неточни часови диапазони; Неуспешни опити за доставка; Лоша комуникация с куриера; Нарушено лично време или пространство.
Доставка до офис на куриер	Подходящо за клиенти, които не са на адрес; Често по-ниска такса за доставка.	Необходимо е придвижване до офис; Ограничено работно време на офиса; Опашки и изчакване.	Претоварени офиси; Бавно обслужване; Липса на персонал; Лоша организация на предаване на пратките; Неправилно обработена пратка.
Доставка до автоматична пощенска станция	Денонощен достъп; Бързо получаване; Няма нужда от физическа комуникация с куриер; Максимална гъвкавост във времето; Удобство на близостта до работа или до дома	Налични свободни клетки; Ограничение за обемни или тежки пратки; Слаборазвита мрежа от АПС (отдалеченост от клиента)	Пратката не се побира; Пренасочване поради препълнена АПС; Технически проблем.
Доставка до pick-up локация (магазин или партньорски пункт)	Комбинирано пазаруване (вземане + допълнителни покупки); Удължено работно време в сравнение с офисите; Удобно местоположение	Различно качество на обслужване заради различните партньори; Ограничено пространство за пратки.	Непрофесионално обслужване от партньор; Липса на подреденост или лоши условия на съхранение; Недостатъчна сигурност.

Източник: авторът въз основа на Lim et al. (2018) и Vakulenko et al. (2019)

В обобщение на данните, представени в горепосочените таблици, може да се заключи, че последната миля се явява критичната точка, в която маркетинговите обещания се потвърждават или компрометират чрез реалното логистично изпълнение. Това налага тя да бъде разглеждана не само като логистичен елемент, но и като стратегически маркетингов инструмент, който пряко влияе върху потребителското преживяване. Именно в отговор на тези предизвикателства нараства значението на алтернативните и по-гъвкави решения за последната миля на доставката, каквито са автоматичните пощенски станции.

Основното предимство на АПС от гледна точка на клиентското преживяване произтича от денонощния достъп, който позволява на потребителите да получават пратките си бързо, с минимални усилия и в удобно за тях време (Parcel Hive, 2024). Освен това АПС предоставят висока степен на независимост и контрол върху процеса на последната миля, а фактори като местоположение и разходи за доставка допълнително повишават потребителската удовлетвореност (Iwan et al., 2016, p. 654). Липсата на пряк контакт с куриер намалява рисковете, свързани със субективни фактори като закъснения, пропуснати посещения или неефективна комуникация. Това минимизира времето и усилията, необходими за получаване на пратката, а надеждната и навременна доставка се определя като един от най-критичните фактори за удовлетвореност на клиентите, особено в етапа на последната миля (Lim et al., 2018).

Допълнително предимство на АПС е тяхната пространствена интеграция в ежедневните маршрути на потребителите – в близост до супермаркети, офис сгради, спирки и други зони с висока честота на посещаемост. Това разположение намалява усилиято, необходимо за получаване на пратките, и прави процеса по-ефективен от гл.г. на време и удобство (Tsai et al., 2024), като дава на потребителите усещане за контрол върху доставката.

Въз основа на казаното дотук може да се направи извода, че в сравнение с останалите канали за доставка, автоматичните пощенски станции предлагат по-безпроблемно и последователно клиентско преживяване, което позволява те да бъдат разглеждани като гъвкав и надежден канал за доставка.

Заключение

Анализът на омниканалния маркетинг и омниканалната търговия показва, че макар двете концепции да са тясно взаимосвързани, те изпълняват различни, но допълващи се функции - омниканалният маркетинг формира очакванията на потребителите чрез съгласувани и персонализирани послания във всички точки на контакт, а омниканалната търговия е отговорна за реалното изпълнение на тези обещания чрез ефективна организация на търговските и логистичните процеси.

Последната миля на доставката е критичен фактор за успех на омниканалния търговец, тъй като именно тук се постига очакваното потребителско преживяване. На свой ред автоматичните пощенски станции се утвърждават като ефективно и гъвкаво решение, осигуряващо удобство, контрол и последователност в клиентското преживяване, като по този начин стимулират удовлетвореност и лоялност към търговеца.

В заключение може да се обобщи, че устойчивото развитие на омниканалните стратегии изисква търговците да разглеждат последната миля не само като логистичен етап, а като стратегически инструмент за създаване на конкурентно предимство. Интегрирането на гъвкави решения в последната миля, съобразени с реалното потребителско поведение, създава условия за по-добра синхронизация между маркетинговите обещания и търговските и логистичните процеси и допринася за повишаване на цялостното омниканално потребителско преживяване.

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DEVELOPING STRATEGIC HUMAN CAPABILITIES FOR DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY: INSIGHTS FROM ALBANIA

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Abstract: *The rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed the way governments design and deliver public services, emphasizing the need for strategic human resource capabilities to sustain effective digital governance. This study explores the relationship between employee competencies, digital readiness, and the success of digital transformation strategies within the Albanian public administration. Drawing on data collected through a questionnaire distributed among public officials, the research identifies key capacity gaps, levels of digital literacy, and perceptions of training adequacy in supporting digital reforms. The findings reveal that while significant progress has been made in modernizing digital infrastructure and promoting e-services, challenges persist in aligning human resource development with technological innovation. In particular, limited continuous training, uneven digital competencies across institutions, and resistance to change remain critical barriers. The study underscores the importance of investing in targeted capacity-building programs, fostering a culture of innovation, and integrating digital skills development into strategic HR policies. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on how human capital strategies can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of digital governance in developing contexts such as Albania.*

Keywords: Digital governance; Human resource capabilities; Public administration.

JEL: M12, M53, H83, J24, O15

Introduction

Digital transformation has become a central priority for modern public administrations, positioning human resource capabilities as a decisive factor for successful implementation. Although Albania has made notable progress in expanding digital public services, the effectiveness of these reforms depends heavily on the digital readiness, skills, and adaptability of public employees. The core problem addressed in this study concerns the alignment between technological advancements and the preparedness of human resources to support, manage, and sustain these digital innovations.

Existing studies highlight the importance of employee competencies, continuous training, and organizational culture in enabling effective digital governance. However, the degree of examination

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of these factors within the Albanian public sector remains limited, with few empirical studies assessing actual capacity levels or digital skill gaps among public officials. While international best practices and theoretical models offer solutions, their application in Albania has been uneven, largely due to institutional differences, resource constraints, and varying levels of digital literacy.

This study is subject to several limitations, including its reliance on self-reported data from public officials and the diversity of public institutions, which may influence the comparability of responses. Additionally, the research does not encompass all sectors of the administration, focusing instead on those most directly involved in service digitalization.

Despite these limitations, the expected results of the study include a clearer mapping of existing human resource capacities, identification of the main training needs, and an understanding of the obstacles that hinder digital transformation within public administration. The findings aim to provide evidence-based insights that support the development of strategic HR policies, targeted capacity-building initiatives, and more effective approaches to strengthening human capital for digital public service delivery.

Literature review

Digital transformation has become a central theme in contemporary public administration, reshaping the structure, processes, and strategic orientation of government institutions worldwide. As governments adopt digital technologies to improve service delivery, transparency, and citizen engagement, the strategic role of human resources becomes increasingly prominent. Scholars argue that digital transformation and SHRM are mutually reinforcing processes, each influencing the other in complex ways (Mergel et al., 2019; Scupola & Mergel, 2022). In the Albanian context, where digital public services have expanded rapidly in recent years, understanding this relationship is essential for analysing capacity gaps and designing HR strategies that support sustainable digital governance.

The intersection of digital governance and strategic human resource management (SHRM) has become a central theme in public administration scholarship. SHRM emphasizes the alignment of human resource practices with organizational strategy (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). In digital governance settings, this alignment is particularly crucial as public employees must adapt to new technologies, service delivery models, and decision-making frameworks. Human capital theory positions skills, knowledge, and competencies as the most important drivers of organizational effectiveness (Becker, 1993), and recent research confirms its importance for digital transformation outcomes (Vuori et al., 2019; Weerakkody et al., 2021).

Digital transformation in the public sector shifts the discussion from traditional HR functions toward capabilities for innovation, adaptability, and user-oriented service design (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2015). Scholars highlight that technological advancement alone does not guarantee digital governance success; workforce readiness, organizational culture, and leadership remain decisive (Mergel, 2019; Scholta et al., 2019).

Foundational theories in SHRM provide important frameworks for interpreting these dynamics. The Michigan Model (Fombrun et al., 1984) emphasizes the alignment of HR practices with organizational strategy. The model posits that HRM should be designed to ensure internal fit among staffing, performance appraisal, development, and reward systems, and external fit with organizational strategy. In the context of digital governance, the Michigan Approach suggests

that digitalization strategies drive HR priorities. Public sector organizations must adapt their HR practices to acquire and develop a digitally competent workforce, redesign job profiles, integrate digital performance indicators, and invest in targeted upskilling programs (Rana et al., 2023). Studies have shown that countries with coherent digital strategies embedded in HRM—such as Estonia, Denmark, and South Korea—achieve higher-quality digital public services, largely due to strategic talent management and competency development (OECD, 2021, 2023).

While the Michigan Approach emphasizes top-down strategic alignment, the Harvard Model (Beer et al., 1984) offers a more participatory and stakeholder-oriented perspective on HRM. This approach highlights the role of employees, organizational culture, leadership, and communication in shaping HR outcomes such as commitment, competence, and congruence. Applied to digital transformation, the Harvard Model emphasizes that technological upgrades cannot succeed without employee engagement, digital confidence, and organizational readiness (Gibbs et al., 2021). Research shows that digital initiatives often fail not due to technological limitations but due to employee resistance, insufficient training, or a lack of participatory processes (Lindgren et al., 2019; Øgård & Pedersen, 2023). In this sense, HRM does not merely follow digital strategy; it actively shapes digital transformation by influencing culture, learning processes, and staff motivation.

Recent studies reinforce the idea that digital transformation redefines HR capability frameworks. Digital governance requires new competencies including data literacy, digital ethics, cybersecurity awareness, and the ability to work with AI-enabled tools (European Commission, 2024; UNDESA, 2024). Workforce planning is increasingly supported by HR analytics, enabling public organizations to predict future skill needs, identify capability gaps, and implement evidence-based HR policies (Bondarouk & Brewster, 2022). Digital talent management and e-recruitment systems have become central to attracting individuals with specialized technical and analytical skills. Moreover, training and continuous development are viewed as key mechanisms for ensuring that existing staff can adapt to rapid technological changes (Drews et al., 2021).

Strategic HRM also plays a pivotal role in enabling digital transformation. A digitally enabled workforce contributes significantly to innovation, efficiency, and citizen satisfaction. HR strategies that emphasize learning cultures, cross-functional collaboration, and agility are strongly associated with successful digitalization outcomes (Criado et al., 2021; Mergel, 2021). The literature further suggests that digital leadership—a set of competencies related to guiding teams through technological change—has become an essential component of HR development strategies (Berghaus & Back, 2021). Effective digital leaders are able to mitigate resistance, foster trust in digital tools, and promote a culture of experimentation and continuous improvement.

In the public sector, digital transformation also introduces new ethical, organizational, and policy challenges. Issues such as data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and digital exclusion require HR professionals to adopt new competencies and to integrate ethical guidelines and legal compliance into HRM processes (ITU, 2021). The need for digital inclusion is especially important in countries undergoing rapid technological change, as disparities in digital skills can lead to unequal participation within the public workforce.

Considering these developments, the integration of the Michigan and Harvard Approaches offers a comprehensive lens for understanding the interplay between HRM and digital

transformation. The Michigan Approach underscores the need for strategic alignment between digital strategies and HR practices, while the Harvard Approach highlights the importance of employee engagement, cultural readiness, and long-term workforce well-being. Together, they provide a multidimensional framework for conceptualizing how public administrations can build strategic human capabilities that support and sustain digital governance.

This understanding directly aligns with the methodology of the present study, which uses survey data from Albanian public officials to assess digital readiness, skill levels, training needs, and perceptions of digital transformation. By integrating theoretical perspectives with empirical data, the study aims to identify concrete capacity gaps and strategic priorities for strengthening human capabilities within the Albanian public administration as it continues its digital transformation journey.

Digital Skills, Workforce Readiness, and Competency Frameworks

International organizations have developed comprehensive digital competency frameworks to support governments in structuring their workforce development. The OECD (2021) outlines digital literacy, data skills, cybersecurity awareness, and digital leadership as fundamental capabilities in the public sector. Similarly, the European Commission's Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp 2.2) provides a structured approach to understanding digital skill levels (Carretero et al., 2022).

The ITU (2020) and UN DESA (2022; 2024) stress that digital literacy and continuous training significantly influence digital service quality and accessibility. Studies show that public employees often possess uneven digital skills, which create disparities in service quality and digital adoption rates (Gibbs et al., 2021; Øgård & Pedersen, 2023). Scholars emphasize the need for targeted, context-based digital skills training rather than generic ICT programs (Lindgren et al., 2019).

HR Capabilities and Digital Transformation Outcomes

Empirical studies increasingly connect HR capabilities to digital transformation success. Mergel et al. (2019) demonstrate that digital government initiatives depend on employees' ability to work with data, collaborate across departments, and embrace innovation. Research shows that HR policies promoting continuous learning, digital talent recruitment, and performance incentives correlate strongly with effective e-government implementation (Criado & Gil-Garcia, 2019; Wirtz & Müller, 2019; Rana et al., 2023). Recent analyses reveal three consistent patterns first that digital infrastructure without human capability produces limited impact (Cordella & Paletti, 2019) on the other hand continuous training is directly linked to higher employee adaptability (Pirog & Buss, 2022) and lastly organizational culture and leadership shape digital transformation trajectories (Scupola & Mergel, 2022).

Measuring Digital Readiness and Capacity Gaps

Assessing digital readiness and identifying capacity gaps within public organizations has become an essential component of strategic human resource management in the digital era. Digital readiness can be defined as the extent to which employees, teams, and institutions are prepared to adopt, integrate, and effectively utilize digital technologies to deliver public services. Theoretical perspectives emphasize that readiness is a multidimensional construct

encompassing technical skills, digital literacy, adaptability, motivation, and organizational support (Bondarouk & Brewster, 2022; Mergel, 2021). Understanding digital readiness is critical because it informs workforce development strategies, highlights potential bottlenecks in digital transformation initiatives, and allows policymakers to target resources efficiently.

Scholars note that assessment frameworks for digital readiness vary widely, from self-assessment surveys to institutional metrics and national indices of e-government maturity (Criado et al., 2021; Drews et al., 2021). Self-assessment approaches provide valuable insights into employees' perceptions of their own skills, confidence, and preparedness; however, they are prone to biases and may overestimate actual competencies (Drews et al., 2021). Consequently, robust measurement models integrate quantitative metrics, such as the number of training hours completed, frequency of digital system usage, or participation in digital projects, with qualitative insights, such as perceived barriers to digital adoption, attitudes toward innovation, and confidence in using digital tools. This combination allows researchers and managers to obtain a more nuanced understanding of both individual and organizational readiness, bridging the gap between perceived and actual digital capabilities.

A critical component of digital readiness assessment is the Training Needs Assessment (TNA) methodology, widely recommended in both theoretical and applied human resource literature (Brown, 2020; Alonso-García & Rodríguez, 2022). TNAs provide a structured approach to identifying gaps between current employee competencies and the requirements of digitalized roles, guiding decisions about curriculum design, resource allocation, and prioritization of capacity-building interventions. In the public sector, studies have demonstrated that TNAs contribute to more efficient allocation of training budgets, alignment of workforce skills with organizational strategic priorities, and improved adoption of new technologies (Alonso-García & Rodríguez, 2022; Pereira & Anderson, 2023).

In the context of the present study, digital readiness and capacity gaps are operationalized as key variables to be measured through the survey instrument administered to Albanian public officials. The questionnaire includes items assessing employees' self-reported digital competencies, such as proficiency in ICT tools, familiarity with e-government platforms, data management capabilities, and digital communication skills. It also measures perceived organizational support, including access to training, managerial encouragement, and availability of digital resources. Additionally, the survey captures perceived barriers and challenges, such as lack of time, inadequate infrastructure, or resistance to change, which theoretical models indicate as critical determinants of digital readiness (Mergel, 2019; Drews et al., 2021).

From a theoretical standpoint, these measures allow the study to test several key propositions. First, higher levels of ICT competence and prior training are expected to correlate positively with overall digital readiness. Second, perceived organizational support is theorized to moderate the relationship between individual skills and successful adoption of digital tools. Third, perceived barriers are anticipated to negatively influence digital readiness and may highlight capacity gaps that cannot be addressed solely through individual-level interventions. By linking these constructs to observable behaviours and organizational outcomes, the study integrates both the Michigan logic of alignment between HR practices and strategic objectives, and the Harvard logic of employee participation and organizational learning, providing a comprehensive framework for evaluating human capabilities in digital governance.

Albania-Specific Context and Empirical Evidence

Albania has made substantial progress in digital governance in recent years, with initiatives such as the e-Albania platform significantly expanding the availability of online public services and earning recognition in international assessments of e-government development (UN DESA, 2022; 2024). These achievements demonstrate the country's commitment to leveraging digital technologies to improve public service delivery, increase transparency, and enhance citizen engagement. At the same time, national and international reports highlight persistent challenges, particularly regarding human resource capacity and readiness to implement and sustain digital transformation across public institutions (ITU, 2021; UNDP, 2024).

Evidence suggests that while some employees demonstrate strong Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills, there is substantial variation across institutions and departments. Skills gaps, limited structured training opportunities, and inconsistent digital readiness hinder the full utilization of digital platforms and innovations. The European Commission (2023; 2024) and SIGMA/OECD (2023) emphasize that successful digital reforms in Albania depend not only on technological infrastructure but also on HR modernization—including competency-based HRM, standardized training programs, and improved integration of Human Resource Management Information Systems (HRMIS). These reforms are necessary to ensure that employees possess the required technical capabilities, are adequately supported, and are aligned with the strategic objectives of digital public service delivery.

Academic studies further underscore the importance of organizational culture, legacy processes, and employee engagement in influencing digital adoption (Leka & Duro, 2022). Resistance to change, hierarchical work structures, and insufficient incentives for digital innovation can exacerbate capacity gaps, even when digital tools and training programs are available. In this context, understanding how public officials perceive digitalization becomes critical, as perceptions shape motivation, engagement, and willingness to adopt new technologies.

The present study operationalizes these Albania-specific challenges through a questionnaire that captures multiple dimensions of digital readiness and capacity gaps. One key dimension measures ICT skills, asking respondents to self-assess their proficiency with digital tools, e-government platforms, data management systems, and digital communication technologies. This provides both an objective and subjective measure of technical readiness. A second dimension evaluates training and development, assessing employees' experiences with structured digital training programs, perceived adequacy of training, and alignment with the skills required for digital public service delivery. A third-dimension addresses perceived organizational support, capturing perceptions of managerial encouragement, availability of digital resources, and access to guidance in using digital systems.

Additionally, the questionnaire includes items measuring perceived barriers to digitalization, such as insufficient infrastructure, workload constraints, resistance to change, and lack of clarity regarding digital processes. These items reflect theoretical and empirical evidence suggesting that gaps in organizational culture and legacy administrative procedures can

impede digital transformation (Leka & Duro, 2022; UNDP, 2024). Finally, the survey assesses attitudes toward digitalization, including beliefs about the relevance of digital services, trust in digital platforms, and personal motivation to engage with technological innovations. These attitudinal measures allow the study to link perceptions directly to individual readiness and the effectiveness of organizational strategies for digital transformation.

By integrating Albania-specific empirical evidence with these multi-dimensional measures, the study provides a robust framework for examining how human capabilities influence the success of digital public service delivery. It allows for statistical analysis of both objective competencies and subjective perceptions, offering insight into capacity gaps, training needs, and organizational factors that either enable or hinder digitalization in the Albanian public sector. This approach ensures that the research not only documents existing challenges but also identifies actionable areas for HR modernization and policy interventions tailored to Albania's institutional context.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative insights derived from an extensive literature review. The mixed design allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how strategic human resource capabilities influence digital public service delivery in Albania. The qualitative component provides the theoretical foundation for identifying key dimensions of digital readiness, HR strategies, and capacity gaps, while the quantitative component empirically tests these dimensions through the perceptions of public administration employees.

The quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed electronically to various Albanian public administration institutions, including ministries, agencies, and local government units. The survey targeted employees involved in administrative tasks or digital service delivery, ensuring that respondents had direct exposure to digital platforms and processes. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and the data collection process complied with ethical standards for social research. The questionnaire measured several dimensions identified in the literature review, including ICT skills, digital readiness, training opportunities, perceived organizational barriers, and attitudes toward digitalization. A Likert-type scale was used to quantify these perceptions, and a pilot test helped refine the clarity and reliability of the items.

In parallel, a qualitative analysis based on recent academic literature, international reports, and policy documents informed the conceptual framework of the study. This literature review synthesized existing knowledge on HRM models (including the Michigan and Harvard approaches), digital transformation requirements, employee competencies, and organizational culture factors influencing digitalization. These insights not only guided the construction of the questionnaire but also provided explanatory depth when interpreting the empirical findings, allowing the study to link theoretical expectations with real conditions in the Albanian public sector.

The data collected were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics to identify patterns in employee skills, readiness, and perceptions. Correlation and regression analyses were performed to explore the relationships between key variables and to test whether training, ICT skills, and organizational conditions significantly influence digital readiness. The qualitative insights drawn from the literature were then used to contextualize the statistical results, ensuring that findings are interpreted within broader organizational, institutional, and theoretical frameworks.

The methodological framework is designed to empirically test the study's main hypothesis, which is explicitly stated as follows: **employees with higher digital competencies, better access to structured training, and stronger organizational support are more likely to demonstrate positive perceptions of digitalization within public administration.** Integrating this hypothesis directly into the methodological design ensures coherence between the theoretical arguments and the empirical analysis, enabling a rigorous assessment of how human resource capabilities shape digital transformation outcomes in the public sector. Through this integrated methodological approach, the study combines empirical evidence with theoretical grounding to provide a well-rounded analysis of strategic human capabilities in Albania's digital transformation.

Results and discussion

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the population under study, it is essential to first describe the characteristics of the participants. This overview allows for a contextualized interpretation of the subsequent findings. The study initially involved 173 respondents, of whom 171 were suitable for further elaboration and subsequently included in the empirical analysis. The questionnaire included sections for biographical information, such as gender, age, educational level, work position and experience. The questionnaire responses were measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"). Participants also answered specific questions regarding skills, support, training offered, organizational structure, complains, internet absences and digital abilities as an obstacle, efficacy and improvement, accessibility and quality of digitalized services and the digitalization speed.

The sample was predominantly female, representing 63.7% of participants, while males accounted for 36.3%. In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents were relatively young, with 68.4% aged between 22 and 35 years, 24.6% aged 36–50 years, 5.3% aged 51–60 years, and a small proportion of 1.8% over 61 years. Regarding occupational position, the sample was largely composed of specialists (73%), whereas directors represented 27% of the participants. The educational profile of the respondents was highly homogeneous, with 95.3% holding a university degree, 4.1% having completed secondary education, and only 0.6% possessing a doctoral qualification. With respect to professional experience, 59.1% of respondents reported 1–5 years of tenure, 15.8% had 6–9 years, and 25.2% had over 9 years of experience. Overall, the sample reflects a workforce that is predominantly young, highly educated, and female, with specialists forming the majority and professional experience varying across the population.

These characteristics provide a clear context for interpreting the subsequent findings. The following sections present the results of the analysis and offer a detailed discussion of the observed patterns and their implications for the research objectives. By examining the data in relation to the sample profile, meaningful insights can be drawn regarding the factors under study.

Integrated Analysis of Regression Results

The regression analyses conducted in this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the key factors influencing efficacy improvement, accessibility, and quality of digitalized public services. In the Analysis of Factors Affecting Efficacy Improvement, results indicated that skills and digital abilities were the most significant predictors, highlighting the central role of personal competencies in enhancing work performance within a digitalized context. In the Analysis of Factors Affecting Accessibility of Digitalized Public Services, skills, training, and digitalization speed emerged as significant determinants, demonstrating that both human capital and the pace of digital implementation are crucial for ensuring that digital services are accessible to users. Finally, in the Analysis of Factors Affecting Quality of Digitalized Services, skills and training again proved to be

the most influential factors, emphasizing that well-developed competencies and targeted learning initiatives directly contribute to the perceived quality and effectiveness of digital services. Across all three analyses, structural factors such as organizational configuration and support, as well as certain obstacles like internet availability, showed limited or marginal influence, suggesting that human and technical capacities outweigh organizational or infrastructural limitations in shaping digital service outcomes. Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of investing in skills development, training programs, and efficient digitalization strategies to simultaneously enhance efficacy, accessibility, and quality in digital public services, providing actionable insights for policymakers and managers seeking to optimize digital transformation initiatives.

Analysis of Factors Affecting Efficacy Improvement

Understanding efficacy improvement is essential because it reflects how effectively individuals and organizations adapt to digitalization and optimize performance. Examining the predictors of efficacy improvement provides insight into which factors most strongly influence productivity and organizational outcomes, allowing for targeted interventions and strategies to enhance performance.

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to assess the influence of several factors—skills, support, training, organizational factors, complaints, obstacles related to internet access, obstacles related to digital abilities, and digitalization speed—on efficacy improvement. The dependent variable in the model was efficacy improvement, reflecting the extent to which respondents perceived improvements in their work performance and efficiency.

Table 1 presents the unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients, along with t-values and significance levels for each predictor. The regression equation can be expressed as follows:

$$\text{Efficacy Improvement} = 1.679 + 0.161(\text{Skills}) + 0.064(\text{Support}) + 0.123(\text{Training}) + 0.058(\text{Organizational}) - 0.021(\text{Complaints}) - 0.056(\text{Obstacles} - \text{Internet Absence}) + 0.210(\text{Obstacles} - \text{Digital Abilities}) + 0.107(\text{Digitalization Speed})$$

The results indicate that skills ($B = 0.161$, $\beta = 0.178$, $t = 2.028$, $p = 0.044$) and obstacles related to digital abilities ($B = 0.210$, $\beta = 0.221$, $t = 2.580$, $p = 0.011$) have statistically significant positive effects on efficacy improvement. This suggests that higher skill levels and stronger digital competencies contribute meaningfully to enhanced work efficacy. Other variables, including support, training, organizational factors, complaints, obstacles related to internet absence, and digitalization speed, did not reach statistical significance ($p > 0.05$), although training approached significance ($B = 0.123$, $\beta = 0.157$, $t = 1.713$, $p = 0.089$), indicating a potential positive effect that may be explored in further studies.

Overall, the analysis highlights that personal competencies, particularly digital skills, play a critical role in improving efficacy, whereas structural or organizational factors appear to have less immediate influence. These findings underscore the importance of investing in skill development and digital literacy to facilitate organizational performance improvements.

Table 1. Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Efficacy Improvement

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.679	0.465	—	3.612	0.000
Skills	0.161	0.079	0.178	2.028	0.044
Support	0.064	0.080	0.074	0.802	0.424
Training	0.123	0.072	0.157	1.713	0.089

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Organizational	0.058	0.081	0.057	0.707	0.481
Complaints	-0.021	0.089	-0.019	-0.231	0.817
Obstacles – Internet Absence	-0.056	0.087	-0.054	-0.639	0.524
Obstacles – Digital Abilities	0.210	0.081	0.221	2.580	0.011
Digitalization Speed	0.107	0.073	0.118	1.455	0.148

Dependent Variable: Efficacy Improvement

Analysis of Factors Affecting Accessibility of Digitalized Public Services

Examining accessibility of digitalized public services is crucial because it reflects the effectiveness of digital transformation initiatives in public organizations and indicates how easily citizens and staff can engage with digital services. Identifying the factors that influence accessibility helps guide policy and managerial decisions to enhance service delivery. Understanding these factors is particularly important for this study, as it provides insights into which elements of human capital, organizational support, and digital infrastructure most significantly impact service accessibility. Moreover, analyzing these predictors allows for evidence-based recommendations to improve digital public services and ensure equitable access for all users.

A multiple linear regression was conducted with accessibility of digitalized public services as the dependent variable, and predictors including skills, support, training, organizational structure, complaints, obstacles related to internet access, obstacles related to digital abilities, and digitalization speed.

The regression equation is expressed as follows (single-line version):

Accessibility of Digitalized Public Services = 0.841 + 0.244(Skills) + 0.028(Support) + 0.292(Training) + 0.050(Organizational Structure) + 0.122(Complaints) - 0.087(Obstacles – Internet Absence) - 0.025(Obstacles – Digital Abilities) + 0.176(Digitalization Speed)

The results indicate that skills ($B = 0.244$, $\beta = 0.243$, $t = 3.024$, $p = 0.003$), training ($B = 0.292$, $\beta = 0.334$, $t = 3.992$, $p < 0.001$), and digitalization speed ($B = 0.176$, $\beta = 0.174$, $t = 2.358$, $p = 0.020$) have statistically significant positive effects on accessibility. This suggests that higher skill levels, targeted training programs, and faster digitalization processes significantly enhance the accessibility of digital public services.

Other predictors—including support, organizational structure, complaints, obstacles related to internet absence, and obstacles related to digital abilities—were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$), indicating a limited direct effect on service accessibility in this model. Overall, the analysis underscores the importance of human capital and effective implementation pace in improving accessibility outcomes in digitalized public services.

Table 1. Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Accessibility of Digitalized Public Services

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.841	0.473	–	1.778	0.077
Skills	0.244	0.081	0.243	3.024	0.003

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Support	0.028	0.082	0.029	0.343	0.732
Training	0.292	0.073	0.334	3.992	0.000
Organizational Structure	0.050	0.083	0.045	0.610	0.543
Complaints	0.122	0.091	0.099	1.343	0.181
Obstacles – Internet Absence	-0.087	0.089	-0.076	-0.975	0.331
Obstacles – Digital Abilities	-0.025	0.083	-0.023	-0.298	0.766
Digitalization Speed	0.176	0.075	0.174	2.358	0.020

Dependent Variable: Accessibility of Digitalized Public Services

Analysis of Factors Affecting Quality of Digitalized Services

Examining quality of digitalized services is essential as it reflects the effectiveness, reliability, and user satisfaction of digital service delivery in public organizations. Understanding the factors influencing service quality enables organizations to implement improvements that enhance both operational efficiency and citizen trust. Analysing these predictors is particularly relevant for this study because it identifies which aspects of human capital, organizational structure, and digitalization practices most strongly affect service quality. Furthermore, it provides actionable insights for policymakers and managers to optimize the design and delivery of digital public services.

A multiple linear regression was conducted with quality of digitalized services as the dependent variable, and predictors including skills, support, training, organizational structure, complaints, obstacles related to internet access, obstacles related to digital abilities, and digitalization speed.

The regression equation is expressed as follows (single-line version):

$$\text{Quality of Digitalized Services} = 1.192 + 0.219(\text{Skills}) + 0.124(\text{Support}) + 0.194(\text{Training}) - 0.138(\text{Organizational Structure}) + 0.125(\text{Complaints}) + 0.008(\text{Obstacles – Internet Absence}) + 0.139(\text{Obstacles – Digital Abilities}) + 0.090(\text{Digitalization Speed})$$

The results indicate that skills ($B = 0.219$, $\beta = 0.243$, $t = 3.056$, $p = 0.003$) and training ($B = 0.194$, $\beta = 0.248$, $t = 2.993$, $p = 0.003$) have statistically significant positive effects on the quality of digitalized services. Support approaches significance ($B = 0.124$, $\beta = 0.142$, $t = 1.710$, $p = 0.089$), suggesting a potential positive effect that may warrant further investigation.

Other variables—including organizational structure, complaints, obstacles related to internet access, obstacles related to digital abilities, and digitalization speed—did not reach conventional levels of significance ($p > 0.05$), although organizational structure and obstacles related to digital abilities are marginally close to significance ($p \approx 0.06$), suggesting that these factors may still play a contextual role in shaping service quality. Overall, the analysis highlights that human capital—particularly skills and training—is critical in enhancing the quality of digitalized public services, while structural and technological factors may have more nuanced or indirect effects.

Table 1. Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Quality of Digitalized Services

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.192	0.419	–	2.843	0.005
Skills	0.219	0.072	0.243	3.056	0.003
Support	0.124	0.072	0.142	1.710	0.089
Training	0.194	0.065	0.248	2.993	0.003
Organizational Structure	-0.138	0.073	-0.136	-1.879	0.062
Complaints	0.125	0.081	0.114	1.557	0.121
Obstacles – Internet Absence	0.008	0.079	0.008	0.108	0.914
Obstacles – Digital Abilities	0.139	0.073	0.146	1.897	0.060
Digitalization Speed	0.090	0.066	0.099	1.361	0.175

Dependent Variable: Quality of Digitalized Services

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the factors influencing efficacy improvement, accessibility, and quality of digitalized public services. Across all analyses, skills and training consistently emerged as the most significant predictors, underscoring the critical role of human capital in supporting digital transformation initiatives. Digital abilities and the speed of digitalization also demonstrated positive effects, particularly in enhancing efficacy and accessibility, indicating that both competence and implementation pace are essential for successful digital service delivery.

Structural and organizational factors, as well as certain obstacles such as internet availability, showed limited or marginal influence, suggesting that human and technical capacities outweigh organizational or infrastructural constraints in determining the outcomes of digital services. These findings highlight the importance of investing in workforce development, including targeted training programs and skill enhancement initiatives, to maximize the benefits of digitalization in the public sector.

Overall, the study emphasizes that effective digital transformation depends not only on technology but also on the capabilities and preparedness of the workforce, as well as the strategic management of digital processes. Policymakers and public managers should prioritize human capital development and efficient digitalization strategies to simultaneously improve efficacy, accessibility, and quality of digitalized public services, thereby ensuring more inclusive, efficient, and high-performing public service delivery.

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COMPROMISE PURCHASE DECISIONS

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Abstract: *In this text the authors aim to conceptualize and to suggest interpretations of the compromise purchase decisions in contemporary marketing. The concept can be understood as the ones, which are made under specific conditions – if there are no better options or there is lack of resources or availability of a product or a brand.*

The typology of compromise purchase decisions will be also developed, as well as aspects, related to their dynamics in the digital environment.

Keywords: purchase decisions, compromise purchase decisions, consumer behavior, digitalization, marketing communications.

JEL: E21, M31

Introduction

In recent years, there were a lot of influences and changes, that affect development of the understandings of consumer behavior. Among them are the technological shifts, including digitalization, which is related to creation of more convenience of the consumer choices as well as to an increased flow of commercial information. The pandemic, which started in 2020, also led to specific changes in consumer behavior, where some of them will have more long-term perspective than others (Hristov, Kostadinova, Jeleu, 2025).

In addition, we are witnessing a remarkable increase of the product variety of consumer goods and brands, having also in mind that all those products are being communicated – they are subject of communication campaigns, including in social media. In the last years, as it can be seen in the data for 2024, there were an estimated 93.2 million active trademark registrations across 155 intellectual property offices globally, representing an increase of 6.1% compared to 2023 (World Intellectual Property Indicators, 2025).

In addition, digitalization makes brand communication easier and in a lot of cases cheaper, thus creates opportunities for even larger number of brands and product categories. The development of digital media and the access to them for a lot of businesses seems to contribute to the increase of their influence because of the authentic content that can be found in them – these are publications, posts, images and videos created or shared by the users themselves. This creates a huge amount of information that should be perceived by the consumers, and in the situation of limited time, they obviously are trying to optimize their efforts. The first consequence of this is the decrease of the attention span – recent research says that the average human attention span has shrunk to just 8.25 seconds (Ahmed, 2025). A second consequence – which is in the

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focus of the current study – is the shrink of the decision-making process. All these global trends bring the need to conceptualize consumer behavior in new ways and to reshape our understanding of existing concepts that are still applicable.

Therefore, there is a need of better examination of the idea of compromise purchase decisions, where under specific circumstances consumers can make compromise with their primary choice of a product or a brand and buy not the favorite one, but the possible second or third option. The dynamics of life, especially in the developed economies, with the combination of limited time and the product variety are the most important prerequisites for existing and – maybe – the increase of frequency and importance of the compromise purchase decisions.

Methodological notes

Since the current study aims to outline a newer concept, the basic method used is the desk research – collecting and analysing information from existing sources. It was applied in order to identify the existence and possible parameters and elements of the compromise purchase decisions. In addition, the conclusions are based on the literature review of carefully selected academic sources, influential monographies of authors in the field of marketing and communication and on some empirical research and analyses.

A thematic analysis was also performed to identify recurring topics and emerging trends in the field of digitalization, consumer behavior, decision making process, predominantly in the field of fast-moving consumer goods.

Additional methods used in the development and the conceptualization of the compromise purchase decisions are well-established ones such as analysis and synthesis, generalization, deduction and induction.

The study has several limitations that should be mentioned. Considering the theoretical approach used in the idea of conceptualization, there is no empirical confirmation of the statements provided – therefore, it can be formulated as a direction for future field research. Moreover, the theorizing presumes a sort of universalism in terms of time and space (different periods and different markets, all of those related to different patterns of consumer behavior), and it can be assumed, that some differences can exist, however, it is also a subject of additional research.

Development of the topic and similar concepts

As a result of the literature review, it can be stated, that the topic of compromise purchase decisions is not well developed in the specialized sources and in marketing theory and practice, which, as discussed, provides area of improvement. However, there are some important marketing concepts that are worth mentioning, since they resemble in some ways the behaviour in focus here.

1. Repertory (or polygamous) loyalty – where the consumers are loyal and tend to buy not only one brand of a category, but two or more ones (Jelev, 2022). The statement is also suggested, that consumers are not promiscuous, they have a set group of preferred options from which they choose based on context.
2. Limited decision making – situations where consumers consider only a subset of options and rely on simple heuristics, due to constraints in time, involvement, or knowledge (Peter, Olson, 2010). The position is stated, that when resources (time, information, cognitive effort) are limited, consumers often decrease the search and choose an acceptable option from a small set. This leads to purchases that are not necessarily their ideal choice, but a compromise dictated by constraints.
3. Unplanned buying – when consumer is unfamiliar with a store’s layout or perhaps the person is under some time pressure (Solomon, 2018: 393). It is developed by a lot of authors, drawing different patterns, but it is also mentioned, that unplanned buying is not always related to emotional decisions.
4. Probabilistic behaviour. Consumers often think and behave randomly. The brand they bought last time may not be the brand they buy next time; what they thought about a brand last month may not be the same as what they think about it next month (Sharp, 2017: 50, 70).
5. Compromise effect – it is a context effect: when a middle option is presented between two extremes (for example cheap and low quality versus expensive and high quality), consumers disproportionately choose the middle option, because it seems easier to justify as a compromise (Simonson, 1989). Compromise effect is robust, appears in many categories, and is influenced by social norms and purchase tasks (Li, 2020).
6. Consumer responses to stockouts product unavailability – when a preferred option is unavailable, consumers often make a “next best” purchase of a product category or a brand, or decide not to buy at all (Campo, Gijbrecchts, Nisol, 2000). And this is understood as purchase of a non-preferred alternative caused by constraints.

Conceptualization of compromise purchase decisions

Traditionally, consumer researchers have approached the decision-making process primarily from a rational perspective. Within this framework, consumers are assumed to behave in a deliberate and systematic manner: they actively seek and process new information, integrate it with their existing knowledge about a product, carefully evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of available alternatives, and ultimately arrive at a satisfactory purchase decision. When marketers believe that consumers actually go through this kind of planning, it is essential that they carefully study the steps in decision-making to understand how people adopt information, form beliefs about options, and select criteria that they use to choose one option over another (Solomon, 2018: 339).

However, there are a lot of signals from markets, that because of the current situation with a lot of information and purchasing options, consumers are attempting to optimize their decisions

both in terms of time and preferences. Considering this, the focus on compromise purchase decisions will possibly increase its importance.

Compromise purchase decisions refer to consumer choices in which people select a non-preferred or second or third best alternative due to situational constraints that limit access to their favourite option for a brand or product category. These decisions arise when factors such as product unavailability, restricted financial or time resources, limited information, or reduced search capacity prevent consumers from identifying or obtaining their most desired choice. In this sense, compromise purchase decisions represent context-driven, satisficing outcomes shaped by external or internal constraints rather than by stable preferences.

In addition, what are the current benefits of focusing on the compromise purchase decisions in the marketing theory and practice? They can be formulated in three main directions and all of them can be developed in order to refine marketing and communication strategies.

1. Understanding if there are and what are the missed opportunities for the brand on the market and how can they be avoided.
2. Exploring what is the importance of the available budgets and the importance of price when taking the purchase decisions.
3. Better understanding of a brand loyalty as a marketing concept – and its dynamics for different brands, in different purchasing situations and for different product categories, especially for the fast-moving consumer goods.

Typology of compromise purchase decisions

Compromise purchase decisions can be made in a variety of situations and based on different reasons. Each one is related to different motivation and is made as a result of different, let's say, different driving forces.

1. **Low level of involvement.** In this situation, when the involvement to a category or a brand is very low, there is a tendency consumer to choose the first available option, which is in the store or online shop, without even thinking of a finding the better version in a different merchant. In addition, when brand involvement is low, there is evidence of the fact that consumers make their choices predominantly based on price. In this situation, higher price is often perceived as an indicator of higher quality, while a lower price is associated with lower quality.
2. **Lack of better options.** In a specific consumer situation, where there is a very limited availability and there are some obstacles related to time or proximity so that a person can choose a better option. For example, when consumption is taking place in a shop located in a small village, or the person is in a hurry and chooses any of few available things, knowing that it is not the best or the preferred one. This market situation may be caused by obstacles related to the distribution policy of market leaders or by lower product circulation in certain shops. The

choice is typically unsatisfactory, and the purchase is unlikely to be repeated, but it does occur under these specific circumstances.

3. **Lack of availability of a category or a brand.** In this case, and when the preferred product category or brand is out of stock, consumers tend to focus on substitutes, which is related to additional – usually not very pleasant – efforts. It is also interesting how in this situation even the expectations for lack of availability are reflected in the behaviour – and this is the phenomenon of the stockpiling, of course, if the product category is available to be stockpiled. The lack of a specific category may also lead to chaotic purchasing behavior, which differs significantly from regular shopping patterns. Factors such as price, brand, and the usual purchase quantity are ignored. Such situations create opportunities for all manufacturers or importers within the category to sell their products on the market with less efforts. Consumer satisfaction is reduced solely to the acquisition of a certain quantity within the category.

4. **Limited time.** This is the case when a given consumer is in a hurry or there is a situation of urgency – for example, there is a need to take a medicine immediately. If there are no preferred options, the purchase can be made without the additional effort of searching for the best one. Lack of time leads consumers to choose the nearest retailer or to search for options for online shopping, and brand choice is limited to what is available there. This is again a compromise purchase that would not occur under different circumstances.

5. **Low price.** The preferred option can be available, but because of the promotional activities or attractive price of the substitute, consumers can decide to switch. In this situation the perceived risk is low, so this is a driver for taking a compromise purchase decision. This can be considered as one of the most common reasons for compromise purchases, namely financial inability or constraints that prevent consumers from buying the desired brand or product. Most probably, this is a characteristic of consumers with low income and, consequently, low purchasing power.

There are differences in the compromise purchase decisions considering the product category. For high-loyalty categories, such as tobacco products, a new retail usually is being searched. However, for other categories, such as fresh milk, bread, olives, etc., consumers are more prone to make compromise.

Compromise purchases can be one-time purchases when the consumer is not satisfied with the product qualities or, conversely, become a regular substitute for the favourite brand.

Conclusion. Directions of future research

The conclusions clearly indicate a growing need to shape and manage compromise purchase decisions within contemporary marketing. Addressing this need is essential for refining marketing strategies, particularly in relation to customer-focused communication approaches.

In addition, four main directions of the future research of compromise purchase decisions can be outlined.

The first one is, as already stated, the need for empirical verification of the importance and frequency of the compromise purchase decisions. It can be made in different product categories, in relation with different price levels, in online and traditional shopping and in other cases, which are relevant to the current perspectives of consumer behaviour.

The second one is the linking of this concept with the parameters and concepts in the current marketing knowledge, and further development of its prominence. This could be also based on the theoretical research and requires further conceptualization.

The third one, which is a direct result of a compromise purchase is the opportunity to have new experiences with new brands. This could be described as forced first purchase, but there is a possibility consumer satisfaction to be on a high level.

The fourth aspect concerns the relationship between compromise purchase decisions and the level of satisfaction with the purchased product category or brand. It may be hypothesized that such decisions are associated with lower, or significantly lower, levels of post-purchase satisfaction. However, this assumption requires empirical validation through systematic research.

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FROM TOOL TO ACTOR: DIELLA AND THE EMERGENCE OF ALGORITHMIC SUBJECTIVITY IN GOVERNANCE

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Abstract: *This article examines how an artificial intelligence system—Diella—was constituted as Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence in Albania, marking an institutional transition from digitalization as a technical resource to digitalization as an actor within executive governance. Drawing on interpretive process tracing and high-reliability public sources, the study reconstructs the mechanisms through which Diella acquired symbolic visibility, procedural authority, and a recognizable institutional presence. The analysis develops the Algorithmic Ascendancy Model, a six-stage framework encompassing imaginary articulation, prefigurative prototyping, role attribution, rule-embedded delegation, public addressability, and responsibility allocation. These stages show how political imaginaries, performative practices, and algorithmic procedures converge to produce functional subjectivity for a non-human entity. The article situates the Albanian case within broader debates on futures literacy, performative politics, and algorithmic governmentality, highlighting how anticipated digital futures are used to justify institutional experimentation. It argues that Diella's emergence illuminates the conditions under which algorithms become integrated into governance structures, while also revealing accompanying tensions in legality, accountability, and transparency. The case offers insight into early trajectories of AI institutionalization and the reconfiguration of agency in contemporary public administration.*

Keywords: Algorithmic Governance; Digitalization; Institutional Subjectivity; Prefigurative Politics; AI in Government

JEL: H83; H11; D73; O33

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1. Introduction

The incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) into public governance has raised fundamental questions about how authority, legitimacy, and responsibility are configured in contemporary political systems. A growing body of research shows that governments increasingly experiment with AI to optimise bureaucratic routines, support data-driven policymaking, and symbolically project administrative modernity (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013; Wirtz, Weyerer, & Geyer, 2019; Zuiderwijk, Chen, & Salem, 2021). While many states have introduced AI incrementally as a back-end decision-support tool, Albania has initiated a distinctive institutional experiment by designating an AI system—Diella—as Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence (Henley, 2025; Reuters, 2025). This appointment represents a conceptual shift from digitalization as a functional tool to digitalization as a political actor embedded within executive structures. Diella is publicly represented through an avatar, attributed a ministerial title, and assigned procedural responsibilities in public procurement. This novelty renders the Albanian case analytically valuable for understanding how political systems construct the conditions under which an algorithm may appear, act, and be treated as an institutional subject within both domestic and international arenas (EUISS, 2025; Jasperse, 2025).

The emergence of Diella must be situated within broader scholarship on future-oriented political imaginaries. Appadurai's (2004) concept of the capacity to aspire highlights how narratives of desirable futures orient collective expectations and legitimise institutional experimentation. Albanian political elites have mobilised a vision of a technologically advanced, efficiency-oriented, and European-aligned state, presenting Diella as the embodiment of this trajectory (EUISS, 2025). Such discursive strategies align with de Jouvenel's (1967) classic insight that political orders mobilize conjecture as a form of anticipatory governance, and with contemporary work on futures literacy, which emphasizes the constitutive role of imagined futures in shaping present-day institutional design (Mangnus et al., 2021). Recent research on digital and "smart" government similarly shows that public authorities increasingly deploy digital imaginaries to justify organisational and technological reforms (Criado, Sandoval-Almazán, & Gil-García, 2019). Within this interpretive lens, Diella is not merely introduced as a technological upgrade but is positioned within a broader imaginary of corruption-free, modern governance, in which AI is framed as a corrective to long-standing institutional deficits.

The Albanian government's phased introduction of Diella also reflects the mechanisms of prefigurative politics, typically associated with social movements but increasingly relevant to state-led technological transformations (Breines, 1989; Yates, 2015; Mergel, 2024). Prior to institutional formalization, Diella appeared in pilot settings, citizen-facing services, and a scripted parliamentary intervention that staged AI as an actor embedded in political deliberation (Tika, 2025). Prefiguration involves the enactment of anticipated futures in the present, reducing uncertainty and familiarizing social and institutional actors with emerging practices (Yates, 2015). By deploying Diella across controlled public demonstrations and administrative pilots, the Albanian government effectively rehearsed a future model of AI-assisted governance, thereby cultivating acceptance and normalizing the presence of a non-human political figure. This logic echoes findings from public administration research, which show that early AI deployments often shift discretion toward automated routines even before full institutionalization is achieved (Bullock, Young, & Wang, 2020; Sun & Medaglia, 2019).

Yet these enactments are also inseparable from performative politics, a well-established feature of political communication where symbolic displays support narratives of capacity, innovation, or credibility. As Bratton (2016) argues, digital interfaces themselves become political stages upon which authority is performed, structuring who appears as an actor and how they can be seen. The introduction of Diella through televised ceremonies, parliamentary appearances, and performative

speeches exemplifies how technological artifacts can be used to construct images of progress and accountability (Tika, 2025). The carefully designed avatar—young, female, and dressed in traditional Albanian attire—serves to humanize the technology while symbolically linking it to national identity. In Southeast European political contexts, where symbolic and communicative performances frequently accompany reform agendas, Diella’s staged visibility operates as a tool for political signaling both domestically and internationally, consistent with the broader literature on political performance and spectacle (Alexander, 2010; Edelman, 1971).

Beyond symbolic politics, the Albanian case intersects with debates on algorithmic governmentality, a form of governance characterized by data-driven procedures, opaque decision architectures, and the redistribution of agency through algorithmic systems (Rouvroy & Berns, 2013; Danaher et al., 2017). Diella’s role in procurement oversight—one of the most corruption-sensitive areas of governance in Albania—is implemented through procedural codification, whereby algorithmic evaluations guide or determine tender outcomes (Jasperse, 2025; TechPolicy Press, 2025). This institutional design shifts certain decision-making functions from human officials to software systems, thus creating a form of functional subjectivity without legal personhood. Such arrangements challenge classical accountability frameworks, which traditionally presume identifiable human agents capable of providing explanations and bearing responsibility (Bovens, 2007; Yeung, 2018). Critics note that the opacity of AI operations and the absence of transparent auditability heighten risks of unaccountable authority and the insulation of political actors behind “technical” decisions, a concern strongly echoed in the literature on black-box governance and AI in the public sector (Pasquale, 2015; Zuiderwijk et al., 2021; Wirtz, Weyerer, & Sturm, 2020).

This paper examines the Albanian case through an interpretive and process-tracing perspective, focusing on the sequential mechanisms through which Diella is discursively constructed, symbolically enacted, procedurally embedded, and publicly represented as an institutional actor. The analysis draws on established theoretical contributions concerning political imaginaries (Appadurai, 2004; de Jouvenel, 1967; Mangnus et al., 2021), prefigurative enactment (Breines, 1989; Yates, 2015), performative governance (Alexander, 2010; Bratton, 2016; Edelman, 1971), institutional rule-making (March & Olsen, 1989; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007), public mediation (Habermas, 1989), and algorithmic authority (Rouvroy & Berns, 2013; Yeung, 2018; Danaher et al., 2017). Empirical grounding relies on high-reliability sources including *The Guardian*, the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), ECPR’s *The Loop*, and TechPolicy Press, alongside official government communications and analytical reports by specialist initiatives such as EMILDAI (Maciel Perez & Démas, 2025).

The article contributes to political science debates in three principal ways. First, it shows how political elites mobilize desirable digital futures to justify institutional experimentation, using imaginaries as political resources in line with recent analyses of AI adoption in the public sector (Sun & Medaglia, 2019; Madan & Ashok, 2023). Second, it demonstrates how prefigurative and performative practices—as sequential yet overlapping processes—help cultivate acceptance for AI as an institutional actor. Third, it highlights how algorithmic systems can redistribute agency, authority, and accountability within governance structures, generating new tensions in democratic oversight that resonate with comparative work on algorithmic governance and AI in public administration (Danaher et al., 2017; Zuiderwijk et al., 2021; Wirtz et al., 2020). This article asks through what institutional, discursive, and procedural mechanisms an AI system such as Diella acquires functional subjectivity within a democratic executive.

2. Theoretical Framework

The emergence of an artificial intelligence system as an institutional actor calls for a theoretical framework capable of tracing how futures are imagined, how authority is performed, and how power is redistributed through technological systems. In this article, three bodies of literature—on imagined futures and prefiguration, on performative politics, and on algorithmic governmentality—are brought into conversation to illuminate the political and institutional conditions under which an artefact such as Diella can take on a ministerial presence. These literatures do not merely sit alongside one another; they converge around a shared concern with how political orders bring into being the realities they claim to describe, especially when digital technologies become central to reform narratives (Criado et al., 2019; Zuiderwijk et al., 2021).

2.1 Imagined Futures and Prefigurative Enactment

Any attempt to understand the institutionalization of an AI minister must begin with how political systems mobilize the future. Appadurai's (2004) account of the capacity to aspire is instructive here: aspirations are socially organised anticipations that structure what political actors consider possible and legitimate. They operate not as abstract hopes but as navigational tools that orient institutional behaviour. In this sense, imaginaries of technological modernity, transparency, and European alignment do not simply accompany Albania's reforms; they provide the normative horizon that renders institutional experimentation intelligible.

De Jouvenel's (1967) classic exploration of political conjecture extends this reasoning by showing that futures are actively constructed through interpretive labour. Anticipation is not a passive orientation toward what has not yet occurred; it is a generative political act through which leaders propose trajectories and institutional pathways. The state's attempt to insert AI into the ministerial rank therefore draws upon this long-standing political technique of projecting the future in order to reorganise the present. Contemporary analyses of digital governance emphasise that such projections are increasingly tied to narratives about "smart", data-driven and AI-enhanced government (Criado et al., 2019; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013).

Recent scholarship in futures studies deepens this argument. Mangnus et al. (2021) describe futures literacy as the capacity to work with multiple possible futures as a resource for decision-making. From this perspective, digitalisation is not imagined as a mere administrative enhancement but as part of a broader anticipatory horizon in which algorithmic systems promise to correct entrenched governance failures. Futures become a technology of governing in themselves, shaping not only policy agendas but also the kinds of institutional innovations that become thinkable.

The movement from imagined futures to institutional practices is mediated by what scholars of social movements have termed prefiguration. Although initially used to describe bottom-up experimentation, the logic of prefiguration—performing the desired future within the present—applies equally to state-led initiatives. Breines (1989) and Yates (2015) remind us that prefigurative practices cultivate familiarity, reduce political uncertainty, and domesticate otherwise unfamiliar institutional forms. Recent work on AI in the public sector shows that governments often use pilots, sandboxes, and experimental deployments to rehearse anticipated governance models and mitigate political risk (Mergel, 2024; Sun & Medaglia, 2019). The Albanian state's early demonstrations of Diella can be read as enactments of a not-yet-realised governance model. These enactments do not merely preview the future; they constitute it in embryonic form, aligning with broader patterns of anticipatory experimentation in digital governance (Madan & Ashok, 2023).

Together, these works establish a first conceptual pillar: that institutional innovations involving AI are intelligible only within a political field already structured by imaginaries of what the future should be and by prefigurative acts that bring those imaginaries closer to the present.

2.2 Performative Politics and the Staging of Authority

If imaginaries explain why political systems pursue certain trajectories, they do not on their own account for how authority is projected or stabilized. Here the literature on performative politics offers a second analytical lens. Butler's (1990, 1993) early theorisation of performativity—while formulated in the context of gender—has been widely adapted to show how identities, roles, and institutional positions are constituted through repeated acts. A ministerial identity, human or not, is not simply assigned; it is continuously performed.

Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical sociology deepens this insight by framing public life as a space where actors engage in impression management before attentive audiences. In his reading, the coherence of political authority depends not only on formal mandates but on the credibility produced through performances that signal competence, trustworthiness, and control. Political leadership is sustained by the successful management of appearances.

This line of thinking has been extended to democratic politics more broadly. Alexander (2010) argues that contemporary political life has a theatrical dimension in which leaders choreograph meaning through symbolic gestures, narrative framing, and the staging of political roles. When digital artefacts appear within these performances, they do not stand outside the political field; they become part of the repertoire through which political actors dramatize their claims.

Bratton (2016) brings these insights into the domain of digital governance by showing how interfaces—screens, avatars, platforms—structure political perception. Interfaces mediate authority: they make certain actors visible, foreground certain narratives, and normalise certain hierarchies. Gillespie (2014) similarly highlights how platforms and algorithmic interfaces act as curators of public attention and meaning. In this sense, the public presentation of an AI minister is not a technical detail but a political performance that shapes how authority is imagined and experienced. Research on AI in government suggests that such performances are increasingly integral to how public-sector AI is legitimated and integrated into existing governance arrangements (Wirtz et al., 2019; Wirtz et al., 2020).

Performative politics therefore serves as a second conceptual foundation for analysing Diella's emergence. It draws attention to how symbolic acts, curated appearances, and digital personifications function as techniques through which legitimacy is staged and institutional novelty is smoothed into public life.

2.3 Algorithmic Governmentality and the Redistribution of Agency

A third set of debates concerns how algorithms reconfigure the mechanics of governance. Rouvroy and Berns (2013) describe algorithmic governmentality as a mode of rule in which decision-making is shaped by data-intensive procedures, statistical correlations, and automated scripts rather than deliberative processes. This form of governance is rooted, conceptually, in Foucault's (2007, 2008) broader theory of governmentality, which emphasises that modern power operates through techniques, practices, and rationalities that order behaviour at a distance.

The introduction of algorithmic systems into governance aligns closely with what Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007) term governing by instruments: the idea that policy tools—rather than decrees or bureaucratic discretion—structure the relationships between state and society. Algorithms transform these instruments from procedural guidelines into computational authorities whose outputs can carry binding force. Comparative work on AI in public administration indicates that

such systems increasingly shape how bureaucratic discretion is organised and constrained (Bullock et al., 2020; Danaher et al., 2017; Sun & Medaglia, 2019).

Such transformations inevitably raise questions about accountability. Bovens (2007) provides a widely accepted framework for thinking about public accountability as a relationship that requires identifiable agents capable of explaining and justifying their actions. When decisions emerge from opaque computational processes, this relationship becomes strained. Yeung (2018) warns that algorithmic regulation risks creating authority without transparency, while Katzenbach and Ulbricht (2019) highlight how opacity becomes an institutional feature rather than a technical defect. Zuiderwijk et al. (2021) and Wirtz et al. (2020) further show that AI integration can create governance gaps in which responsibilities are diffused across technical, organisational, and political domains.

At stake here is not simply whether AI systems make efficient decisions, but how their integration shifts agency across developers, political leaders, and administrative infrastructures. In effect, algorithmic systems redistribute responsibility and reshape the institutional architecture through which decisions are produced and contested, with implications for both democratic control and perceived legitimacy (Papagiannidis, Mikalef, & Conboy, 2025).

2.4 Conceptual Synthesis

Read together, these three literatures provide a framework that captures the layered nature of AI's emergence as an institutional actor. Imagined futures supply the normative horizon and motivational logic; prefigurative practices enact elements of the anticipated future; performative politics stages authority and stabilises legitimacy; and algorithmic governmentality embeds new systems of rule within procedural infrastructures.

This integrated perspective is essential for analysing an artefact such as Diella. It allows us to see the case not as a technological anomaly, nor as a purely symbolic gesture, but as a complex political project in which imaginaries, performances, and algorithms converge to produce a new, hybrid form of institutional presence.

3. Methodological Note

This article adopts an interpretive and process-oriented methodological approach to examine how an artificial intelligence system acquires institutional presence within the Albanian executive. The approach reflects the nature of the research question: rather than assessing performance or causal effects, the aim is to understand how meaning, authority, and institutional functionality are constructed and enacted. This aligns with the interpretivist tradition in political science, which treats political phenomena as products of socially embedded practices, discourses, and interpretations (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014; Bevir & Blakely, 2018).

Methodologically, the analysis follows a process-tracing logic in the interpretive sense, which differs fundamentally from causal-inferential versions of process tracing. Interpretive process tracing is concerned with reconstructing the sequences of meaning-making through which actors endow practices with institutional significance (Pouliot, 2015; Glynos & Howarth, 2007). Rather than searching for causal mechanism tests, it reconstructs how particular constellations of discourse, performance, and procedural innovation accumulate to produce new institutional realities. This epistemological stance is appropriate for a case where an AI system is endowed with ministerial identity, a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to causal variables but emerges through a constellation of symbolic and procedural acts. It is consistent with recent calls in the algorithmic

governance literature for approaches that integrate technical developments with their political and cultural embedding (Danaher et al., 2017).

The empirical material consists of four types of sources. First, the analysis draws on official government communications, including ministerial statements, press releases, parliamentary transcripts, and public descriptions of Diella's mandate. Such documents are not treated as transparent representations of political reality, but as performative texts that reveal how political elites narrate authority, justify institutional novelty, and position AI within broader modernisation trajectories. This approach is consistent with interpretive document analysis, which treats policy texts as sites where meaning is produced and institutional roles are articulated (Yanow, 2000).

Second, the study incorporates reporting from high-reliability international and European policy outlets, notably The Guardian (Henley, 2025), the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS, 2025), TechPolicy Press (Jasperse, 2025), and ECPR's The Loop (Tika, 2025), as well as critical blogs such as EMILDAI (Maciel Perez & Démas, 2025). In rapidly evolving cases where academic literature has not yet fully developed, public-facing policy analysis and investigative journalism often document critical institutional shifts as they occur. While these sources are not treated as explanatory accounts, they provide triangulation and contextual depth—an accepted practice in interpretive and constructivist research where meaning is co-produced across political and societal arenas (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

Third, secondary academic literature informs the analytical lens through which the empirical material is interpreted. The article draws on established theoretical contributions in futures studies, performativity, and algorithmic governance to make sense of how Diella's role is assembled. The purpose of these literatures is not to generate hypotheses but to provide conceptual scaffolding for interpreting the Albanian case, consistent with interpretivist methodological reasoning (Bevir & Blakely, 2018; Danaher et al., 2017).

The interpretive orientation of the study also necessitates an explicit note on reflexivity. The aim is not to determine whether Diella "is" a minister in any ontological sense, but to understand the processes by which ministerial identity is attributed, staged, and operationalised. This stance parallels constructivist approaches that treat institutional facts as the outcomes of discursive and procedural labour rather than fixed descriptors (Pouliot, 2007; Bevir & Rhodes, 2003). The researcher therefore approaches institutional categories as historically contingent and politically produced.

4. The Algorithmic Ascendancy Model: A Six-Stage Process of Constructing Diella's Institutional Subjectivity

The institutional emergence of Diella can be understood through a layered process in which narrative construction, symbolic enactment, legal designation, procedural embedding, communicative presence, and accountability contestation combine to produce what may be described as algorithmic subjectivity. To capture this process, this article develops the Algorithmic Ascendancy Model, a six-stage analytical framework that synthesizes the empirical sequence through which Diella was imagined, enacted, formalized, operationalized, made public, and ultimately contested. The stages presented below do not represent a linear chronology but overlapping mechanisms through which an artificial intelligence system is gradually legitimated as a ministerial actor.

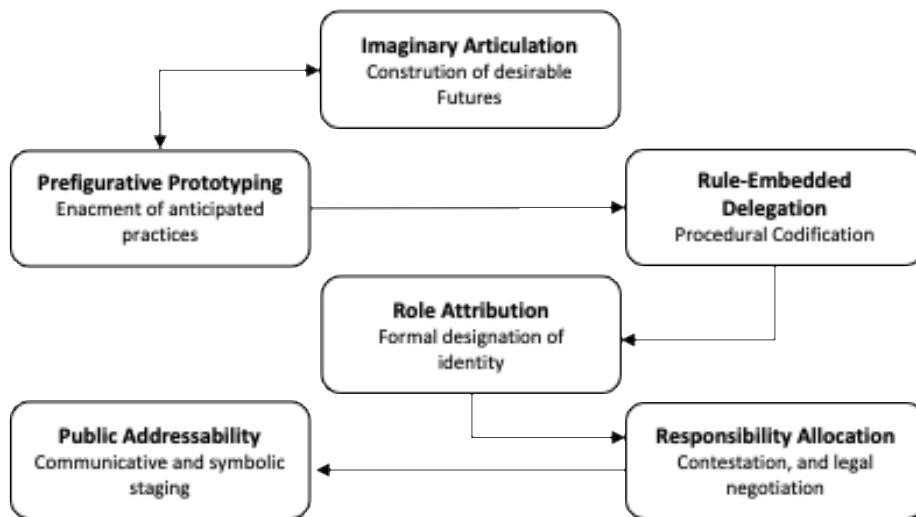


Figure 1. *The Algorithmic Ascendancy Model: A Six-Stage Process*

4.1 Imaginary Articulation: Envisioning a Digital, Corruption-Free Future

The first stage concerns the political imaginary through which Diella became conceivable as an actor of governance. Over the past decade, Albania has positioned digital governance as the normative horizon of state modernization, in line with broader regional trends toward digital-era governance (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013; EUISS, 2025). This imaginary was sharpened when Prime Minister Edi Rama declared Diella to be “the first cabinet member not physically present but virtually created by artificial intelligence,” promising that she would make procurement “100% free of corruption” (Henley, 2025). Such articulations frame technology as a moral and political corrective. By situating Diella within Albania’s Europeanizing trajectory, political elites linked algorithmic governance to the aspirational future of transparency and administrative integrity (Reuters, 2025). This corresponds to what Appadurai (2004) describes as the capacity to aspire: imaginaries that organize expectations and legitimize new institutional forms. In this stage, the future functions as a justificatory regime through which an AI minister becomes institutionally thinkable.

4.2 Prefigurative Prototyping: Enacting the Future in the Present

The second stage involved enacting components of the envisioned future before Diella’s formal appointment. Prefigurative practices—in Breines’s (1989) and Yates’s (2015) sense—allowed the government to domesticate the idea of a nonhuman minister. Diella’s public interactions with nearly one million users, her issuance of tens of thousands of digital seals, and her involvement in scripted parliamentary segments functioned as performative dress rehearsals of a governance model not yet codified (Tika, 2025; Maciel Perez & Démas, 2025). These enactments made the imagined governance future experientially accessible, creating a sense of plausibility for a technology that lacked precedent. Here, practice preceded institution. This pattern reflects wider findings that AI pilots in the public sector often reshape bureaucratic practices and expectations even before formal structures are adapted, shifting discretion toward automated processes and experimental infrastructures (Bullock et al., 2020; Mergel, 2024).

4.3 Role Attribution: Constituting a Ministerial Identity

The naming of Diella as “Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence” constituted the third stage. Role attribution is a critical institutional operation: as March and Olsen (1989) argue, institutional identities are produced by formal designations that stabilize expectations. The presidential decree listing Diella among the cabinet members gave juridical shape to a virtual presence (EUISS, 2025; Maciel Perez & Démas, 2025). Although the decree specified that the Prime Minister would bear ultimate legal responsibility, the symbolic force of the designation created the conditions for public recognition of Diella as a ministerial actor. This naming act initiated the constitutional controversy—opposition actors argued that only natural persons can legitimately hold ministerial portfolios—which would later resurface in the contestation of accountability. Recent work on AI governance warns that such formal role assignments for AI systems risk blurring institutional boundaries and complicating lines of responsibility (Papagiannidis et al., 2025; Zuiderwijk et al., 2021).

4.4 Rule-Embedded Delegation: Inscribing Authority into Administrative Procedure

The fourth stage concerns the transformation of Diella from a titular figure into a functional participant in public procurement. The government embedded algorithmic evaluations into procurement workflows, endowing the system with *de facto* decision-shaping authority (Jasperse, 2025; TechPolicy Press, 2025). This procedural inscription reflects what Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007) describe as governing by instruments, in which power resides in the technical scripts that structure administrative action. Rama’s promise that Diella would “examine every tender and eliminate bribes, threats, and conflicts of interest” (Henley, 2025) demonstrates how algorithmic impartiality was leveraged as a reformist rationale. As Diella began issuing evaluations, rankings, and stamps on official documents, her authority migrated from symbolic designation to operational influence. This marks the point at which algorithmic agency materializes through rule. Comparative studies suggest that such delegation can both standardise decisions and introduce new forms of opacity, especially when AI is embedded deeply into administrative routines (Sun & Medaglia, 2019; Wirtz et al., 2020).

4.5 Public Addressability: Constructing a Communicative and Symbolic Presence

The fifth stage involved establishing Diella as a publicly addressable actor. Her appearances at international forums, the circulation of statements, responses to citizen queries, and the cultivation of a distinctive avatar constitute what Bratton (2016) identifies as interface politics. At the 2025 Global Dialogue Forum, Diella’s avatar delivered a speech affirming that AI can “strengthen—not weaken—human leadership,” an intervention that extended her communicative presence beyond Albania’s borders (EUISS, 2025). Public addressability reinforces legitimacy by enabling citizens and institutions to orient themselves toward an identifiable figure. Habermas’s (1989) emphasis on communicative mediation is useful here: Diella’s avatar became the medium through which a virtual minister entered the public sphere. Gillespie (2014) and Alexander (2010) remind us that such interfaces and performances do not merely reflect authority; they co-produce it by shaping the frames through which publics interpret political roles. In this stage, visibility reinforces plausibility and embeds Diella within a communicative infrastructure that is both symbolic and political.

4.6 Responsibility Allocation: Contesting Legal and Democratic Authority

The final stage concerns responsibility allocation, where constitutional norms and political authority confront the ambiguities of algorithmic governance. Because algorithms lack legal personhood, Diella’s actions raised fundamental questions about accountability. Critics argued that procurement decisions mediated by Diella obscured responsibility and insulated political actors behind technological opacity (Maciel Perez & Démas, 2025; Jasperse, 2025). The opposition’s

constitutional challenge asserted that ministers must be natural persons accountable to Parliament, exposing the tensions between political imagination and legal order. Rouvroy and Berns (2013) describe this as a defining feature of algorithmic governmentality: authority is distributed across technical infrastructures and political overseers in ways that destabilize traditional accountability frameworks. Bovens's (2007) framework underscores that accountability requires clarity regarding who must provide justifications and face potential sanctions. In the Diella case, this clarity is weakened. Pasquale's (2015) critique of black-box governance and Yeung's (2018) analysis of algorithmic regulation are directly relevant: both highlight how opacity in computational systems complicates contestation, review, and democratic control. In this stage, the political, legal, and technological strands of Diella's existence collide, revealing both the innovation and the fragility of such an institutional arrangement.

Stage	Core Mechanism	Analytical Function	Empirical Markers (Albania)
1. Imaginary Articulation	Construction of desirable futures	Establishes normative horizon	Rama's promise of "corruption-free tenders"; European modernization discourse
2. Prefigurative Prototyping	Enactment of anticipated practices	Makes imagined future experientially plausible	972k citizen interactions; parliamentary scripted debut; digital stamps
3. Role Attribution	Formal designation of identity	Produces symbolic institutional subjectivity	Presidential decree naming Diella minister; cabinet listing
4. Rule-Embedded Delegation	Procedural codification	Converts symbolic status into functional authority	Algorithmic tender evaluations; administrative embedding
5. Public Addressability	Communicative and symbolic staging	Reinforces legitimacy through visibility	International speeches; avatar identity; public statements
6. Responsibility Allocation	Contestation and legal negotiation	Tests boundaries of accountability	Constitutional challenge; debates on ministerial personhood

Table 1. *The Algorithmic Ascendancy Model: Six Stages of Institutionalizing an AI Minister*

Taken together, the six stages of the Algorithmic Ascendancy Model show that Diella's emergence as a ministerial figure was not a technological inevitability but the result of a dense configuration of narrative, performative, legal, and procedural work. Each stage mobilized distinct political techniques—imagining, enacting, naming, codifying, representing, and contesting—that collectively produced a hybrid form of agency situated between human political authority and algorithmic decision systems. This process demonstrates that the institutional presence of AI arises through political creativity as much as through computational innovation. In this sense, Diella's case illuminates how contemporary states may construct algorithmic subjectivity not as a technical artefact, but as an object of political imagination and institutional power.

5. Discussion

The case of Diella invites a more nuanced assessment than either technological optimism or outright scepticism can provide. Its significance lies not simply in the novelty of appointing an artificial intelligence system to a ministerial role, but in the way this act reconfigures the political, symbolic, and procedural foundations of governance. The six stages mapped by the Algorithmic Ascendancy Model reveal a process that simultaneously opens new institutional possibilities and reproduces longstanding tensions in Southeast European political systems. The discussion that follows highlights both sides of this dual dynamic.

On the one hand, Diella embodies an ambitious technological wager: the belief that procedural corruption can be reduced by embedding decision-making in digital systems less susceptible to

clientelism or discretionary abuse. This aspiration aligns with scholarly arguments that digital instruments can create micro-environments of impartiality in settings where institutional trust is weak (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013; Sun & Medaglia, 2019). By placing procurement evaluation in algorithmic workflows, Albanian authorities sought to symbolically externalize political discretion, redirecting public expectations toward a model of automated integrity. Studies of AI frameworks for public management support the view that AI is often promoted as a way to align administrative practice with ideals of neutrality and efficiency (Wirtz et al., 2019; Criado et al., 2019).

Yet this reformist narrative must be viewed critically. The promise of algorithmic neutrality is well known to carry a moralizing allure, projecting technology as a corrective to political failures (Gillespie, 2014; Zuiderwijk et al., 2021). Rama's declarations that Diella would make tenders "100% free of corruption" exemplify what Edelman (1971) describes as the politics of reassurance: symbolic innovations that offer emotional certainty without resolving structural problems. In this reading, Diella becomes a vessel through which political leadership reframes its relationship to corruption, shifting expectations without necessarily enhancing accountability. Comparative reviews of AI in government underscore that claims of transformative impact frequently exceed available empirical evidence (Madan & Ashok, 2023).

The performative dimension of Diella's emergence is equally ambivalent. On one hand, its public staging—through parliamentary appearances, international speeches, and a carefully designed avatar—demonstrates how political authorities use symbolic action to socialize citizens into emerging institutional forms. This resonates with Alexander's (2010) conception of political performance as a way of sustaining legitimacy by dramatizing moral purpose. It also aligns with research on the centrality of interfaces and mediated presence in shaping how AI is perceived as trustworthy or authoritative (Bratton, 2016; Gillespie, 2014).

On the other hand, the intensity of the performance raises questions about narrative control. The Albanian government not only introduced an AI minister but placed that figure at the centre of a spectacle that blended technological futurism with nationalist symbolism (Tika, 2025). The avatar's traditional Albanian attire and youthful appearance activated emotional registers that render political messages more persuasive. This use of performativity maps onto what Zuboff (2019) calls instrumentarian power: the deployment of digitally mediated symbols to shape behaviour and perception in ways that exceed transparent persuasion. Diella's orchestrated visibility thus operates both as an experiment in governance and as a strategic communication device.

The risk here is not only that Diella's presence may serve as a conduit for political propaganda, but that performativity can obscure the absence of substantive reform. In contexts with longstanding concerns about media pluralism and concentrated executive power, the blending of state messaging with algorithmic staging invites scrutiny over how narratives are curated, distributed, and stabilized. In this sense, Diella may function less as a governance reform and more as an electoral or reputational device—an AI-enabled extension of political communication, packaged as modernization (Jasperse, 2025; Maciel Perez & Démas, 2025).

Another critical issue concerns the actual productivity of the ministerial experiment. Although public statements emphasize Diella's capacity to analyze tenders, issue digital seals, and perform administrative tasks, no independent assessment of accuracy, efficiency, or error rates is publicly available. This opacity resonates with Rouvroy and Berns's (2013) warning that algorithmic systems frequently operate as black boxes, whose authority depends on institutional narratives rather than demonstrable performance. Reviews of AI adoption in public administration indicate that performance claims are often based on limited evidence and that success metrics remain loosely defined (Madan & Ashok, 2023; Zuiderwijk et al., 2021).

In the absence of transparency, it is unclear whether Diella improves procurement quality or merely automates pre-existing workflows. The promise of 24/7 efficiency must therefore be weighed against the possibility of automated pathologies: biased evaluation metrics, vulnerabilities in data integrity, or systemic amplification of flawed administrative routines. As Yeung (2018) argues, algorithmic regulation may give the appearance of objectivity while entrenching underlying structural biases. Bullock et al. (2020) make a similar point by showing how algorithmic tools can reconfigure, rather than eliminate, bureaucratic discretion. Without a mechanism for external audit or parliamentary oversight, the productivity of the AI minister remains as much a rhetorical construction as an administrative reality (Wirtz et al., 2020).

Perhaps the most consequential implication concerns how Diella reshapes the architecture of responsibility. The government's insistence that ultimate accountability remains with the Prime Minister creates a duality: the algorithm is symbolically responsible for decisions, while a human actor remains formally answerable. This duality enables a strategic ambiguity. When procurement outcomes are contested, political leaders may defer to "what the algorithm decided," thereby diffusing responsibility across technical systems and administrative hierarchies. Bovens's (2007) framework reminds us that accountability requires clarity in who must explain, justify, and potentially face sanction for decisions. Diella complicates this clarity by introducing a non-human intermediary whose internal functioning is not publicly accessible.

Furthermore, the algorithm's opaque methodology—no public information exists about training data, evaluation criteria, or internal validation procedures—creates a governance environment in which narrative control can substitute for substantive accountability. This resonates with Pasquale's (2015) analysis of black-box governance, in which opacity enables political actors to harness algorithmic authority while avoiding scrutiny. The constitutional controversy surrounding Diella's appointment illustrates this tension: the symbolic elevation of an algorithm to ministerial status presses against the normative boundaries of legal personhood and democratic oversight (Maciel Perez & Démas, 2025; EUISS, 2025). These developments reflect broader concerns in the literature that AI may reconfigure, rather than resolve, longstanding accountability deficits in public governance (Wirtz et al., 2020; Zuiderwijk et al., 2021).

Taken together, the Albanian case illustrates a double movement. On one side, Diella represents a genuine institutional innovation: a bold attempt to take advantage of AI's potential to routinize integrity, modernize administrative practice, and project state capacity. On the other, it reproduces and intensifies familiar patterns of political communication, narrative centralization, and institutional opacity. The Algorithmic Ascendancy Model reveals that these dynamics are mutually constitutive. The cultural and symbolic labour that normalizes Diella as a minister simultaneously provides opportunities for political messaging, narrative control, and selective transparency.

In this sense, the implications of the Diella experiment extend beyond the technical domain. They speak to the evolving relationship between governance and digital systems, where the boundary between institutional reform and political spectacle becomes increasingly porous. The Albanian case demonstrates that algorithmic subjectivity is as much a product of political imagination—and political strategy—as it is of computational design.

While the Albanian case is distinctive in formalizing an AI system as a ministerial actor, it intersects with wider experiments in algorithmic governance. Estonia's Bürokratt programme, the UAE's Minister of State for AI, and emerging municipal-level AI deployments in Northern Europe illustrate how governments use AI to reshape administrative interaction and decision routines. Existing studies show that such initiatives typically remain within the "tool" or "interface" domains

of AI governance (Sun & Medaglia, 2019; Bullock et al., 2020; Zuiderwijk et al., 2021; Wirtz et al., 2020), whereas Diella shifts toward an actor-like institutional presence.

6. Conclusion

The appointment of Diella as Albania's Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence represents an unusually vivid entry point into the emerging politics of algorithmic governance. Rather than treating this development as either an eccentric anomaly or a harbinger of an inevitable future, this article has sought to reconstruct the political, symbolic, and procedural work required to transform an AI system into a figure capable of occupying a ministerial role. Through the Algorithmic Ascendancy Model, the analysis highlights six interlocking mechanisms—imaginary articulation, prefigurative prototyping, role attribution, rule-embedded delegation, public addressability, and responsibility allocation—that together constituted the arc through which Diella was made intelligible as an institutional actor.

Three broader lessons emerge from this reconstruction.

First, the Albanian case illustrates that algorithmic actors do not enter governance as neutral technical instruments. They are ushered in through political imaginaries that project desirable futures—transparent procurement, corruption-free administration, European alignment—and that help normalize institutional innovation (Appadurai, 2004; Mangnus et al., 2021; Criado et al., 2019). Such imaginaries can function as resources for states seeking to demonstrate reformist commitment, but they also risk obscuring the structural limitations of digital tools. In this sense, Diella embodies both the promise and the fragility of future-oriented governance narratives.

Second, the case underscores the central role of performative politics in stabilizing technological authority. Diella's public appearances, curated persona, and symbolic representation at international events reveal the extent to which legitimacy is not only administered through procedures but performed through carefully choreographed acts (Alexander, 2010; Bratton, 2016; Tika, 2025). These performances help make an unfamiliar actor recognisable, yet they also open space for political spectacle, narrative manipulation, and electoral messaging. The line between innovation and propaganda is not cleanly drawn; it is negotiated through ongoing public interpretation and contestation.

Third, the procedural embedding of Diella into procurement workflows illuminates the shifting architecture of agency under algorithmic governance. Authority moves from individuals to coded routines; accountability becomes distributed, and at times diffused; legality lags behind institutional creativity. The resulting tensions—particularly the constitutional dispute over whether a minister must be a natural person—offer an instructive reminder that political systems adapt unevenly to technological transformation. Far from resolving accountability deficits, algorithms may reconfigure them in new ways, rendering responsibility more ambiguous rather than more transparent (Bovens, 2007; Yeung, 2018; Wirtz et al., 2020).

The Diella experiment thus occupies an ambivalent position in the study of digital governance. It represents a forward-looking attempt to rethink administrative integrity through technological means, but it also reflects and potentially reinforces patterns of narrative centralization, symbolic governance, and institutional opacity commonly observed in Southeast European political systems (EUISS, 2025; Maciel Perez & Démas, 2025). Its significance lies not in whether it succeeds or fails as a technical innovation, but in what it reveals about how states imagine, perform, and proceduralize authority in a digital age.

More broadly, the case contributes to political science by demonstrating how algorithmic subjectivity is politically constructed rather than technologically predetermined. It shows that the emergence of nonhuman actors in governance is shaped by narrative work, symbolic action, and institutional design, rather than by computational capability alone. The Algorithmic Ascendancy Model proposed here provides a conceptual tool for examining similar developments elsewhere, offering a vocabulary for analysing how imagined futures, performative practices, and algorithmic instruments converge to produce new forms of authority.

As AI systems continue to infiltrate administrative and political domains, the questions raised by Diella—about accountability, legitimacy, and the boundaries of institutional personhood—will become increasingly salient. Whether such experiments contribute to democratic deepening or democratic erosion will depend less on technological sophistication than on the political choices that guide their institutionalization.

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PROMOTING THE NURSING PROFESSION: UTILIZING INTEGRATED MARKETING TECHNIQUES TO TACKLE THE SHORTAGE OF NURSES

Indrit BIMi¹

Abstract: *The promotion of the nursing profession through strategically designed marketing initiatives is increasingly recognized as a critical approach to enhancing its public image, professional recognition, and societal value. Historically perceived as subordinate to physicians, nurses are now acknowledged as autonomous, evidence-based, and leadership-oriented professionals; however, persistent stereotypes, workforce challenges, and limited public awareness continue to affect the attractiveness and credibility of the profession. This review employed a comprehensive literature search across Google Scholar, Web of Science, PubMed, CINAHL, and Scopus, covering the period from 2010 to 2025, using keywords such as “promote,” “profession,” and “nurs*.” After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria and removing duplicates, peer-reviewed studies directly addressing nursing image, professional branding, and marketing strategies were analyzed to synthesize current evidence.*

Findings indicate that effective promotion of nursing requires integrated strategies that combine external marketing efforts with internal workplace improvements, including supportive work environments, professional empowerment, educational modernization, and leadership development. Global initiatives, professional associations, and individual nurse advocacy play a central role in shaping public perception and fostering a cohesive professional identity. The review highlights that sustained marketing efforts, political commitment, and collaborative international strategies are essential to strengthen recruitment, retention, and the overall professional standing of nursing.

In conclusion, advancing the nursing profession necessitates coordinated actions across healthcare systems, policymakers, and professional organizations to ensure long-term sustainability, workforce stability, and enhanced quality of care. Strategic marketing, combined with systemic workplace and educational reforms, can reinforce nursing’s visibility, credibility, and societal impact.

Keywords: nursing profession; professional promotion; integrated marketing; workforce shortage; clinical recruitment; employer engagement; professional branding; nurse advocacy; continuing professional development (CPD); health workforce policy.

JEL: I1; I11; I14; I25; J24; M31; L84

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Background

The promotion of the nursing profession through integrated and strategically designed marketing initiatives represents a critical approach to strengthening its public image and societal recognition. Such strategies extend beyond traditional communication efforts and encompass comprehensive branding, stakeholder engagement, digital presence, media representation, and policy advocacy. By systematically applying marketing principles within healthcare contexts, the profession can enhance its visibility, clarify its scope of practice, and reinforce its identity as an autonomous, evidence-based, and leadership-oriented discipline.

Importantly, these promotional efforts are not limited to external perception management but are also closely linked to the development of healthy, supportive, and empowering work environments. Strengthening the professional image of nursing contributes to improved morale, increased job satisfaction, and greater professional pride among nurses, which in turn positively influences workforce stability and quality of care. A strong and credible professional brand can therefore function as both a public-facing strategy and an internal mechanism for organizational development.

Leadership in this endeavor is undertaken not only by individual nurses acting as ambassadors of their profession, but also by national and international professional associations, regulatory bodies, academic institutions, and healthcare organizations. Through coordinated advocacy campaigns, educational reforms, policy engagement, and collaborative initiatives at multiple levels, these entities play a central role in shaping public discourse, influencing health policy, and ensuring the long-term sustainability and advancement of the nursing profession.

Methodology

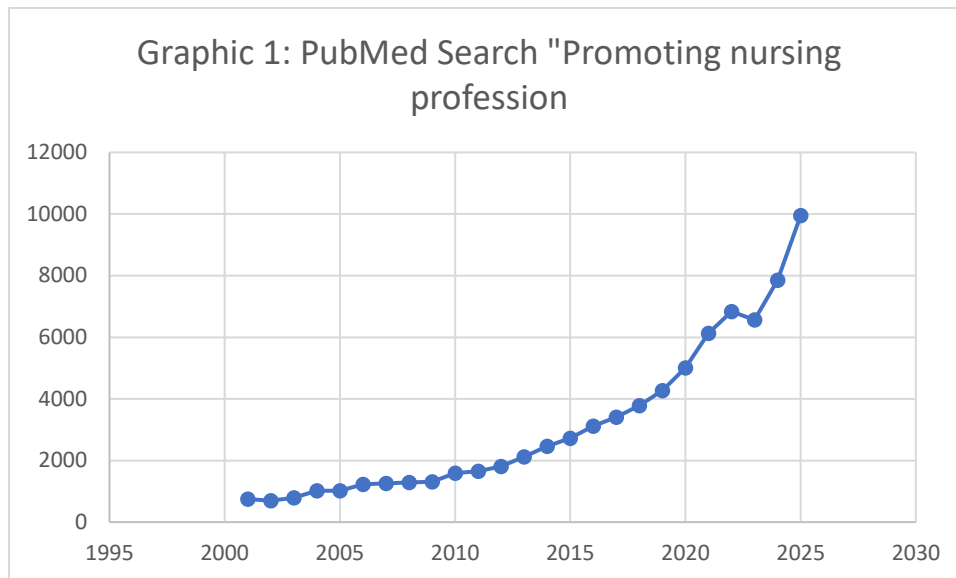
A comprehensive literature search was undertaken to identify scholarly publications addressing the promotion of the nursing profession. The search was conducted across major scientific databases, including Google Scholar, Web of Science, PubMed, CINAHL, and Scopus, to ensure broad coverage of multidisciplinary and nursing-specific research. The keywords “promote,” “profession,” and “nurs*” were applied, with the use of truncation and Boolean operators to capture variations of relevant terms and to refine the search strategy. The review covered publications from 2010 to 2025 in order to reflect contemporary perspectives and recent developments in professional promotion and branding within nursing.

The initial search yielded several thousand articles. These records were subsequently subjected to a structured screening process based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Only peer-reviewed articles published in English and directly related to the promotion, image, or professional development of nursing were considered eligible. Duplicate studies were removed, and titles and abstracts were systematically reviewed to assess relevance. Full-text articles meeting the eligibility criteria were further evaluated for methodological rigor and thematic alignment with the objectives of the review.

This systematic and transparent approach enhanced the credibility, consistency, and reliability of the evidence synthesized in the final analysis.

Results and discussions

Based on Pubmed about scientific works and articles, we noticed that from 2001 till 2025 the numbers are enourmous changed.



promoting nursing profession - Search Results - PubMed. (2026.). PubMed.

Nurses play a central role in shaping the public image of their profession, and this image is influenced by multiple professional, organizational, and societal factors. Developing a clear and autonomous professional identity remains essential for strengthening nursing's position within healthcare systems (Moghbeli, 2025). Historically, nursing has often been perceived as subordinate to medicine; however, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted nurses as the primary and most visible component of the global healthcare workforce.

Various strategies have been implemented to promote the nursing profession, including the application of marketing principles. Nevertheless, marketing efforts within nursing remain insufficient and require further development to effectively enhance professional visibility and societal recognition (Kagan, 2015). The global nursing shortage, which has reached crisis levels in many contexts, has also been linked to the public image of the profession, influencing recruitment and retention trends (Somers, 2010).

Creating and sustaining a positive professional image requires not only external communication but also internal marketing strategies that address workplace conditions and the needs of healthcare personnel (Amiri, 2023). The public image of nursing is dynamic and continuously evolving (Duan, 2024), yet it remains complex and sometimes ambiguous, shaped by administrative, social, and cultural interpretations (Beauregard, 2003). Therefore, coordinated global efforts to strengthen and promote the professional image of nursing are essential (Cámpoli, 2024).

Strategic initiatives should focus on strengthening the nursing "brand" through professional empowerment, the development of nurse ambassadors, and the creation of supportive and healthy work environments (Yeo, 2025). However, professional self-actualization alone does not necessarily contribute to broader promotion of the profession (Hazanov, 2020). Effective professional advocacy also includes guidance on teamwork, communication skills, leadership, and maintaining a constructive professional attitude (Laskowski-Jones, 2023).

Modern and up-to-date educational approaches further contribute to shaping public perception and enhancing professional credibility (Elsheikh, 2023). In addition, meaningful improvement in nursing's societal image requires strong political commitment and public support (Farsi, 2010). Technological advancements and globalization have also contributed to increasing international recognition of the profession (Tsai, 2020).

In some countries, workforce shortages are associated with declining enrollment in nursing education programs, while in others migration driven by dissatisfaction exacerbates staffing gaps (Albaugh, 2003). Ultimately, the effectiveness of nursing practice is closely linked to the strength and organization of health systems (Allen, 2007). Efforts to improve the nursing profession should therefore include responsible media representation, strengthened nursing education, financial support for students, and competitive remuneration strategies (Almaki, 2011).

Conclusions

In conclusion, the public image of nursing is shaped by complex professional, organizational, and societal influences, requiring the development of a strong and autonomous professional identity. Although global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have enhanced the visibility of nurses, sustained and strategic marketing efforts remain necessary to strengthen recruitment, retention, and professional recognition. Improving nursing's image depends on integrated approaches that combine internal workplace improvements, educational modernization, political support, and global collaboration. Ultimately, advancing the profession requires coordinated action across health systems, professional organizations, and policymakers to ensure long-term sustainability and workforce stability.

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THE DIGITAL BATTLEGROUND: INCUMBENCY, POPULISM, AND NEW MOVEMENTS IN ALBANIA'S GENERAL ELECTIONS

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Abstract: *This study examines the divergent social media strategies (Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok) employed during Albania's 2025 general elections, focusing on the incumbent, the main opposition, and new challengers. In a deeply polarized context, social media has become the central arena where political identity and dissent are performed, and traditional campaign models are being replaced by dynamic, hybrid forms of digital mobilization.*

Employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative platform-usage data, qualitative content analysis of physical meetings and core messaging, and official Central Election Commission (CEC) results, the study compares five key political actors. Findings identify three strategic clusters: the professionalized Incumbent Strategy (Rama); the grievance-driven Populist Strategy (Berisha); and the authenticity-based New Challenger Strategy (Shehaj, Lapaj, Qori). The analysis shows that the ecosystem functions as a constellation of fragmented echo chambers. Although the incumbent dominated the Diaspora vote (61.14%)—aided by institutional advantages and the March 2025 TikTok ban—new challengers showed comparatively high efficiency in converting digital engagement into votes, accelerating the fragmentation of the opposition's digital and electoral bases.

Keywords: Digital Politics, Diaspora Communication, Digital Populism, Hybrid Regimes, Platform Strategy, Opposition Fragmentation, TikTok Ban, CEC (Central Election Commission).

JEL: B1; B10

1. Introduction

The puzzle: digital competition under hybrid incumbency

Albania's 2025 general elections were fought on two interlinked terrains: the familiar arena of party organization and state resources, and an increasingly decisive arena of platform-mediated political visibility. In contemporary electoral competition, social media is not merely an auxiliary campaign tool; it is the infrastructure through which leadership is narrated, opposition is staged, and political belonging is performed. This is especially salient in polarized systems where citizens encounter politics less as deliberation and more as identity signalling, affective alignment, and routine exposure to partisan cues.

Yet digital politics in hybrid or competitive-authoritarian contexts raises a specific analytical problem: platforms expand participation and lower barriers to entry, but incumbents often retain the capacity to shape the digital ecosystem itself, through regulatory interventions, media capture, and asymmetric access to visibility. The Albanian case is therefore analytically

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valuable because it combines (a) a mature, long-running personalization of leadership online, (b) the first nationwide attempt to mobilize a newly enfranchised transnational electorate, and (c) a consequential intervention in platform accessibility shortly before election day.

Why 2025 is a critical case: Diaspora enfranchisement and platform governance

The 2025 election introduced Diaspora voting for the first time via postal ballot, bringing a transnational electorate—large, geographically dispersed, and politically heterogeneous—directly into the national contest. This reform transformed campaign incentives. Parties could no longer rely primarily on domestic ground operations and local patronage networks; they also had to compete for attention and credibility within Diaspora communities where political information is filtered through digital channels, community associations, and cross-border family networks.

This change in the electorate coincided with a shift in the regulatory environment: the March 2025 TikTok ban—implemented roughly two months before election day—reconfigured the opportunity structure for actors who depended on short-form virality and emotionally resonant messaging. Even where such interventions are formally justified through public-interest language (youth safety, data protection), their electoral consequences are not evenly distributed. In this sense, the Albanian election offers a concrete instance of what scholarship describes as “controlled connectivity”: partial openness to digital communication paired with selective restriction when digital mobilization becomes politically threatening.

This paper argues that Albania’s 2025 campaign can be understood as a digital battlefield structured by three interacting forces:

1. Platform affordances (what Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok reward in terms of style, tone, and reach).
2. Strategic leadership styles (technocratic-populist spectacle, grievance populism, and networked authenticity); and
3. Regime structure (the institutional capacity to amplify, regulate, or constrain digital visibility).

Within this structure, five central actors clustered into three recognizable strategic profiles.

- The incumbent strategy (Edi Rama / Socialist Party) is defined by professionalized production, centralized message discipline, and the use of Instagram and Facebook to perform governance competence and national-European horizon narratives—what can be conceptualized as *spectacular governance* in a platform setting.
- The populist opposition strategy (Sali Berisha /Democratic Party) leverages crisis framing, moral polarization, and direct address, benefiting disproportionately from TikTok’s emotional virality prior to the ban, but remaining structurally vulnerable to platform disruption.
- The new challenger’s strategy (Agron Shehaj /Opportunity Party, Adriatik Lapaj/ Albania Becomes Movement Party, Arlind Qori/ Together Movement Party) emphasizes networked authenticity and participatory connection, producing intense micro-public engagement and relatively efficient vote conversion, but facing scaling

constraints in the absence of incumbent-level organizational and infrastructural resources.

A core empirical implication is that Albania's digital public sphere does not function as a unified space of national debate. It operates as fragmented, partially non-overlapping echo chambers—platform-shaped publics that intensify polarization and diffuse opposition coherence. The result is an asymmetry: incumbency can turn visibility into legitimacy through institutionalized spectacle, while challengers and opposition actors struggle to convert attention into coordinated electoral momentum.

Contribution: linking platform strategy to electoral conversion in a Diaspora setting

The study makes three contributions relevant to ongoing debates on digital politics in hybrid regimes.

First, it treats platforms as institutions of visibility rather than neutral channels, showing how platform selection and content style align with leadership types and regime incentives. Second, it integrates Diaspora mobilization into the analysis of platform politics, addressing how transnational voters are targeted through hybrid online-offline campaigns and symbolic narratives of belonging. Third, it proposes a simple comparative metric—Engagement-to-Vote Ratio (EVR)—to operationalize the efficiency of converting “digital capital” (likes + shares on Diaspora-targeted posts) into “electoral capital” (Diaspora vote share), while explicitly noting that EVR is comparative rather than causal.

Research design and scope

Methodologically, the paper uses a mixed-methods design combining an author-built dataset of Diaspora-targeted posts (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), qualitative reading of message frames and offline meeting patterns, and official CEC results. The dataset is restricted to posts dedicated to Diaspora engagement, each tagged with platform, date, engagement, and meeting location, enabling comparison of (a) platform reliance, (b) narrative focus, and (c) conversion efficiency across actors.

Roadmap of the paper

The next section develops the theoretical framework linking controlled connectivity, digital populism, platform politics, and hybrid regime dynamics. The methodology section then details the dataset construction and the EVR metric. The findings section maps the three strategic clusters and compares their platform use and conversion patterns. The discussion situates Albania's 2025 election within broader debates on how hybrid regimes increasingly compete through the architecture of visibility, and how digital fragmentation reshapes opposition dynamics and electoral outcomes.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The Logic of Digital Struggle in a Hybrid Regime

The theoretical framework for this paper integrates insights from Controlled Connectivity, Digital Populism, Platform Politics, and Hybrid Regime Theory to explain how digital infrastructures have become instruments of power and contestation.

Controlled Connectivity and Hybrid Regimes

In competitive authoritarian or hybrid regimes, the power dynamic of social media—as institutional actors that organize visibility and participation and mediate public discourse — becomes politicized. Incumbents manipulate these infrastructures, transforming them into tools of control. Albania's March 2025 decision to ban TikTok, two months before the parliamentary elections, is an archetype of algorithmic governance as political strategy, representing "digital authoritarianism by democratic means". This exemplifies Controlled Connectivity, where partial openness is permitted, but the state intervenes when opposition movements threaten power.

Digital Populism and Platform Fragmentation

Populism has evolved, with Digital Populism (Moffitt, 2016) functioning as a political style performed through spectacle, crisis framing, and authenticity. Social media amplifies this style by privileging emotional, unmediated communication, leading to the formation of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2014). Sali Berisha's 2025 campaign, which framed him as the moral defender of the people against corruption, embodies this grievance populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). However, its dependence on constant performance renders it fragile and vulnerable to algorithmic disruption or platform bans. Online platforms also foster ideological isolation, as algorithms reward outrage and create affective echo chambers. In Albania, this segmentation was visible: Instagram for incumbents (professional curation), TikTok for populists (raw grievance), and hybrid spaces for challengers (authentic activism).

Networked Authenticity and Diaspora Mobilization

Emerging actors like Lapaj, Qori, and Shehaj exemplify networked authenticity, emphasizing transparency and participatory connection. They act as platform parties (van Dijck et al., 2018) leveraging online networks for mobilization. While authenticity can accrue symbolic capital and attract attention, this digital advantage rarely translates into institutional scale without traditional party resources. The Albanian Diaspora's engagement (Brinkerhoff, 2009), mirroring patterns of transnational political participation, shows a normative alignment: Rama's "Albania 2030: The European Horizon" message appealed to voters seeking stability and European alignment, while Berisha's moral populism resonated less with cosmopolitan sensibilities.

3. Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to analyze the online activity of parliamentary party leaders.

- **Data Collection Platform:** An author designed platform as is shown in **Table 1** was constructed to analyze online activity specifically targeting the Diaspora.
- **Data Points:** The platform logged posts on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok dedicated to the Diaspora, recording the politician's name (full details available in Web References), message, URL, date, likes/shares, and the target country/city of the physical meeting.
- **Targeted Content:** All analyzed posts were dedicated to the Diaspora, documenting physical meetings in various states, with each meeting reflected across all platforms used by the politician.
- **Analytical Framework:** The politicians were clustered as shown in **Table 2**, based on: (1) Communicative Style (technocratic, populist, or authentic), (2) Platform Affordance (visual governance on Instagram, emotional virality on TikTok), and (3) Regime Structure (institutional control like the state TikTok ban).
- **Electoral Conversion Metric:** The study calculates the Engagement-to-Vote Ratio (EVR) to compare the efficiency of converting digital capital into electoral capital across the three strategic clusters.

$$\text{Engagement-to-Vote Ratio (EVR)} = \frac{\text{Diaspora Vote \%}}{\text{Total Likes} + \text{Total Shares}}$$

The denominator, Total Likes + Total Shares, is specifically chosen as a measure of "digital capital" because it reflects the direct, unmediated reach and emotional resonance of a message, prioritizing active user response over passive visibility metrics like views or impressions. Crucially, this calculation is strictly limited to data collected from the Diaspora-targeted posts recorded in the author-designed platform (as shown in Table 1) and does not include general domestic engagement. By confining the metrics to content explicitly addressing the Diaspora, the study ensures that the EVR accurately compares the conversion efficiency of the specific communication strategies detailed in the findings.

Analysis: The study quantified platform usage compared Diaspora communication strategies to domestic patterns (see Appendix A) and analyzed the core political message to mobilize the Diaspora. The final electoral conversion was measured using official CEC results.

Table 1. *Illustration of Database - online activity of leaders (Rama, Berisha, Lapaj, Shehaj, Qori) targeting Diaspora (October 2024-May 2025)*

POST_ID	NAME	POST_TEXT	URL	DATE	LIKE	SHARE	PLATFORM	CITY/STATE
35568618 98374319 040_3	Adriatik Lapaj	FALEMINDERIT! Më poshtë datat e takimeve me ...	https://www.instagram.com/p/DFcgw0vuQvA	1/30/25	1744		Instagram	Arezzo/IT
35462067 18288931 312_3	Agron Shehaj	Ju presim në datën 18 janar në orën 11:00 në Siena,	https://www.instagram.com/p/DE2qDitynw	1/15/25	1113		Instagram	Firenze/IT
74868928 76182375 685_4	Arlind Qori	TAKIM ME BASHKATDHETAR 30 mars në orën	(https://www.tiktok.com/@arindqori/video/7486)	3/30/25	400	4	TikTok	Bologna/IT

		13:00 në via Azzo Gardino, Bolonja.	8928761823 75685',)					
34917598 92243581 220_3	Edi Rama	Me një kënaqësi krejt të posaçme tek shqiptarët e Greqisë, Selanik	https://www.instagram.com/p/DB1OR8yIokk	11/1/24	4084		Instagram	Athinë/ GR
74742807 69641270 583_4	Sali Berisha	Takim madhështor me diasporën shqiptare, Athinë, Greqi.	https://www.tiktok.com/@prof.dr.saliberisha/video/7474280769641270583	2/22/25	215	2	Tiktok	Athinë/ GR

Table 2: Integrative Framework: The Digital Battlefield Model

Dimension	Description	Albania 2025 Example
Communicative Style	Leadership style and framing: technocratic, populist, or authentic.	Rama: technocratic-populist hybrid; Berisha: grievance populism; Lapaj: networked authenticity.
Platform Affordance	Platform characteristics shaping message tone and reach.	Instagram: visual governance; TikTok: emotional virality; Facebook: residual legacy.
Regime Structure	Institutional control over media and digital ecosystems.	State TikTok ban and media capture strengthened incumbent advantage.

4. Contextual political background

The Albanian Diaspora vote was implemented for the first time in the May 11, 2025, general parliamentary elections, allowing Albanians living abroad to participate via the postal system. This cohort represented over 40% of eligible voters. According to CEC, 245,935 registered citizens from Diaspora, a significant 202,187 cast their ballots from more than 100 countries worldwide. The bulk of these votes (more than 80%) originated from Italy, Greece, Germany, the UK, and the USA (CEC, 2025).

The inaugural Diaspora vote served as the first major mobilization exercise for Albanian political parties outside the Republic of Albania's official borders. Consequently, all participating parties actively attempted to mobilize the Diaspora through physical meetings and remote communication. Given that political leaders had already established distinct online communication profiles with the public inside Albania over the preceding 15 years using platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, this new context required them to address the Diaspora specifically through these online channels.

The electoral system implemented in Albania in 2025 is regional proportional representation with a flexible list, allowing for one preferential vote. The country is divided into 12 regions, where Kukës is the region that produces 3 members of parliament (MPs), and Tirana (where the capital is located) produces 37. The electoral threshold is 1% at the national level. Votes are translated into mandates using the d'Hondt formula. The Diaspora vote is counted at the regional level, based on the voter's civil registration in Albania (Albania, Assembly, 2024). The official

and publicly announced procedures for citizens regarding the Diaspora vote started in January 2025 with the creation of the platform for voters from abroad. The postal voting process was carried out approximately one month before Election Day.

5. Findings: Strategic Clusters and Electoral Conversion

Cluster 1: The Incumbent Strategy (Edi Rama / SP)

Edi Rama's Technocratic Populism represents the professionalized apex of digital campaigning in Albania's 2025 elections. His social media approach was heavily centralised, coordinated through official channels and a professional production team that integrated visual aesthetics with political messaging. Instagram emerged as the flagship platform; accounting for 36.6% of his Diaspora-targeted content (while within the country dominates FB). Posts predominantly showcased achievements, infrastructure projects, and EU-aligned narratives under the slogans "*Albania 2030: The European Horizon.*" "*Proud of Albanians in Greece/ Italy etc.*" "*Proud of Albania*".

By positioning himself as both artist and technocrat, Rama transformed digital communication into governance performance—what Dean (2005) and Gerbaudo (2019) identify as spectacular governance. This alignment with spectacle is crucial: Rama utilizes high production quality and artistic framing to portray the administration not as a transparent process, but as an aesthetically controlled visual event.

This spectacular approach resonates with scholarship suggesting that contemporary political leadership often depends on the performance of power. Rama's strategy focuses on projecting a sense of state strength and continuity, where the spectacular display of institutional competence—visible in polished infrastructure videos and curated meetings—is designed to generate affective loyalty and legitimacy, rather than inviting open deliberation. In this sense, his visual governance is a means of control that leverages digital platforms to produce a steady stream of aesthetically dominant content, contrasting sharply with the raw, unpolished, and easily disrupted spectacle of the populist opposition.

Complementing this was a controlled offline campaign. Rama's Diaspora visits (6 major appearances) were amplified through Instagram reels and Facebook livestreams, creating an online-offline legitimacy loop. This integration explains partly the remarkable 61.14% diaspora vote share—a record for an Albanian incumbent. *Cluster 2: The Populist Strategy (Sali Berisha / DP-ASHM coalition)*

Sali Berisha's Digital Populism Web 2.0 (Moffitt, 2016) relied on TikTok's viral affordances especially December 2024-March 2025), using short videos to frame politics as moral struggle. His followers surged by 180% in four months, but the March 2025 TikTok ban (Council of Ministers, 2025) crippled mobilisation. Posts predominantly showcased "*Albania need you*" "*You are the last hope*".

Offline or in distance, he conducted 16 Diaspora visits (10 in Italy), yet digital enthusiasm failed to translate into electoral gains (23.55% diaspora vote). The result illustrates populism's structural vulnerability in hybrid regimes where infrastructural control trumps communicative energy.

Cluster 3: The New Challenger Strategy (Lapaj, Qori, Shehaj)

The Networked Authenticity model defined the challengers’ approach. Adriatik Lapaj’s campaign, with 69.3% Diaspora-targeted content on Instagram and 21 meetings (EU, UK, USA 7 Canada), achieved notable efficiency (7.40% votes). Qori and Shehaj, combining ideological critique and managerial appeals, gained 2.17% and 2.96%, respectively. Collectively, challengers secured 12.53% Diaspora votes (CEC, 2025), symbolising Albania’s growing appetite for civic, non-partisan politics but also the diffusion of opposition potential. Posts predominantly showcased information about the next meetings, showing enthusiasm and being thankful for the hospitality. All new challengers addressed Diaspora as symbol and instrument of change. All above are summarized in **Table 3** combined with official result (only vote from Diaspora).

Table 3: Political actors, main social platform used for Diaspora, predominant narrative in their posts and official result.

Actor / Subject	Primary Diaspora Platform	Core Narrative Focus	% of Out-of-Country Vote
Edi Rama / PS (Incumbent)	Instagram (36.6%) FB (46.6%) Tik Tok (16.6%)	Structural Statecraft: National pride, EU 2030 integration (Framing party as state)	61.14%
Sali Berisha / PD-ASHM (Main opposition leader, Populist)	FB (43.3%) TikTok (35%) / lost post-March 2025 Instagram (21.6%)	Symbolic Patriotism: Vote restores power, “last hope” (Framing as existential)	23.55%
Agron Shehaj / Mundësia (New Challenger)	Instagram (55.5%) FB (29.6%) Tik Tok (14.8%)	Grassroots Logistics: Organizational structuring (Practical, transparent)	2.96%
Adriatik Lapaj / NISMA-SHB (New Challenger)	Instagram (69.3%) FB (30.6%)	Grassroots Logistics: Our road, road of no return (Sustained commitment)	7.40%
Arlind Qori / L. Bashkë (New Challenger)	TikTok (30%) Instagram (45%) FB (25%)	Ideological, anti-establishment	2.17%

5. Discussion and Theoretical Implications and Limitations

The 2025 Albanian elections offer a revealing illustration of how digital infrastructures, far from serving as neutral arenas of political expression, become instruments through which incumbency is reinforced in hybrid regimes. Rather than levelling the playing field, the digital environment deepened pre-existing asymmetries between the governing party and its challengers. The most consequential development—the government’s decision to ban TikTok months before the election—demonstrated how regulatory power can be strategically deployed to reshape the architecture of political reach. Although formally justified through the language of data protection and youth safety, the timing and selective impact of the ban mirrored patterns observed in other hybrid regimes. As in Turkey (CMS LawNow 2020), Serbia (Amnesty International, 2024), or Hungary (Freedom House, 2024), regulatory interventions functioned as tools of “controlled connectivity”, narrowing the visibility of opposition actors while preserving the communicative dominance of the incumbent.

This asymmetry was further amplified by the structural logic of the platforms themselves. The digital public sphere in Albania did not resemble a unified arena of deliberation but consisted instead of isolated, mutually reinforcing publics shaped by platform affordances. Instagram favoured high-production-value visuals and hierarchical messaging, conditions under which incumbency thrives. TikTok had previously allowed populist actors, especially Berisha, to mobilize resentment, affect, and immediacy. Meanwhile, authenticity-driven actors like Lapaj and Qori cultivated smaller but committed followings within conversational and trust-based networks. These publics overlapped only minimally. Rather than converging into a unified anti-incumbent movement, opposition engagement fragmented into parallel, emotionally intense but strategically disconnected ecosystems. The opposition's digital vitality, paradoxically, contributed to its electoral inefficiency by dispersing attention, energy, and narrative coherence across several competing actors.

The Engagement-to-Vote Ratio (EVR) helps illuminate this dynamic. Although not a causal indicator, EVR exposes differences in conversion efficiency across political actors. Rama's high EVR, compared to the markedly lower ratios of the opposition, underscores how institutional stability, message discipline, and platform-appropriate communication strengthen electoral returns. By contrast, populist virality proved shallow: Berisha's large digital footprint failed to convert proportionally into votes, especially once his most critical platform was curtailed. The new challengers, while generating intense micro-public engagement, confronted the classic scaling dilemma: digital authenticity flourishes in small, intimate publics but struggles to expand without organizational resources or infrastructural support (Papacharissi, 2014). The case of Qori—who's numerically high EVR reflects the mathematics of small denominators rather than broad influence—highlights the need to interpret efficiency carefully. The broader pattern remains clear: incumbency enjoys the structural advantage of scale, coherence, and infrastructural protection, while opponents must contend with fragmented publics and unpredictable algorithmic exposure.

Taken together, these insights challenge optimistic narratives about digital democratization. The Albanian case shows that digitalization can consolidate incumbency rather than destabilize it when the state possesses both the regulatory capacity to shape platform accessibility and the communicative infrastructure to dominate high-visibility channels. In such contexts, political competition increasingly depends on the ability to control the "architecture of visibility"—the platforms, algorithms, regulations, and media ecosystems that determine which messages reach which publics, and under what conditions. The 2025 election thus exemplifies a broader transformation: hybrid regimes (Freedom House, 2025) have learned not only to govern offline institutions but to govern digital connection itself.

Although the findings illuminate crucial aspects of digital mobilization, they must be interpreted with care. The study does not claim that the ruling party's success among Diaspora voters was driven solely, or even primarily, by social media strategy. The digital sphere represents only one component of a broader political ecosystem shaped by factors that extend well beyond online engagement. Ground-level mobilization within Albania continues to influence Diaspora voters through family networks, community associations, and informal channels of persuasion. The incumbent's long-standing organizational capacity, access to state infrastructure, and control over administrative processes play a substantial role in shaping electoral behaviour. Moreover, the data used in this analysis captures only publicly observable

engagement and does not include comment depth, private messaging, or platform-specific algorithmic biases. TikTok data after the ban is incomplete, and Instagram's closed, curation-based architecture limits external measurement of reach.

There are also interpretive limitations inherent in the aggregate nature of the data. Engagement traces do not reveal whether those interacting with content are the same individuals who ultimately voted. EVR, while valuable for comparing strategic efficiency, cannot determine whether engagement "causes" voting, nor can it control for the sociological or organizational variables that underpin voter behaviour. Finally, the generalizability of the findings is conditional on regime type. The patterns observed here are likely to apply in hybrid regimes with regulatory discretion over digital infrastructures but may not extend to consolidated democracies or fully authoritarian systems.

These limitations do not diminish the significance of the findings; rather, they clarify their appropriate scope. The contribution of this study lies not in offering a deterministic explanation of the official electoral outcome but in showing how digital practices shape the strategic environment within which electoral competition unfolds. The 2025 Albanian elections suggest that in hybrid regimes, political actors compete not only over votes and narratives but over the infrastructures of visibility themselves. Understanding this dynamic is essential to grasping the evolving relationship between digital media, political power, and democratic possibility.

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Appendix A: Domestic Data (FB&Instagram&TikTok)

Domestic use of platforms (Albanians living within the country and Diaspora included) Nov 2024-Nov 2025: Edi Rama 3740 posts (FB 64.7% of posts/ Instagram 33.9% of posts/ TIK TOK 0.01% of posts); Sali Berisha 4800 posts (FB 68.75% of posts, Instagram 18.95% of posts/ TIK TOK 12.27% of posts); Adriatik Lapaj 1440 posts (FB 79% of posts/ Instagram 19.3% of posts/ TIK TOK 1.25% of posts) Agron Shehaj 1000 posts (FB 54.7% of posts/ Instagram 29.7% of posts/ TIK TOK 15.95 of posts); Arlind Qori 2180 posts (FB 33.34% of posts/ Instagram 31.97% of posts/ TIK TOK 31.6% of posts)

ENHANCING THE PERCEPTION OF NURSING IN MARKETING APPROACH

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Abstract: *The professional image of nursing has evolved significantly over time, transitioning from a historically subordinate role within physician-dominated healthcare systems to a contemporary, autonomous, and evidence-based discipline. Despite this progress, persistent stereotypes, negative perceptions, and structural workplace challenges continue to affect the attractiveness and public recognition of the profession. This study aimed to explore the image of nursing and examine the role of marketing strategies in enhancing professional visibility and positioning within healthcare systems.*

A comprehensive literature review was conducted using major scientific databases, including Google Scholar, Web of Science, PubMed, CINAHL, and Scopus, covering the period from 2010 to 2025. Relevant peer-reviewed articles were identified using predefined keywords related to nursing image and marketing. Following systematic screening and application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, studies addressing professional branding, healthcare marketing frameworks, and organizational factors influencing nursing image were included in the final synthesis.

The findings indicate that strengthening nursing's professional image requires strategic marketing approaches grounded in established frameworks, such as the marketing mix, alongside investments in high-quality education, leadership development, and supportive work environments. Factors such as inadequate recognition, heavy workload, limited managerial support, and misalignment between compensation and responsibilities negatively influence both public perception and career attractiveness.

In conclusion, integrating comprehensive marketing strategies with organizational reforms is essential to enhance the visibility, credibility, and sustainability of the nursing profession. Addressing structural workplace determinants and promoting nurses as key agents of change can improve professional reputation, workforce retention, and ultimately patient care outcomes.

Keywords: nursing image; professional branding; integrated marketing; health marketing; workforce recruitment; clinical workforce shortage; professional promotion; nurse advocacy; organizational reputation; continuing professional development (CPD)

JEL classification: L1, L11, L14, L24, M31

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Introduction

Historically, nurses were largely perceived as subordinate assistants to physicians, with their role primarily defined in terms of task execution and support within medically dominated healthcare structures. This traditional view positioned nursing as a dependent profession, emphasizing obedience and technical assistance rather than clinical judgment, independent decision-making, or scholarly contribution.

In recent decades, however, this perception has undergone a significant transformation. Contemporary nursing is increasingly recognized as a distinct, evidence-based discipline characterized by professional autonomy, advanced clinical competencies, critical thinking, and active participation in research and policy development. Nurses are now acknowledged not only as essential providers of direct patient care but also as leaders, educators, and contributors to scientific advancement within complex healthcare systems.

This evolution in professional identity reflects broader changes in healthcare delivery, higher education standards, and the growing emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration, ultimately redefining nursing as an autonomous and scientifically grounded profession.

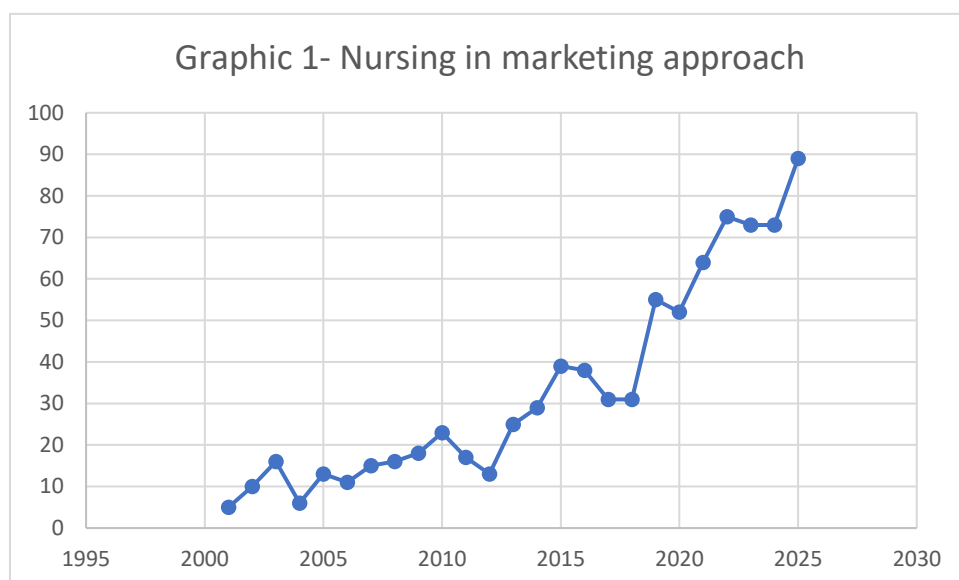
Methodology

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major scientific databases, including Google Scholar, Web of Science, PubMed, CINAHL, and Scopus, to identify relevant studies addressing the image of nursing and its enhancement through marketing strategies. The search strategy incorporated the keywords “image,” “enhancing,” “nursing*,” and “marketing,” using Boolean operators to refine and combine terms where appropriate. The review covered publications from 2010 to 2025 in order to capture contemporary developments and evolving perspectives within the field.

The initial search yielded several thousand articles. These records were subsequently screened based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, focusing on peer-reviewed publications, relevance to the research topic, and availability of full-text articles in English. Duplicate records were removed, and titles and abstracts were independently assessed to determine eligibility for full-text review. Studies that did not directly address nursing image, professional branding, or marketing strategies within healthcare contexts were excluded from further analysis.

This systematic approach ensured a rigorous selection process and enhanced the reliability and validity of the literature included in the final synthesis.

Results and discussions



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Nurses play a fundamental role as agents of change within healthcare systems, contributing not only to clinical care but also to organizational development, policy implementation, and quality improvement initiatives. For this reason, the nursing profession must be continuously promoted and strengthened through strategic efforts that enhance its visibility, autonomy, and professional recognition (Moghbeli, 2025). Sustained promotion of nursing as a dynamic and evidence-based discipline is essential for reinforcing its status within interdisciplinary healthcare teams and for attracting future generations to the profession.

The public image of nursing remains complex and multifaceted, shaped by historical stereotypes, media representations, and societal perceptions. While nurses are widely recognized for their compassion and dedication, the intellectual, leadership, and scientific dimensions of the profession are often underrepresented. Improving this public image requires investment in high-quality nursing education, which fosters professional competence and critical thinking, as well as proactive engagement with media platforms to communicate accurate and contemporary portrayals of nursing roles (Zhou, 2024). Strategic communication efforts are therefore necessary to reposition nursing as a highly skilled and autonomous profession.

In the context of healthcare marketing, Vieira (2023) expands the traditional marketing framework into a model encompassing seven key components—often referred to as the 7 Ps—including Patients, Product (goods or services), Positioning, Promotion, Place, Packaging, and other related elements. This comprehensive approach emphasizes the importance of understanding patient needs, clearly defining healthcare services, strategically positioning them within competitive markets, and ensuring that communication and delivery mechanisms align with organizational goals. Applying such a framework within healthcare institutions can support more effective engagement with both patients and healthcare professionals, including nurses.

Despite ongoing efforts to enhance the profession's visibility, negative perceptions and persistent misconceptions continue to contribute to an outdated brand image of nursing (Yeo, 2025). These misperceptions may undervalue the complexity of nursing responsibilities and reinforce

traditional hierarchies within healthcare systems. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated branding strategies, professional advocacy, and the active involvement of nurses in public discourse.

From the perspective of students, the attractiveness of nursing as a career choice is influenced by several structural and organizational factors. Evidence suggests that nursing may be perceived as less appealing when professional contributions are insufficiently recognized, when salaries and available resources do not correspond to workload demands, and when workplace environments negatively affect psychological well-being. Furthermore, limited managerial and leadership support from nursing supervisors can reduce motivation and professional commitment (Salminen-Tuomaala, 2022). These findings highlight the need for systemic reforms aimed at improving working conditions, compensation structures, and leadership practices.

Enhancing healthcare marketing strategies through targeted engagement of nursing professionals represents an important opportunity for strengthening institutional credibility and trust. Practical guidance focused on building authentic communication, fostering professional trust, and designing evidence-informed campaigns can contribute to improved brand reputation and organizational sustainability (Effective Marketing Strategies for Engaging Nursing Professionals, 2025).

Successful healthcare marketing is traditionally grounded in four principal elements—Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. The strategic integration of these components enables healthcare organizations to effectively reach patients, clients, and collaborative partners. These principles guide service development, pricing models, distribution and accessibility strategies, as well as promotional activities designed to communicate value and quality (Kangas, 2025). When implemented coherently, such strategies contribute not only to market competitiveness but also to patient-centered care delivery.

Importantly, effective marketing within healthcare settings extends beyond financial outcomes. It is closely associated with improved patient satisfaction, enhanced management of online reputation, increased organizational revenue, and potentially improved clinical outcomes (Baum, 2025). Thus, marketing should be understood as a strategic management function that supports both economic sustainability and quality improvement.

More broadly, marketing constitutes a central branch of management in all business sectors, including healthcare (Amiri, 2023). It facilitates strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and value creation, thereby contributing to long-term organizational success.

Finally, supportive work environments remain critical determinants of job satisfaction among healthcare professionals. Although positive workplace climates can enhance motivation and professional fulfillment, burnout and staff turnover are more strongly influenced by factors such as excessive workload, insufficient emotional support, and poor work–life balance (Majed, 2025). Addressing these structural determinants is essential for sustaining a stable nursing workforce and ensuring high-quality patient care.

Conclusions

In conclusion, strengthening the professional image of nursing requires continuous promotion, strategic marketing approaches, and the reinforcement of nurses' role as key agents of change within healthcare systems. Persistent negative perceptions, inadequate recognition, and

unfavorable working conditions continue to limit the attractiveness and sustainability of the profession. Healthcare organizations should integrate comprehensive marketing frameworks with investments in quality education, leadership development, and supportive work environments to enhance professional visibility and workforce stability. Furthermore, targeted strategies addressing workload, compensation, emotional support, and work–life balance are essential to improve job satisfaction, retention, and ultimately patient care outcomes.

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CHALLENGES TO THE SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Kalin Krumov¹

Abstract: *This article analyzes the challenges facing the spatial development of the European Union (EU) and, in particular, the challenges to the Union's infrastructure development policy in the context of accelerated geopolitical shifts. It maintains the view that infrastructure development is a vital prerequisite for economic growth, and consequently for the social sphere; however, the direction of infrastructure development is simultaneously a result of the EU's political and economic reorientation within a burgeoning multipolar world.*

From this perspective, emphasis is placed on the impact of military conflicts, the transformation of the global balance of power, the regionalization of economic relations, the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy, the increasing strategic competition between major geopolitical actors, and the shift in the Union's spatial development concepts regarding its economic ties with other continents. The article demonstrates how geopolitical restructuring alters the EU's economic links with other world regions, which in turn necessitates the development of corresponding infrastructure. The scientific contribution of this study lies in interpreting the EU's infrastructural development not only as a function of internal cohesion policy but also as a function of global intercontinental interactions in a multipolar world.

Keywords: spatial development, infrastructure development policy, challenges, European Union, geopolitical restructuring and uncertainty.

JEL: R11, R58, H54, F15, F51, O52, F02

Introduction

According to the European Regional/Spatial Planning Charter, also known as the "Torremolinos Charter,"² "The focus of spatial planning is the individual and their well-being, as well as their interaction with the environment. The objectives of spatial planning are to provide every individual with an environment and a quality of life conducive to the development of their personality." More specifically, the charter defines the goals of spatial planning as: balanced socio-economic development of regions; improvement of the quality of life; responsible management of natural resources and environmental protection; and the rational use of land. The construction of appropriate infrastructure with the necessary capacity is one of the primary means for the rational use of land, as it ensures the rapid movement of

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² Adopted in 1983.

goods, services, capital, and labor, thereby guaranteeing the development and prosperity of economic entities and the populations across the European continent.

In other words, the rational use of land through the development of suitable infrastructure is a prerequisite for economic growth, while economic development serves as a medium for the advancement of the individual both as a consumer and as a creator of wealth. Returning to the realm of economics, it evolves through economic development plans, which in turn are implemented via policy—specifically, economic policy. There is a well-known assertion that "Politics is a concentrated expression of economics."³ At the same time, Carl von Clausewitz complements this with the phrase, "War is the continuation of politics by other means."⁴ [3]

If we juxtapose this statement with the local and global economic and political processes before and after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, we can see that these words, spoken 200 years ago, remain relevant today. The logic of these multifaceted and complex interactions between systems of varying composition and structure is as follows: the ultimate goal is human development in its dual roles as "man as creator and as consumer of wealth,"⁵ where human development is intrinsically linked to the development of the economy—of which the individual is both the cause and the consequence. In turn, economic development is tied to infrastructure development. It can be argued that a well-developed infrastructure is a critical baseline condition for the evolution of the economic system.

The development of the economic system is a consequence of the implemented economic policy—those actions and measures taken to combine various factors⁶ to achieve objectives through the evolution of the economic system. When economic policy, and policy in general, of a country or a group of countries encounters insurmountable difficulties, then, according to Clausewitz and world history, military actions emerge as one of the instruments for implementing policy, including economic policy.

In this context of multifaceted interactions between diverse systems, the **object** of this work is the development of the infrastructure that sustains the economic development of the

³ It is often attributed to Carl von Clausewitz, though other authors contend the phrase actually belongs to It is often attributed to Carl von Clausewitz, though other authors contend the phrase actually belongs to Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. *V. I. Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 32, Progress Publishers edition, p. 83.*

⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (referenced via the Bulgarian edition: „За войната - Стратегия и тактика на военните действия“, Книгоиздателска къща „Труд“, 2011, p. 2).

⁵ The dual roles of man—as creator and as consumer of wealth—are a central theme throughout the scholarly work of Academician Evgeni Mateev.

⁶ One of these factors is infrastructure.

European Union. This encompasses the infrastructure supporting not only the EU's endogenous development but also the Union's connections with other regions and continents.

The **subject** of this study is the direction of infrastructure development in response to geopolitical shifts, the changing spheres of economic and political influence, and the overall transition from globalization toward the regionalization of the world economy.

The **primary objective** of this work is to identify the challenges and determine the requirements for the development of the infrastructure that secures the European Union's links with other regions and continents, as well as the EU's long-term development as an economic community.

To achieve this goal, an **interdisciplinary approach** is applied, combining elements of political geography, spatial development, regional economics, and European policies, based on an analysis of EU documents and contemporary literature. The study also employs the systems approach, alongside methods of analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, and others. The article argues for the necessity of integrating geopolitical analysis as a vital condition for the future development of EU infrastructure.

1. Geopolitical Shifts and Their Impact on the Concepts of Europe's Spatial Development and Its Global Role

This exposition examines three concepts regarding the political, economic, and spatial development of Europe following World War II. The **first concept** is American, emerging before, during, and after World War II: Western Europe serves as an outpost for the United States, acting as a political, economic, and military counterweight to the Soviet Union and its economic and military alliances in Central and Eastern Europe. The **second concept** belonged to the Soviet Union; both ideas had their respective military, political, economic, and spatial manifestations.

Within the clash of these two ideas, a **third concept** emerged—that of a "United Europe"—pioneered by General Charles de Gaulle. At a later stage, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation also aligned himself with this vision. This independent concept arose alongside the establishment and growth of the European Economic Community, including the infrastructure that sustains other spatial aspects.

The 1951 Treaty of Paris marked the beginning of the European Coal and Steel Community, and in 1957, the Treaties of Rome established the European Economic Community. Two years later, on November 23, 1959, in a speech at the Strasbourg City Hall,

General Charles de Gaulle declared: "*Yes, it is Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals*"⁷, *it is the whole of Europe, which will decide the fate of the world.*" This statement was shocking, given that the Cold War was at its peak and the Iron Curtain had not yet fallen. At that time, de Gaulle effectively included the Soviet Union up to the Urals in his vision for Europe's future.

Later, on February 4, 1965, during a press conference at the Elysée Palace, he further elaborated on this idea, explaining that European affairs should be decided by Europeans themselves rather than by external powers like the USA. He believed that Russia (then the USSR) would eventually return to its European roots. Furthermore, de Gaulle utilized this concept during his historic visit to the Soviet Union in June 1966 to propose a "thaw" in relations and cooperation between the East and the West. During this period, on April 8, 1965, the Merger Treaty was signed in Brussels, creating a single Council⁸ and a single Commission⁹, which administratively unified the three separate European Communities¹⁰.

What was the logic behind de Gaulle's words and actions? He was not naive regarding the USSR, but he believed in three things:

- **An end to bloc division** – he sought to eliminate the dominance of the two superpowers of the time (the USA and the USSR) over the European continent.
- **A "Europe of Nations"**¹¹ – his vision was not for a federation (similar to today's EU), but for a union of sovereign states that collaborate with one another.
- **Russia as part of Europe** – he believed that ideologies are transient, while the geography and history of nations are eternal.

Pursuing this vision of a "Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals" led to de Gaulle's 1966 decision to withdraw France from NATO's integrated military structures. For him, French sovereignty was paramount. De Gaulle did not believe that the United States would risk a nuclear war with the USSR to defend Paris. Consequently, he established the French *Force de Frappe* (nuclear deterrent) and refused to place it under foreign command. Furthermore, the General viewed NATO as an instrument for American control over Europe. Thirdly, de Gaulle was highly critical of American intervention in Vietnam and did not want France to be drawn

⁷ ("*de l'Atlantique à l'Oural*")

⁸ The predecessor to today's European Council.

⁹ The predecessor to today's European Commission.

¹⁰ These were the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), established in 1951; the European Economic Community (EEC), established in 1957; and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom), also established in 1957.

¹¹ (L'Europe des Patries)

into a conflict that was not its own. Thus, the idea of "Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals" represented the 1960s geopolitical vision for a common European space that included Russia.

On November 25, 2010, during a visit to Germany, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, shared the idea of a "harmonious economic community from Lisbon to Vladivostok..." in the newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*¹² [1]. He subsequently used this idea multiple times in speeches, interviews, and strategic documents. The concept was part of his vision for a "Greater Europe" or a common Eurasian economic and political space.

The idea of de Gaulle, further developed by President Putin, presupposes a significant global economic and political role for Eurasia. The realization of this idea, vision, or concept is linked to the development of the corresponding infrastructure through which the exchange of resources, goods, services, and labor can take place. This infrastructure was being developed up until the events preceding the war in Ukraine, which began in 2014—four years after the first sharing of the concept for a "Harmonious economic community from Lisbon to Vladivostok..." in Germany.

It is precisely the military actions in Ukraine that have once again set Europe and Russia against each other, leading to the abandonment of the idea of a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok. Over the last decade, this idea of exchanging European technology for Russian resources, alongside trade in goods and services, led to the initiation of processes for developing the relevant infrastructure—pipelines, ports, roads, railways, etc. The war in Ukraine serves as a turning point for changing the direction of infrastructure development as a core component of the EU's spatial development. It has led to European Union sanctions against the Russian Federation, the closure of checkpoints and borders (Finland, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and others), the redirection of trade and transport routes, the abandonment of pipelines (*Nord Stream* and the Ukrainian gas transit system), oil pipelines (the *Druzhba* pipeline passing through Ukraine), the strengthening of the role of Black Sea and Baltic Sea ports, and the accelerated development of military and civilian infrastructure in the Union's eastern regions.

It can be said that this war has altered the logic of spatial infrastructure development within the framework of the idea of a common economic space stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok. The logic of infrastructure development (transport infrastructure related to the

¹² "Creating a harmonious economic community from Lisbon to Vladivostok, possibly evolving into a free-trade zone." Putin, Vladimir. "Russia and Europe: From Lessons of the Crisis to a New Partnership Agenda." *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 25 November 2010.

exchange of goods, services, energy carriers, people, etc.) has changed not only in Eastern and Central Europe but across the entire Union. The regions located along the EU's eastern border have acquired a new strategic importance, necessitating additional investments in infrastructure, defense, logistics, energy security, and more.

Following the election of President Donald Trump to a second term, the United States has prioritized its domestic economic condition, manifested through the imposition of tariffs not only on its so-called adversaries but also on the European Union, the United Kingdom, Canada, Mexico, and others. This, combined with demands for increased defense spending as a share of GDP by NATO member states, clearly indicates that the US now views the EU and its partners as competitors. Furthermore, since the beginning of President Trump's second term, the US has focused more on its own economic health and on alliances within the Americas than on Europe, which is increasingly left to handle contemporary challenges and the burden of the war in Ukraine on its own.

In other words, processes of regionalization are becoming evident in the global economy. In these processes, Europe and the European Union are assigned a new role compared to their previous status as the primary military, political, and economic outpost of the US on the European continent—specifically, the role of an independent economic community forming the world's largest common market. However, this economic community lacks autonomous military and political weight on a global scale, remaining largely dependent on the US for security and on Russia, the US, and Middle Eastern countries for resources. Consequently, in military and political terms, Europe and the EU are not perceived as an independent pole. The clearly defined poles with well-established military, political, and economic systems are the USA, China, the Russian Federation, and India. Thus, the US withdrawal and the confrontation with the Russian Federation leave Europe and the EU to face challenges in security, policy, economy, and spatial development alone.

The influential Russian strategist Sergei Karaganov¹³ interprets the armed conflict in Ukraine as the culmination of a broader confrontation with the West, represented by the United States and European nations. In his analysis "Midgame and a Strategy for the Day After Tomorrow" for the influential Russian journal *Russia in Global Affairs*, he outlines a worldview

¹³ Since 1989, Sergei Karaganov has served as a member of the Presidential Council, an expert for the Security Council of Russia, a foreign policy advisor in the presidential administration, and, in the mid-2000s, a member of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights. For more than two decades, he has been considered an influential advisor to Presidents Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. Karaganov is also a co-founder and honorary chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and one of the founders of the journal *Russia in Global Affairs*.

in which Russia can only survive through a radical reorientation in both geopolitics and ideology. For many years, Karaganov advocated for closer cooperation between Russia and the US, NATO, and the EU. Following the 2011 parliamentary elections, as Russia's relations with the West deteriorated, Karaganov abandoned the idea of European integration under the "Greater Europe" logic and shifted toward the "Greater Eurasia" project. With the outbreak of full-scale hostilities in Ukraine in February 2022, the Greater Eurasia project is essentially viewed as an extension of his original "Greater Europe" concept.¹⁴ [2] This example does not necessarily signify a mere change, but rather that advisors to the leadership of Europe's largest state by territory are considering an alternative developmental path where the center is not Europe, but Eurasia. Due to the military actions and confrontation in Ukraine, the Russian Federation may now view Europe and the EU differently, placing greater weight on development and ties with Asia.

Consequently, the US withdrawal from Europe, combined with the EU's confrontation with the Russian Federation over the war in Ukraine and Russia's pivot to Asia, seriously alters the concept of the European Union's spatial orientation. These geopolitical shifts pose significant challenges to the Union's spatial development. One such challenge concerns the direction of infrastructure development that facilitates the exchange of resources, goods, services, and people, and which underpins the Union's economic and social progress. This infrastructure is planned decades in advance (30 years or more), and in a time of geopolitical upheaval, the direction of its development becomes a primary priority. This raises the fundamental question: In what direction should the European Union's infrastructure evolve to ensure its preservation as an independent economic pole in a multipolar world?

1. Geopolitical Restructuring of the World Economy

Changes in the global economic balance of power are inherently linked to significant geopolitical uncertainty. Over the past two or three decades, the balance of economic weight has shifted from the G7 countries and Western economies toward emerging economies—specifically, the **BRICS**¹⁵ group. The strengthening role of global economic poles such as China, the USA, Russia, and India, combined with the weakening of traditional partnerships, compels the EU to rethink its position in the global economy and politics. From the perspective

¹⁴ Dubowy, Alexander. "Greater Eurasia instead of Greater Europe: Karaganov's Break with the West." Russian political scientist Karaganov designs a radical program against Europe—with nuclear deterrence and the dream of a Greater Eurasia under Russian leadership. *Berliner Zeitung*, 26.02.2026.

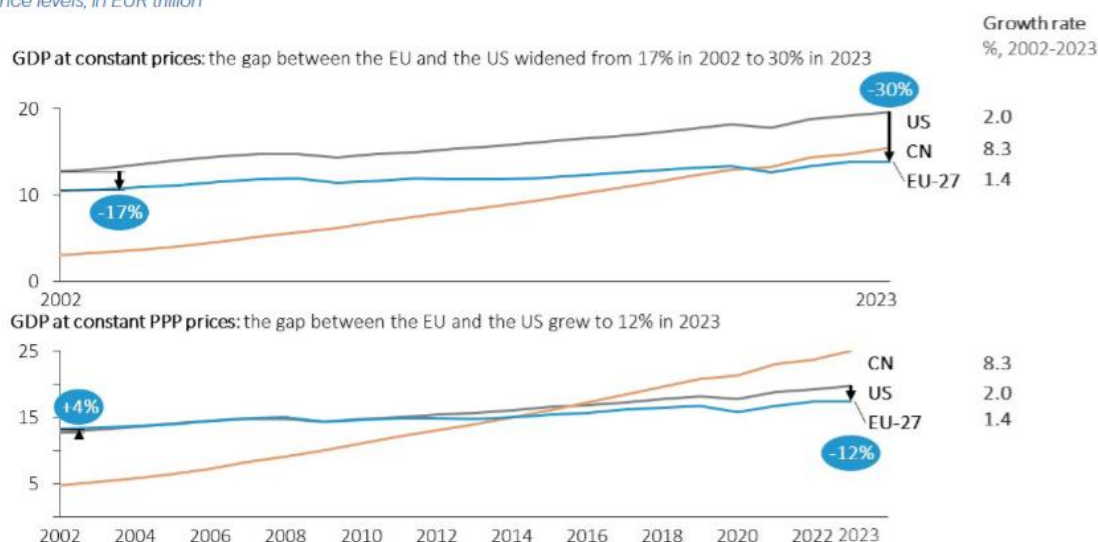
¹⁵ BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

of the three dimensions of a global power pole—economic, political, and military—the European Union possesses only the first, and even this dimension is being called into question. Figure 1 illustrates the dynamics of the GDP generated by the European Union's economy compared to that of China and the USA over the period 2002–2023.

Figure 1¹⁶

GDP evolution

2015 reference levels, in EUR trillion



Source: OECD, 2024.

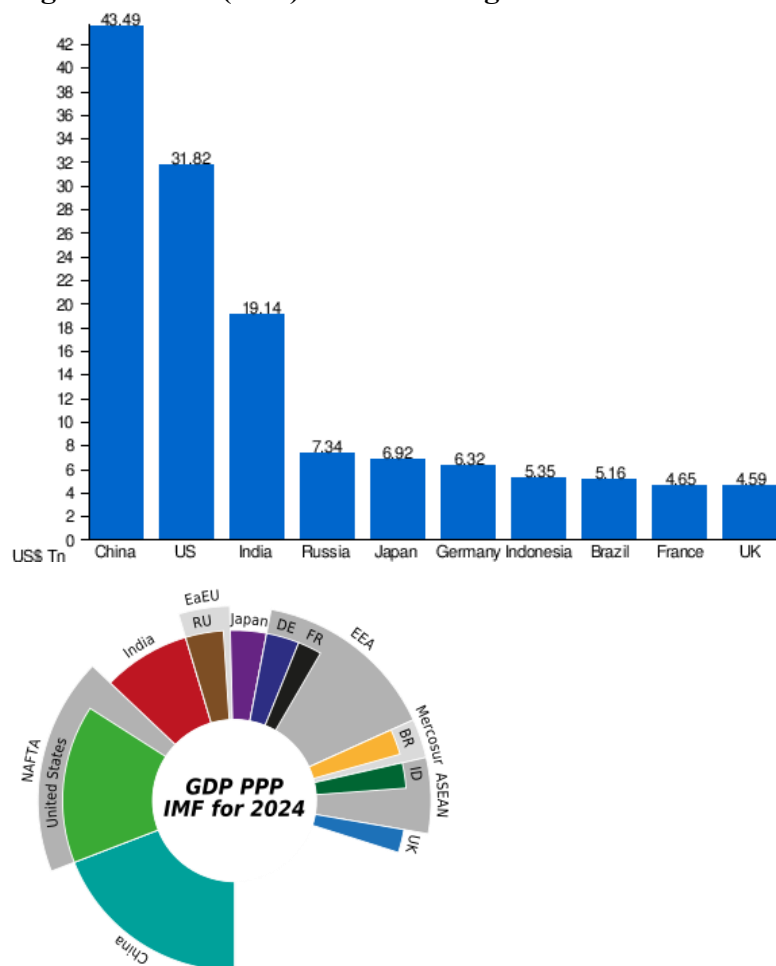
The data unequivocally demonstrate that, at current prices and purchasing power parity (PPP), the EU's GDP growth lags behind not only that of China but also that of the United States. Trends clearly indicate that since 2016, the Chinese economy has ranked first in the world in terms of purchasing power parity. According to data from the International Monetary Fund¹⁷ [1], in 2024, the largest economy by PPP is China, with a GDP of 43.49 trillion current international dollars¹⁸ [2] (See Figure 2).

¹⁶ Report by Mario Draghi, „The future of European competitiveness, Part A: A competitiveness strategy for Europe“, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, p. 12

¹⁷ [World Economic Outlook \(October 2025\) - GDP, current prices](#)
[List of countries by GDP \(PPP\) - Wikipedia](#)

¹⁸ The **international dollar**, also known as the **Geary-Khamis dollar**, is a hypothetical currency unit that has the same purchasing power parity as the U.S. dollar had in the United States at a given point in time. It is primarily used in economics and financial statistics for various purposes, most notably for determining and comparing purchasing power parity and the gross domestic product of different countries and markets.

Figure 2: GDP (PPP) of the ten largest economies in the world in 2024



Source: [World Economic Outlook \(October 2025\) - GDP, current prices](#)
[List of countries by GDP \(PPP\) - Wikipedia](#)

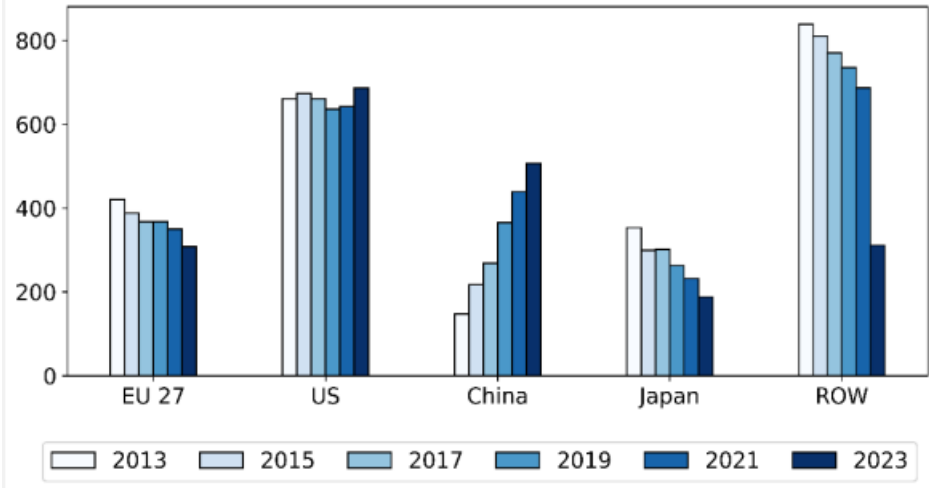
In second place is the US economy with a GDP of 31.82 trillion international dollars, followed by India in third place with 19.14 trillion, and the Russian Federation in fourth with 7.34 trillion. Fifth place is held by the Japanese economy, which produced 6.92 trillion international dollars at PPP in 2026. It is no coincidence that US President Donald Trump refers to the **"Core5" (C5)**—the world's five largest economies by purchasing power parity. This year, the EU's economy at PPP is comparable to, though smaller than, that of the US; notably,

only Germany (6th place) and France (9th place) rank among the top ten global economies for 2024.

The trends showing the EU economy lagging behind were evident even before 2000. It was for this reason that the **"Lisbon Strategy"** was adopted at the European Council meeting in March 2000, with the primary goal of "making the European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world." Even then, analyses indicated that the Union's economic role would diminish globally. This was followed by the **"Europe 2020" Strategy**, which pursued similar objectives. However, reviews of both strategies found that, at best, the results achieved were unsatisfactory.

In terms of investment in Research and Development (R&D) across the ten leading sectors¹⁹, the EU economy holds an advantage over the US and China in only one sector: the automotive industry. Within the European Union itself, Germany accounts for 48% of R&D investment²⁰ [2], France for 19.7%, Sweden for 7.8%, and the Netherlands for 5.3% of the Union's total research expenditure. If Denmark is included, these five countries represent 85.7% of the EU's total R&D spending, highlighting the profound internal disparities within the Union regarding innovation.

Figure 3. Regional distribution of patenting Scoreboard companies²¹



Notes: Data refers to the top 2 000 companies from the 2013-2023 Scoreboard editions, for which patenting data is available.
Source: The 2025 EU Industrial R&D Investment Scoreboard, European Commission, JRC/DG R&I.

¹⁹ NINDL, E., NAPOLITANO, L., CONFRARIA, H., RENTOCCHINI, F., FAKO, P. et al., The 2025 EU Industrial R&D Investment Scoreboard, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/7802619, JRC144638>, p. 60.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 89.

²¹ NINDL, E., NAPOLITANO, L., CONFRARIA, H., RENTOCCHINI, F., FAKO, P. et al., The 2025 EU Industrial R&D Investment Scoreboard, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/7802619, JRC144638>., p. 125

If we compare the dynamics of the distribution of patent-generating companies, **Figure 3** shows that between 2013 and 2023, the number of such companies decreased in the EU, Japan, and the rest of the world, while in the USA, the number remained stable. Only in China has the number of patents registered by companies shown continuous growth.

The trends examined indicate that the world is entering a stage of "**spatial rearrangement**" of economic power, in which states strive to secure control over strategic spaces and critical resources—such as rare earth elements, energy resources, minerals like silver, and other raw materials—as well as transport corridors. This restructuring is often accompanied by military conflicts. In this rearrangement, although the EU economy currently ranks third in the world, it lags significantly in terms of innovation and the number of patents registered by companies. If this trend persists, the European Union will lose its only remaining strength out of the three essential pillars (economic, political, and military) required to form an independent pole in a multipolar world.

From this perspective, the sustainable development of the EU economy amidst geopolitical restructuring is inextricably linked to rethinking its relationships and connections with other countries and continents. The pursuit of **strategic autonomy** necessitates the reorganization of production chains, trade routes, and energy dependencies, all of which have a distinct spatial dimension and are tied to long-term infrastructure planning. In this context, the EU is gradually shifting from a model of global economic openness toward a more selective and regionalized system of external relations. This leads to an increased role for Mediterranean and Atlantic ports, the development of new logistical corridors toward Africa and the Middle East, and the redirection of strategic investments toward the Union's internal regions.

1. EU Connections with Other Continents and the Direction of the Union's Infrastructure Development

Geopolitical conflicts²² [1] reorganize the spatial relationships between centers and peripheries in the global economy, thereby transforming the world's economic geography. For the European Union—which is not a clearly defined military or political pole, but rather an economic pole with fading functions in the global economy—these processes are of strategic importance. Geopolitical restructuring not only shifts the global balance of economic power but is also accompanied by changes in trade flows, military clashes, migration patterns, and more.

²² In addition to Ukraine, military conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa have a significant impact on the development of the European Union.

These processes present both risks and opportunities, necessitating a specific policy response. They require the development of infrastructure that guarantees physical security, energy security, access to resources, enhanced trade flows, the movement of people, resilience, and adaptability, thus preserving the European Union as a significant economic pole.

In the face of geopolitical instability, the development of adequate infrastructure becomes a tool not only for economic growth but also for strategic resilience. From this perspective, the European Union faces the following challenges:

- **Physical Security:** How to develop infrastructure to ensure the physical security of member states under current conditions?
- **Energy Dependency:** High energy dependence on Russia, the USA, and other external suppliers leads to an undesirable increase in energy prices within the EU, which has severely limited economic growth over the past 3–4 years.
- **Trade Reorientation:** In light of US customs policy, trade disputes with China, and sanctions imposed on Russia, a reassessment and full or partial replacement of trade partners is necessary. This requires a change in the direction of imports and exports and a general reorientation of trade flows. This shift will involve a gradual or partial reduction of imports from China and the redirection of a portion of exports from traditional markets, such as the US, toward other emerging markets. The reassessment of trade partners necessitates a corresponding reassessment of transport networks and logistical corridors within the EU.

Overcoming these challenges involves building new infrastructure and upgrading existing systems in a way that ensures:

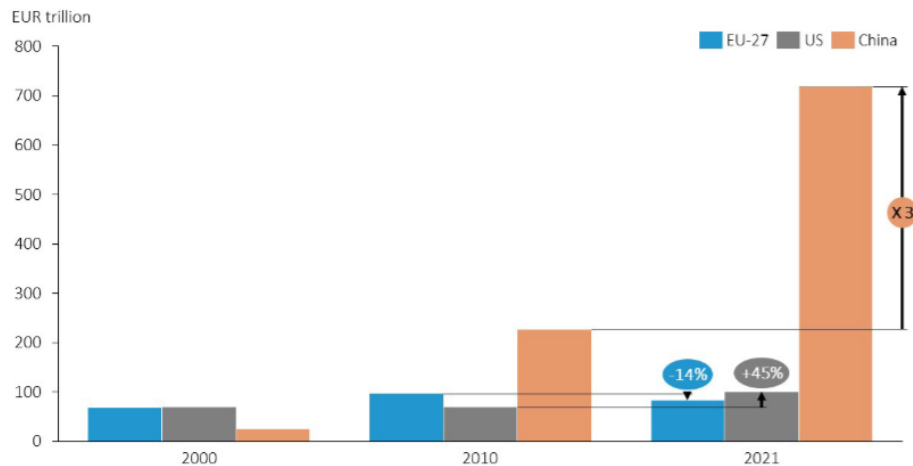
- **Physical security** through the construction of transport corridors capable of rapid deployment of military equipment;
- **Energy diversification**, reduction of energy costs, and increased energy autonomy;
- **Redirection of trade flows**, creating and maintaining large-scale trade links with alternative economic poles.

Where does the EU stand currently? A comparison of investments in transport infrastructure among the world's three largest economic poles—China, the USA, and the European Union (Figure 4)—reveals that between 2000 and 2010, significant investment growth was observed only in China (from approximately \$25 billion to \$250 billion). During

this period, the USA did not substantially increase investments in inland transport infrastructure, while the EU saw an increase of about one-third. Between 2010 and 2021, China's investments surged to approximately \$750 billion, while EU investments decreased by 14% and US investments increased by 45%.

Figure 4.²³

Annual investment in land transport infrastructure in selected regions



Source: OECD, Accessed in March 2024.

During this period, China has invested not only in the development of its own ports, airports, road infrastructure, and rail networks (including high-speed maglev trains, etc.) but also in numerous external projects such as the "Silk Road" (Belt and Road Initiative) and infrastructure in Latin America and Africa. These investments will guarantee China's future economic development and its consolidation as the world's largest economic pole. Against this backdrop, the decline in investment in inland infrastructure within the EU is difficult to explain and necessitates a fundamental shift. While it is true that these investments are long-term and planned for periods exceeding 30 years - requiring a rigorous and accurate assessment of one's own state and global geopolitical processes - it is equally true that while wrong actions are worse than inaction, a lack of significant infrastructure investment for over 20 years is, to put it mildly, irresponsible toward the future of the EU as an economic community.

Another problem exists: the idea of developing a common economic space between the EU and the Russian Federation - the vision of a "Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok" - has been dropped from the agenda following the start of the war in Ukraine, which pitted the USA and the EU against Russia. This has led to a reorientation of the Russian Federation toward Asia. Consequently, the European Union is "closed in" by two military and political poles from

²³ Report by Mario Draghi, „The future of European competitiveness, Part B: In-depth analysis and recommendations“, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, p.211

the West and the East. The USA is increasingly pursuing an independent policy, often disregarding its economic competitor, the EU, while Russia has pivoted to prioritize relations with China, India, Asia as a whole, and the BRICS nations. This has a direct impact on the development of the European space and requires a redirection of investments, reorganization of industrial regions, and the development of new transport and energy corridors. From this perspective, perhaps the greatest opportunities for the EU's spatial development lie to the South - toward Africa and the Middle East. Yet, in terms of inland infrastructure, this reorientation seems strangely absent.

The first changes addressing these challenges to the EU's economic development are linked to two initiatives aimed at diversifying external economic relations. The first is the "green light" given to the signing of two agreements²⁴ with MERCOSUR²⁵. These are:

- The EU-Mercosur Partnership Agreement, which governs political dialogue, cooperation, and trade (PAEM);
- The Interim Trade Agreement, covering trade and investment commitments to be applied before the PAEM enters into force.

Once in effect, these agreements will establish a comprehensive partnership, support more stable and predictable trade rules, and create the world's largest free trade area - a market of over 700 million people.

The second initiative is the Free Trade Agreement between the European Union and India²⁶. This is the most significant agreement for both parties, aiming to strengthen economic and political ties between the world's second and fourth-largest economies during a period of geopolitical tension and global economic challenges.

The implementation of these two initiatives will diversify the European Union's external trade relations, increase its independence from current trading partners, and thus secure the Union's development. Whether these agreements will suffice to preserve its role as an independent economic pole remains a separate and complex question. The realization of these initiatives is closely linked to the development of inland infrastructure—ports, airports, road networks, and many other infrastructural elements—to facilitate the growth of cargo turnover and trade between Latin America, Europe, and India.

²⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/>: What the EU-Mercosur agreements are - Consilium.

²⁵ **MERCOSUR** is the largest intergovernmental organization in South America, comprising a population of 295 million and over 80% of the continent's total GDP. It includes Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Associate members include Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Panama, Peru, and Suriname.

²⁶ <https://ec.europa.eu/>: EU and India conclude historic free trade agreement.

Determining the direction and overall development of inland infrastructure, which is a vital component of the EU's spatial planning and development system, requires addressing the other two challenges related to the Union's physical and energy security. This, in turn, means defining the nature of the links (trade—imports and exports, energy, security) with other regions in the world. In other words, the degree and depth of the EU's relations must be determined for at least the following spaces:

- **Russia and the post-Soviet space;**
- **Africa and the Mediterranean region;**
- **Asia and the Indo-Pacific;**
- **North America and Transatlantic ties;**
- **South America.**

Regarding all these spaces, the EU must develop a policy that leverages opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation while simultaneously neutralizing threats. In practice, this means the EU must decide which regions to distance itself from, with which to maintain a balance, and with which to actively develop relations. In this context, infrastructure policy—as a fundamental condition for economic and social development and as a part of spatial policy—faces the challenge of adapting its instruments to new realities, combining economic expediency with strategic and geopolitical considerations.

Conclusion

Geopolitical shifts present the spatial development of the European Union with new and complex challenges. This work demonstrates that in recent years, the processes of change in the global balance of economic, military, and political power have only intensified; these are factors that strongly influence the Community's developmental potential. Geopolitical instability results in a restructuring of the EU's internal space, necessitating a rethinking of spatial development priorities and infrastructure development—both of which are long-term and form the foundation of all other Union policies.

Secondly, in the context of the global shift in power, the EU's spatial links with other continents are also undergoing a significant transformation. The analysis of spatial processes and the Union's intercontinental connections reveals a clear shift from a model based primarily on economic cohesion and openness to a model where growth, security, resilience, and strategic autonomy take center stage.

The primary conclusion is that the Community's economic development will depend on its ability to define its priorities, including by global regions, and to adapt its infrastructure development—as a crucial part of spatial policy—to the changing geopolitical environment and the associated military, political, and economic challenges. An effective response to these challenges requires the application of an interdisciplinary approach in formulating the goals for the European Union's development and the implementation of its policies. Only in this way can the Union guarantee its progress and relative economic autonomy in conditions of increasing global uncertainty.

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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PROMOTING PUBLIC SECTOR INITIATIVES AMONG YOUTH

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Abstract: *This paper explores the role of social media in promoting public sector initiatives among youth, with a particular focus on university students at “Aleksandër Moisiu” University of Durrës (UAMD). As Albania continues to advance its digital governance and citizen-engagement strategies, social media platforms have become essential tools for communicating governmental programs, public services, and civic opportunities to younger audiences. University students, as highly active users of digital platforms, represent a key target group for public institutions seeking to increase awareness, transparency, and participation in national and local government initiatives.*

Drawing on surveys and observational insights from UAMD students, the study investigates how social media content, platform choice, and message design influence students’ awareness, perceptions, and willingness to engage with public sector activities. The analysis highlights that visually appealing and interactive posts, collaborations with credible youth figures, and timely dissemination of information significantly enhance engagement. At the same time, challenges such as scepticism toward government communication, concerns about misinformation, and uneven digital literacy levels shape students’ responses to online outreach efforts.

The findings demonstrate that social media has strong potential to bridge the gap between public institutions and young citizens in Albania, especially when communication strategies align with students’ media habits and expectations. The paper concludes with recommendations for Albanian public sector bodies, such as national ministries, municipal authorities, and public agencies, on how to more effectively tailor their social media presence to foster informed, active, and sustained participation among UAMD students and youth more broadly.

Keywords: public sector initiatives, students, social media, UAMD

JEL: M38, H83, D83, H41, L86

1. Introduction

Public awareness campaigns are essential communication strategies used to address large-scale social, health, or environmental issues. These campaigns aim to increase public knowledge, shift attitudes, and ultimately influence individual and collective behaviour. University students made up a unique audience: they are technologically connected, socially engaged, and highly exposed to

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information flows, yet often sceptical of institutional messaging. It is this duality that makes them both promising and challenging targets for awareness initiatives.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the extent to which public awareness campaigns influence university students' attitudes and behaviours at Aleksander Moisiu University of Durres. Which sources do students trust mostly and how do they react to information presented through these platforms. It examines theoretical frameworks that explain behaviour change, evaluates empirical findings from previous studies, and evaluates as well primary sources that include opinions and suggestions that come from university students of Bachelor and Master's Programmes in University Aleksander Moisiu. It aims to identify critical elements that contribute to campaign success in university settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Approaches to Behaviour Change

Public awareness campaigns use strategic communication to educate the public and motivate change. In order to understand how campaigns shape behaviour, this study refers firstly to previously established psychological and communication theories. The following theories explain campaign impact and how social environments influence behaviour, how people learn and adapt new behaviours, or factors that may make it easier or harder for people to adopt healthier or safer behaviours.

- a. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985) implies that behavioural intention, that is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, predicts actual behaviour. This theory is frequently applied in campus campaigns promoting health and sustainability behaviours. As a general rule, the stronger the intention to engage in a behaviour, the more likely should be its performance" (Ajzen, 1991, p. 181).
- b. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), a frequently applied theory of health behaviour, emphasises observational learning, social influence, and self-efficacy. Peer-led initiatives based on SCT have proven effective among university populations because students tend to model behaviours demonstrated by relatable peers.
- c. While the Health Belief Model of Hochbaum explains behavioural choices through perceived susceptibility, severity, benefits, and barriers. Campaigns targeting mental health or substance use often apply HBM to highlight risks and promote help-seeking.
- d. The Elaboration Likelihood Model was developed by Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo in the 1980s. It's a theory of persuasion that explains how people process messages through the central route (deep, thoughtful processing) and the peripheral route (surface-level cues). According to the theory, students are more persuaded by messages that they find relevant and credible, particularly when processed through the central route.

Based on these theories, other characteristics of students and the way they approach to latest internet-based platforms, a connection may be found that gives a better understanding of how to organise public awareness campaigns that increase students' engagement.

2.2 Characteristics of University Students as an Audience

University students have distinct traits that impact how they respond to campaigns. These characteristics require campaigns to be relatable, evidence-based, and interactive.

It is a fact that the young generation has a high digital exposure, and they rely on digital platforms for information gathering. Gen Z uses online platforms deeply for learning, health, and social interaction.

A 2023 study published in JMIR looked at Gen Z and their exposure to and use of digital media for self-relevant health topics. Participants age varied from 18 to 26 and the study found that, compared to previous generations they rely more on the internet for information related to health. The same study found that digital health literacy predicts their information-seeking behaviour, but that higher use of digital media does not always lead to more health empowerment for them (Jiao et al. 2023). Another global survey found that Gen Z and Millennials heavily favour social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok for health-related or scientific information (Blandi Lorenzo et al. 2022). According to (West et al, 2024) adolescent social media use (including high exposure) plays a strong role in shaping their digital competence or their ability to navigate, assess, and interact with digital content. While, in the study “The Moderating Effects of Young Adults’ Personality Traits on Social Media Immersion,” researchers found that personality traits influence how deeply young people get immersed in social media (Yu et al. 2020). In addition, according to West et al. (2024b) reveal as well that social media use during adolescence can boost digital competence like communication or information seeking but may also displace other developmental activities.

Also, according to Schwarze (2025), Gen Z young adults are very attuned to social groups, inclusion, and diversity. This suggests how deeply matter peer group norms and identities. Adolescent development research notes as well that during teenage years, key areas of the brain (like those for self-regulation) are still developing, which makes them more sensitive to emotional or peer-driven decisions (Carolyn Falcon et al. 2023).

Social media is more than entertainment. It is a space where young people try out identities, evaluate their values, and clarify who they are. A coherent review (Avci et al. 2024) in Adolescent Research Review found that active participation on social media (not just passive scrolling) is strongly tied to identity exploration. The authors also note that authenticity in online self-presentation (vs. idealized “perfect” selves) correlates with greater self-concept clarity.

Another study (2024) specifically looked at how social media affects adolescents’ self-esteem and self-presentation, supporting the idea that as Gen Z uses these platforms, they are forming and assessing their values, identity, and peer relationships (Agarwal, 2024). This explains how the developmental stage of exploration and value formation is very much supported by social media as a space where identity is shaped.

One other student’s trait is that their trust in information and their identity is strongly shaped by peer networks and social contexts. There’s strong peer network influence on how they interpret information, and their trust, including scepticism, is formed in social contexts.

A 2023 / 2024 design-oriented study on how young adults assess online information highlighted that trust decisions are socially motivated. People consult peers, rely on group norms, and their assessments are “social and collaborative.” (Vlachokyriakos et al. 2024)

Relatedly, a 2023 arXiv study found that Gen Z does not just evaluate online info individually; rather, they interpret it in social groups. Their “information sensibility” is socially embedded (Hassoun et al. 2023)

Last but not least, this generation tends to have a feeling of scepticism about institutions. Research on Gen Z and civic engagement points to vulnerability to fake news and a somewhat detached relationship with traditional institutions. They often rely on social feedback (likes, shares) and peer networks to assess credibility (Alexandra – Niculina et al. 2025)

Distrust in higher education or other formal institutions is backed by survey data, and their social information practices reflect that scepticism. They lean toward peers or social cues rather than top-down messaging.

These findings tie into the assumption that there’s measurable distrust in institutional sources among Gen Z, especially in academic settings, and social media plays a role in how they form their beliefs and attitudes.

A 2022 survey by Inside Higher Ed found that a considerable percentage of Gen Z aged 18 to 25 years does not trust higher education institutions (Knott, 2022).

Another study found that Gen Z students lean heavily on digital platforms (social media) for news and school-related information, and many of them consider themselves “social activists.” (A.Buzzetto et al. 2024). More broadly, a 2023 review of social media’s impact on adolescents noted that social media use is linked to both positive and negative developmental outcomes (mental health, identity), which can feed scepticism about traditional institutions, especially if those institutions don’t reflect or address what youth experience online (Carolina Falcon Linares et al. 2023)

While Perez-Escoda et al. in 2021 found that young people aged 18 to 22 years show low trust in politicians, media, and journalists, and many of them associate misinformation with manipulation, distrust, and danger.

Table 1: Summary of tendencies of students to respond to campaigns

They have a high exposure to digital and social media content
The influence of peer networks and campus culture is strong
They experience a developmental stage marked by exploration and value formation
They show a tendency toward scepticism of institutional or government messaging

Source: Jiao et al. 2023, Blandi Lorenzo et al. 2022, West et al. 2024, Carolin Falcon et al. 2023, Avci et al. 2024, Agarwal, 2024, Knott, 2022, A. Buzzetto et al. 2024, et al.

In conclusion, previous studies on campaign effectiveness across multiple domains, such as mental health awareness, environmental sustainability, sexual health, and substance use, highlight several findings:

- Campaigns using interactive digital content (videos, gamified challenges, social media influencers) show higher engagement.
- Peer-led interventions increase trust and message acceptance.

- Campaigns that integrate on-campus events, workshops, or student ambassador programs achieve stronger behavioural outcomes compared to purely digital campaigns.
- Repetition and cross-platform messaging strengthen retention.

However, limitations such as message fatigue, scepticism about sponsorship motives, and the gap between attitude formation and actual behaviour may be noted as well.

3. Methodology

This chapter delineates the research design and methods used to investigate the influence of public awareness campaigns on Students' Attitudes and Behaviours. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining secondary research with primary data collection conducted through a structured survey targeting students at the University of Durres. The use of both data types allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem, enabling cross-validation of findings and the identification of patterns that may not be visible through a single method.

3.1 Survey design

The research adopts a mixed design. Secondary research was used to establish the theoretical framework, review existing literature, and position the study within current academic and professional discussions. Primary research was conducted to obtain first-hand insights from UAMD students, capturing their perspectives, experiences, and attitudes related to public awareness campaigns. This dual approach ensures that the study is grounded in established knowledge while also reflecting the specific context of the student population.

3.2 Sampling and participants

Primary data was collected using an online survey administered to students enrolled at UAMD. The survey aimed to gather quantifiable information on the topic of this paper. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions (Likert scales, multiple choice) and open-ended items. The survey was designed based on insights from the secondary research to ensure content validity. A convenience sampling method was used. Students from various departments and study levels were invited to participate. In total, 67 responses were collected.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

The survey was distributed via email and social media. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and in accordance with ethical research guidelines. Quantitative responses were analysed using Excel to identify trends and frequencies.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The research adhered to ethical standards, ensuring confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation. No personal identifying information was collected. Limitations include the use of a non-probability sample and the potential for respondent bias. Additionally, the findings based on UAMD students may not be generalizable to other populations.

4. Results

4.1 Results of the quantitative analysis

Two groups of Bachelor's and Master's students participated in the questionnaire. The answers were collected from “Google Forms”. The questionnaire structure and its main pillars include Demographics, Campaign Exposure, Students’ Perception and personal involvement, Engagement and Behaviour, Motivation and Barriers and Open-Ended reflection.

Overall, 67 students participated in the survey “How do public awareness campaigns influence university students’ attitudes and behaviours”.

There was a significant overrepresentation of women in the sample, comprising 62.5 % of the respondents. This is also related to the fact that in the Programs offered by the Public Administration Department, the majority of students are female. Age distribution and education level are presented as follows:

Table 2a: Age of participants

Age	
18-25	62.50%
25-35	21.90%
over 35	15.60%

Source: author’s analysis, 2025

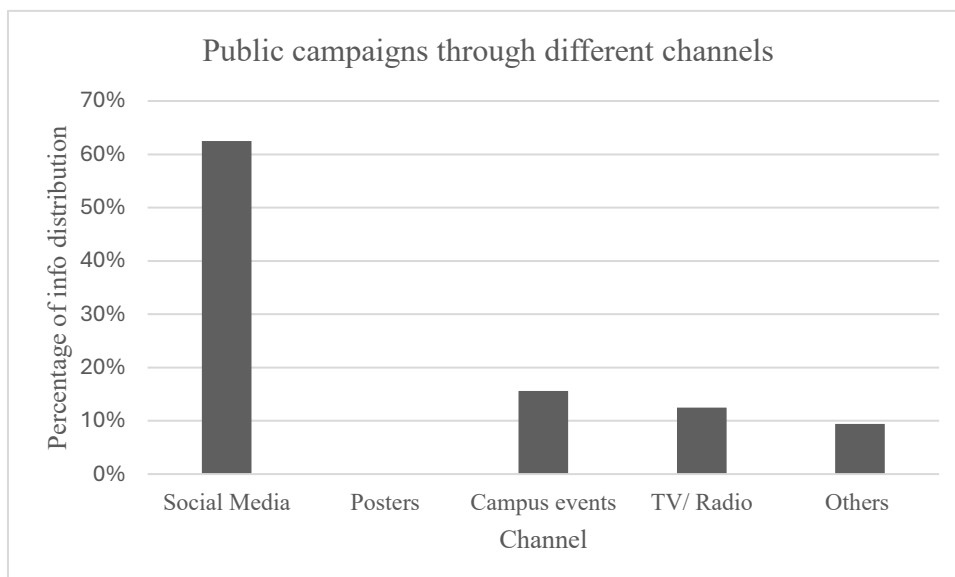
Table 2b: Education level of participants

Education	
Bachelor	84.40%
High school	15.60%

Responses from the questionnaire reveal that public campaigns watched by students were mostly about civic participation. In second place are education and health with an equal percentage of 21.9%.

As explained in Figure 1, most students have watched the latest public campaigns through social media.

Figure 1: Channels where students encounter public campaigns

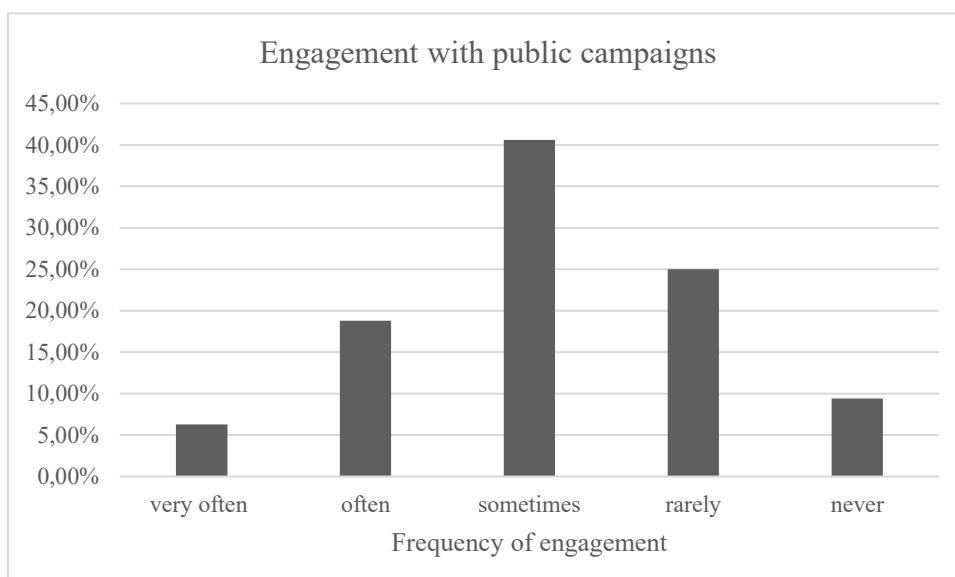


Source: author's analysis, 2025

In addition, students consider public campaigns as an important part of their lives. What they seem to be a little more confused and insecure about is the clarity of the message of these campaigns and the level of trust in public institutions. About 60% of participants declare to be neutral regarding these issues.

According to the responses presented in Figure 2, their engagement with public campaigns seems to be good enough and promising for the future. If better-organised campaigns are to be presented to them, their engagement may as well increase.

Figure 2: Students' engagement with public campaigns



Source: author's analysis, 2025

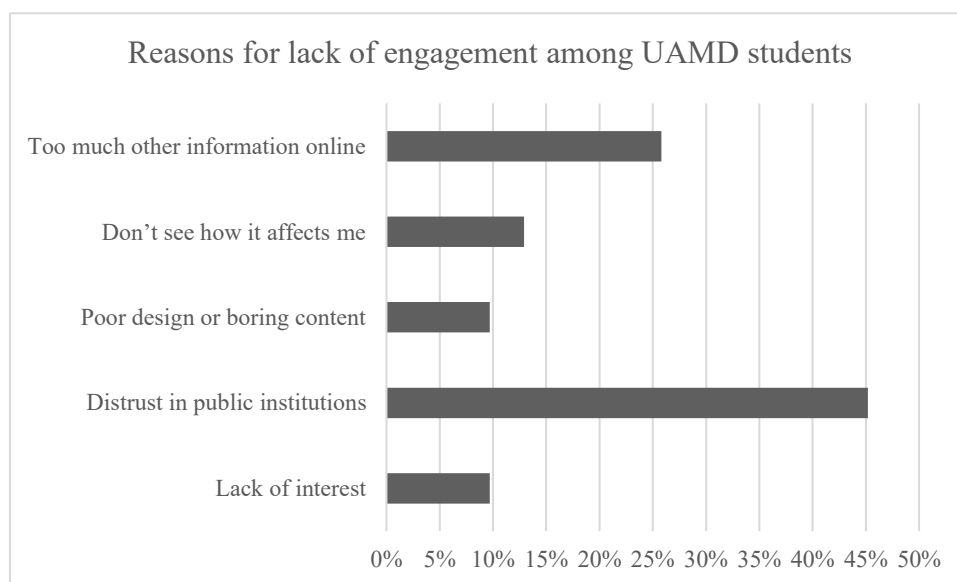
There is a higher tendency among students to believe more in campaigns that are shared by peers or influencers. About 40 % of participants agree and strongly agree with that.

After watching a public campaign, 6.3 % of participants always try to apply its message in their daily life (e.g., recycling, safe driving, voting, etc.)

While 34.4 % do this very often, 46.9% show a medium engagement initiative, 9.4% do it rarely, and 3.1% declare to never take engagement. However, a considerable proportion of participants, exactly 34.4% are interested or very interested in helping design or promote public campaigns for students.

In reference to the main reasons that usually stop students from engaging with such campaigns, the following Figure 3 has been generated.

Figure 3: Reasons that influence students not to engage with public campaigns



Source: author's analysis, 2025

Questionnaire results contribute to the analysis in terms of awareness and exposure, revealing how well public campaigns reach student audiences. They also show the lack of trust in public institutions or messages that come from public campaigns. Students' engagement and action show behavioural or attitudinal influence from these campaigns. Additionally, students' qualitative insights offer creative input for improving youth-targeted public communication.

Main Findings from the quantitative analysis show that:

Students are aware of public campaigns, but they selectively engage, mostly through social media.

Campaigns perceived as authentic and relatable, not overly formal are more effective.

Visual storytelling and peer involvement increase engagement.

There's room for co-creation between students and public institutions.

5. Conclusion

Public awareness campaigns can significantly influence university students' attitudes and behaviours when addressing issues perceived as immediate or personally meaningful and designed with intentionality, relevance, and student engagement in mind.

Campaign components such as message framing, source credibility, and delivery channels interact with students' beliefs, social influences, and perceived control, as explained by the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Social Cognitive Theory and as revealed by current students of Aleksander Moisiu University in the city of Durres.

The most effective campaigns utilise credible sources, resonant message framing, and multi-channel communication strategies. Digital platforms that align with student media habits would contribute to better engagement. To maximise impact, future campaigns must embrace co-creation, digital interactivity, and continuous evaluation. Doing so will help educators, policymakers, and campus organisations foster meaningful behavioural change among students.

6. Discussions

Evidence from previous studies and from primary data from the questionnaire suggests that awareness campaigns are most successful when they incorporate the following:

1. **Relevance and Personalisation:** Tailoring messages to the lived experiences of students improves cognitive engagement.
2. **Credible Sources:** Peers, student leaders, and academic experts are perceived as more trustworthy than corporate or governmental sources.
3. **Interactive and Multimedia Formats:** Videos, infographics, live events, and social media challenges increase message retention and appeal.
4. **Opportunities for Participation:** Allowing students to co-create content or lead initiatives fosters ownership and behavioural commitment.

In Table 3 are presented some main factors that have an influence on students, according to studies and primary research as well.

Table 3. Summary of factors influencing campaign effectiveness

Factor	Description
Message Relevance	Tailored messages resonate more with students
Credible Source	Peer-led or expert messaging improves persuasion
Multimedia Use	Videos/interactive tools increase engagement
Repetition	Repeated exposure reinforces attitudes
Participation	Student involvement boosts ownership

6.1 Ongoing Challenges

Despite their potential, public awareness campaigns face several obstacles:

- Information overload weakens attention and engagement.

- Message fatigue occurs when campaigns lack novelty or appear redundant.
- Credibility concerns, particularly for campaigns tied to government or corporate sponsors.
- Behaviour-attitude gaps persist, meaning students may express positive attitudes without adopting new behaviours.
- Digital scepticism, where students question the authenticity and motives of widely circulated online messages.

To achieve the greatest effect, upcoming campaigns should prioritise co-creation, interactive digital approaches, and ongoing assessment. This approach will enable educators, policymakers, and campus organisations to drive genuine and lasting behavioural change among students.

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PERCEIVED PARENTING STYLES AND DEVIANT BEHAVIORS IN ADOLESCENTS AGED 15-18 YEARS

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Era Vina²

Introduction: *The study of factors contributing to deviant behavior in adolescents warrants special attention from parents, educators, and psychologists in order to implement appropriate interventions to prevent negative behaviors. Therefore, the primary focus and aim of this study is to explore the impact and relationship between perceived parenting styles and deviant behavior in adolescents aged 15-18 years.*

Methods: *More specifically, the study aimed to understand the significance of parenting styles in the manifestation of deviant behaviors among adolescents who have engaged in legal violations and are currently serving sentences at the Institute for Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Minors and Youth in Albania. A descriptive data analysis approach and correlational method were used for this research. The sample consisted of 20 male adolescents aged 15-18 years. Two self-report instruments were used to collect data, corresponding to the variables under study: The Perceived Parenting Style Scale (PPSS) (Meyers & Kumpfer, 1986) with 30 statements and the Deviant Behavior Variety Scale (DBVS), (Jessor & Jessor, 1977) with 19 statements. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 25. Ethical guidelines for scientific research were followed and respected throughout the study.*

Results and Conclusions: *The data, analyzed through correlational analysis, indicated that the perceived permissive parenting style had a moderate positive impact on deviant behavior. This was demonstrated by a correlation value of $p = .042$ and $r = .410$, suggesting that as the permissive parenting style increased, so did the likelihood of adolescents engaging in deviant behaviors. The study emphasizes that while parenting style influences deviant behavior, parents can mitigate the chances of their children engaging in such behaviors by employing positive child-rearing strategies. In this regard, further studies are needed with a larger sample, considering reports from both parents on how they have raised their children, as well as other moderating factors such as the social, economic, and cultural contexts in which the adolescents live, along with their temperamental and personality traits.*

Keywords: adolescence, perceived parenting style, deviant behavior, minors in conflict with the law.

JEL: D91, J13

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is widely regarded as one of the most challenging stages of human growth and development, as during this period adolescents face significant physical, psychological, emotional, and social changes. Various authors describe it as a developmental phase in which adolescents actively explore their environments, relationships, behaviors, and actions. They also seek independence from their parents, desire to be heard rather than opposed, and look for attention, affection, diverse social relationships, and a sense of belonging to particular peer groups (Bell, B.T.,

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2016). Consequently, for these very reasons, adolescent behavior may become aggressive and may at times lead to atypical or maladaptive actions that conflict with what society defines as norms or social rules.

Deviant Behavior and Adolescence

One of the most prevalent problems encountered by adolescents worldwide is deviant behavior. According to the literature, deviant behavior is defined as actions that violate the norms and legal standards of a given society (Nickerson, C., & McLeod, S., 2024). Specifically, deviant behaviors include acts such as theft, assault, deceit/manipulation, the use and trafficking of illicit substances, carrying or using weapons, alcohol consumption, violence, sexual assault, stalking, bullying, and many others. When examining the factors that contribute to the emergence of such behaviors, research suggests that they are multifaceted and numerous.

Factors Influencing Deviant Behavior

Research in this field identifies low socioeconomic status as one of the major contributing factors to deviant behavior (Tracy, B. E. O., & Kingsley, O. O., 2017). Being part of a family facing such socioeconomic challenges can increase vulnerability, as unmet basic needs and financial strain may lead adolescents to engage in deviant acts as a means of survival or to support their families. Another significant factor is the influence of negative peer groups (Rydell, A. M., & Brocky, K., 2024), in which adolescents often seek membership in order to feel accepted. This may occur for various reasons, such as lack of family support, homelessness, the need for financial resources, or experiences of bullying. Additionally, other factors—including low academic achievement, genetic predispositions, age, temperament, and media exposure—play an important role in increasing adolescents' risk of displaying deviant behaviors (Prakash, A., et al., 2020).

The Importance of Parenting Style in Deviant Behavior

The present study focuses specifically on the role of parenting style. Understanding how a child is raised provides insight into the importance and influence of parental behavior on adolescent actions and decision-making. Family relationships—particularly the manner in which the mother and father interact, teach, and transmit values and life principles—have a substantial impact on adolescent behavior. This influence is linked to the characteristics of the parenting style adopted by each parent. Empirical evidence indicates that parenting styles characterized by warmth and responsiveness (authoritative and permissive) are more beneficial compared to styles marked by high demands, strict standards, and limited emotional support (authoritarian) (Dewar, G., 2010–2024). Furthermore, disruptions in family equilibrium (negative interaction cycles), insufficient or overly controlling parental monitoring, and dysfunctional family dynamics increase adolescents' vulnerability to maladaptive thinking patterns and deviant behaviors. Various international studies support the notion that negative family relationship dynamics hinder the development of autonomy and a sense of belonging within the family system (Manscalco, I., 2024).

Importance of the Study

Building upon the issues outlined above, there is a limited body of research in Albania exploring the importance of parenting styles in relation to deviant behaviors among juvenile offenders. The implementation of this study therefore provides a broader perspective for understanding and further examining the relationship between these two variables, as well as the significance of parenting style in explaining deviant behaviors in adolescents.

Moreover, deviant behavior among adolescents—both in Albania and globally—must be treated with particular attention not only by parents, teachers, and psychologists, but also by society at large. This is essential because such behaviors may evolve into more severe antisocial and violent actions in the future, including terrorism and other criminal activities within the community.

2. Methodology

Despite the increasing number of factors that significantly influence the likelihood that adolescents aged 15–18 engage in deviant behaviors, evidence suggests that the way parents raise and educate their children holds particular importance. This is because the shaping of a child—through the values, principles, cultural norms, behaviors, and actions imparted—begins with the parental approach to child-rearing, including the parenting style they employ. In fact, many juveniles in conflict with the law, regardless of the criminal offenses committed (i.e., deviant behaviors), have faced and continue to face major challenges within their families and social environments. Therefore, considering the wide range of factors influencing adolescent deviance, this study seeks to shed light on the relationship between parenting styles and deviant behavior, using a sample of juveniles in conflict with the law in Albania.

Study Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to identify the relationship between perceived parenting styles and deviant behavior among adolescents in conflict with the law within the Albanian penitentiary system. The specific objectives include:

- a) Identifying the predominant age group of juveniles in conflict with the law who have engaged in deviant behaviors.
- b) Determining and examining any potential correlation between perceived parenting styles and deviant behavior.
- c) Identifying which parenting style is most strongly associated with an increased likelihood of deviant behavior among adolescents.

Research Hypotheses

The scientific inquiry tests the following hypotheses:

1. There is a negative correlational relationship between the authoritarian parenting style and deviant behavior in adolescents.
2. There is a positive correlational relationship between the permissive parenting style and deviant behavior in adolescents.
3. There is a negative correlational relationship between the authoritative parenting style and deviant behavior in adolescents.

The methodology employed in this study adheres to a structured and systematic framework designed to explore the impact of each parenting style on adolescents' predisposition toward deviant behaviors. In line with the research objectives, a quantitative research design was considered most appropriate, as it enables objective measurement and statistical analysis of the relationships between variables. A correlational approach was selected because it allows for the examination of the strength and direction of associations between parenting styles and deviant behavior. Since the primary focus of the study is to explore adolescents' perceptions of parenting styles and their involvement in deviant behaviors, all data were collected at a single point in time, considering also the logistical possibilities provided by the institution for conducting this data collection.

Sampling Procedure

The study was conducted at the Institute for Juveniles and Youth in Kavaja. This institution was selected because it is the only facility in Albania that functions simultaneously as a rehabilitation, counseling, and educational center for minors who have committed criminal offenses and, consequently, deviant behaviors. The target population consisted of male adolescents aged 14–18 who had engaged in at least one deviant behavior in their lifetime.

All juveniles in conflict with the law who were present in the institution at the time of data collection participated in the study, resulting in a total sample of 20 individuals. Although the sample size was small, the adolescents represented a diverse range of backgrounds regarding age, type of criminal offense, family structure, and place of origin. A key inclusion criterion was that participants had to be between 14 and 18 years of age, as the study aimed to explore adolescents' perceptions of the parenting styles employed by their parents during their upbringing.

Instruments Used

Data for this study were collected through two standardized self-report questionnaires, adapted into the Albanian language for adolescents aged 14–18. Specifically, the “Perceived Parenting Style Scale (PPSS)” developed by Meyers & Kumpfer in 1986 and the “Deviant Behavior Variety Scale (DBVS)” developed by Jessor & Jessor in 1977 were utilized. These instruments were selected due to their established reliability in measuring perceived parenting styles and deviant behavior among adolescents in conflict with the law. The PPSS, consisting of 30 items, was used to assess the perceived permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative parenting styles, based on Baumrind's theoretical framework. The DBVS, consisting of 19 items, was employed to measure deviant behaviors committed by adolescents in conflict with the law in Albania.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the research instruments, Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted with 5 participants during the pilot phase and subsequently with the full sample of 20 participants, who responded using a Likert scale. Values above 0.7 were considered acceptable indicators of internal consistency for the instruments used in this scientific study.

Following data collection, the information was processed and analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), a widely used statistical software for quantitative research. Descriptive statistics were employed initially to summarize data on age, place of birth, and family structure (i.e., living arrangements) of each adolescent, thereby providing an overview of the sample characteristics. To examine the relationships between perceived parenting styles and deviant behavior in adolescents, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted, offering insights into the strength and direction of these variables.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, ethical principles were rigorously upheld. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the General Directorate of Prisons in Albania. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, and consent was obtained before administering the questionnaires. Confidentiality was ensured, with all responses kept anonymous to protect participants' identities. Additionally, care was taken to avoid any psychological or professional risk to the minors in conflict with the law who took part in the study.

Limitations of the Study

The data for this research were collected through self-report measures completed by the adolescents, which may result in inaccuracies due to misunderstandings or misreporting by the respondents, despite the explanations provided to them prior to completing the questionnaires. The use of specific self-report instruments may not be sufficient to fully capture the complexity of deviant behaviors and the multitude of factors associated with them. Moreover, the study was conducted within a specific time period, which may not be adequate for observing long-term changes in adolescent behavior.

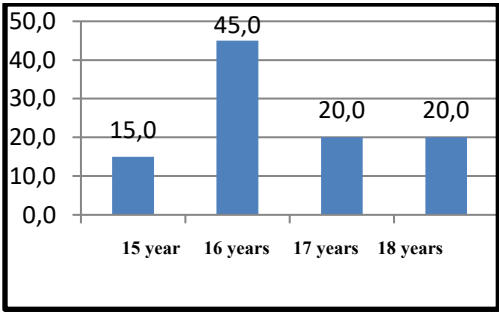
3. Results And Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the relationship between perceived parenting styles and the deviant behavior of adolescents aged 14 to 18 who are in conflict with the law in Albania. Data collected from 20 adolescents were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analyses, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the interactions between these variables. This section presents the results in a structured manner, integrating tables to illustrate the key statistical findings, followed by a detailed discussion of their implications.

Descriptive Statistics

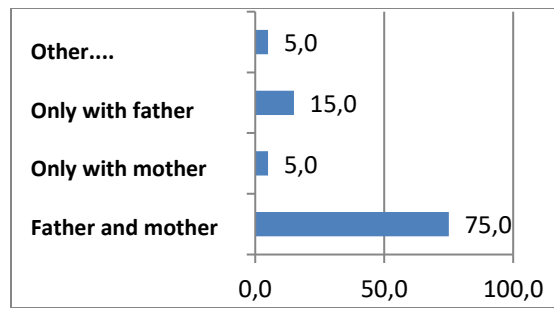
The demographic characteristics of the adolescents were examined to gain a clearer understanding of their family composition (with whom the adolescent lives), age, and place of origin. The sample consisted of 20 male adolescents serving their sentence at the Institute for Juveniles and Youth in Kavajë, Albania. Below are the results of the descriptive analyses related to age, family composition, and place of birth/residence of the sample, as well as the total scores obtained from the two instruments used for data collection.

Fig 1. Age



In Figure 1, the results show that approximately 45% of the adolescents who engaged in deviant behaviors were 16 years old. This finding indicates that adolescence is indeed a particularly challenging developmental period, during which parents must exercise heightened care in the ways they behave, act, and raise their children.

Fig 2. Family composition



In Figure 2, the results indicate that the majority of adolescents, approximately 75%, reported living with both their mother and father in response to the item “Who do you live with?” Among the remaining participants, only 5% live with their mother, 15% live solely with their father, and 5% live with other individuals. This distribution is significant for the study as it highlights the influence of both parents on adolescent behavior, a factor that should be taken into account in future research.

Distribution of Adolescents in Conflict with the Law in Albania

As shown in the table below, the majority of adolescents who have engaged in deviant behaviors are from the capital city, Tirana. This finding underscores the importance of considering the rural/urban factor in adolescent development. Given that most participants come from the capital, it is essential to take into account cultural diversity, gender, social environment, parenting styles, government policies, and other contextual factors. In a highly dynamic city like Tirana, these influences are more varied, and certain behaviors may be considered taboo by the majority of adolescents in Albania.

Table 1. Distribution of adolescents sample

Nr.	CITY
1	Athens
6	Tiranë
1	Elbasan
4	Gramsh
2	Korçë
1	Lezhë
1	Shkodër
1	Fier
1	Durrës
1	Dibër
1	Vlorë

Perceived Parenting Styles

Furthermore, to understand which parenting styles were employed by the parents of the adolescents included in the study, descriptive statistics were conducted on the total scores of the items from the **Perceived Parenting Style Scale (PPSS)**.

Table 2. Perceived Parenting Styles

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mesatarja	Standard deviation
Authoritative Style	20	29	50	41.9	5.1
Authoritarian style	20	17	34	24.2	6.1

Permissive style	20	10	40	23.0	7.6

In Table 2, the results indicate that the **authoritative style** ($M = 41.9$, $SD = 5.1$) was reported as the most frequently used among the three parenting styles measured by the PPSS. This was followed by the **authoritarian style** ($M = 24.2$, $SD = 6.1$) and the **permissive style** ($M = 23$, $SD = 7.6$). These findings provide insight into which parenting styles were predominantly employed in raising the adolescents, and subsequently allow for an analysis of how specific characteristics of each parenting style may explain adolescents' predisposition to engage in deviant behaviors.

Regarding the descriptive data on **Deviant Behavior** among adolescents, Table 3 illustrates:

Table 3. Deviant Behavior

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Deviant Behavior	20	0	19	6.85	5.53

The scores ranged from 0 to 19 points, with a mean of 6.85 ($SD = 5.53$). These results indicate that, overall, the level of deviant behavior in this sample is relatively low. However, the high standard deviation suggests a wide distribution of scores. This implies that while a substantial portion of adolescents may exhibit more controlled behavior, there is also a segment displaying markedly higher levels of deviant behavior.

The Relationship Between Perceived Parenting Styles and Deviant Behavior

To assess the relationship between perceived parenting styles and deviant behavior, adolescents were asked to describe how their parents behaved or have behaved towards them. Responses were measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The relationship between each parenting style and adolescents' deviant behavior is summarized in the tables below.

Table 4. Authoritarian Parenting Style and Deviant Behavior

		Authoritarian Parenting Style	Deviant Behavior
Authoritarian Parenting Style	Pearson Correlation	1	-.135
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.572
	N	20	20
Deviant Behavior	Pearson Correlation	-.135	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.572	
	N	20	20

From the table above, it can be observed that there is a very weak negative relationship between the **Authoritarian Style** and **Deviant Behavior**. However, this relationship is not statistically significant, as $p = .572 > .05$ and $r = -0.135$.

Table 5. Permissive Parenting Style and Deviant Behavior

		Permissive style	Deviant Behavior
Permissive style	Pearson Correlation	1	.410*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.042
	N	20	20
Deviant Behavior	Pearson Correlation	.410*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.042	
	N	20	20

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

From the table above, it can be observed that there is a statistically significant relationship between the variables ($p \leq .05$), specifically $p = .042$, with a correlation coefficient of $r = .410$. Although this represents a moderate positive relationship, the result indicates that as the use of characteristics associated with the **Permissive Style** increases, adolescents' deviant behavior also tends to increase.

Fig 1. Correlation between Perceived Permissive Parenting Style and Deviant Behavior

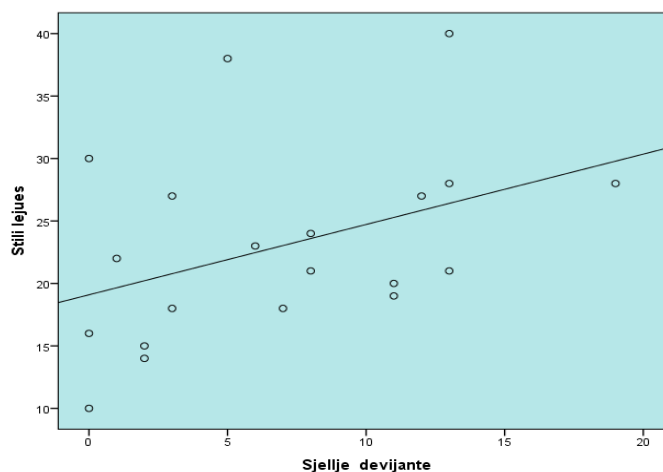


Table 6. Correlation between Authoritative Parenting Style and Deviant Behavior

		Stili Autoritativ	Deviant Behavior
Authoritative Parenting Style	Pearson Correlation	1	-.248
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.292
	N	20	20
Deviant Behavior	Pearson Correlation	-.248	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.292	
	N	20	20

From Table 6, the results indicate that there is no statistically significant relationship between the **Authoritative Style** and **Deviant Behavior** ($p > .05$). The correlation coefficient of -0.248 suggests a weak negative relationship between these two variables. In practical terms,

this implies that as the use of the authoritative parenting style increases, there is a slight tendency for deviant behavior to decrease, although this relationship remains weak.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature, reinforcing the notion that parenting styles—including the family environment, parental behavior, and child/adolescent education—are primary factors influencing and explaining deviant behavior among adolescents in general, as well as those who have committed criminal offenses. A suitable and healthy parenting style can enhance adolescents' ability to solve problems positively, manage emotions, and make appropriate decisions. Thus, the way a parent raises a child and the atmosphere they provide can translate into healthy or maladaptive behaviors in the future.

The results also align with international studies such as Adesanya & Osinowo (2019), which suggest that a permissive parenting style is more likely to lead to deviant behaviors. Conversely, Prinzie et al. (2010) report that adolescents with authoritative parents are at lower risk for engaging in deviant behaviors. However, the findings of this study diverge from Prinzie et al., as the parents of adolescents in the Kavajë Juvenile Institute predominantly employed an authoritative style, yet their children still committed offenses. Furthermore, the observed positive relationship between the permissive style and deviant behavior among adolescents supports the findings of Parveen et al. (2020), who noted higher levels of permissive parenting among families of deviant adolescents. One of the most notable findings of this study is the critical role of parenting practices in influencing deviant behavior among adolescents, whether or not they are in conflict with the law.

A warm and educational family atmosphere, with parents who are explanatory, open to adolescents' opinions and needs, fostering close relationships, independence, and critical thinking, represents the most effective approach to raising healthy children with minimal behavioral problems. Positive parenting methods influence the development of a positive identity, self-esteem, academic success, and autonomy in children and adolescents. Therefore, addressing the challenges associated with negative or inappropriate parenting practices, as identified in this study, is crucial, since behavioral issues can adversely affect adolescents' development, as well as their life goals, values, and principles.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that parents learn positive child-rearing techniques aimed at enhancing self-esteem, integrity, confidence, moral development, and a culture of problem-solving through communication and other constructive strategies. Moreover, the roles of teachers and school psychologists should be emphasized to carefully address adolescents' emotional outbursts, providing emotional support to help them reflect on which behaviors are socially acceptable.

Investing in parent psycho-education and programs to manage adolescents' negative behaviors will contribute to their healthy growth and development, reducing the likelihood of engaging in deviant behaviors in society.

4. Conclusions And Recommendations

The findings of this study provide an overview of the significance of adolescent development with regard to parenting styles in relation to deviant behavior. In conclusion, the study suggests that the **Permissive Parenting Style** is associated with deviant behavior. This implies that the use of this parenting style by parents contributes to a higher likelihood of children and adolescents engaging not only in deviant behaviors but also in law-violating behaviors in Albania.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, further research is needed, focusing on moderating factors that influence adolescents' deviant behaviors. Such factors include the social, economic, and cultural context in which adolescents live, as well as other variables such as temperament and personality.

- Future studies should consider reports from both parents regarding their child-rearing practices. This would help create a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of the impact of parenting styles on children's behaviors.
- Expanding the sample to include adolescents from different regions and diverse socio-economic backgrounds would enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide a broader picture of deviant behaviors.
- It is necessary to conduct studies examining how comprehensive education and information about the consequences of deviant behavior influence prevention in adolescents, which would be highly beneficial.
- Further research should explore the impact of different parenting styles (authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive) and their combinations on specific deviant behaviors and adolescents' mental health.

These recommendations can facilitate more detailed and in-depth studies on deviant behaviors and their influencing factors, contributing to the development of more effective strategies for prevention and intervention.

Final Reflections

The findings of this study highlight the need to invest in positive child-rearing strategies as a primary factor influencing adolescents' development, personal and professional growth, and psycho-emotional health. A warm family environment that emphasizes open dialogue, understanding, nurturing communication, and explanatory guidance—while fostering close parent-child relationships and being receptive to adolescents' thoughts and needs—can serve as a catalyst for promoting independence, critical thinking, and positive behavior among adolescents in general.

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ПСИХОЛОГИЧЕСКОТО ЦЕНООБРАЗУВАНЕ В ОНЛАЙН И ОФЛАЙН СРЕДА: ТЕОРЕТИЧНИ АСПЕКТИ

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Резюме: *Психологическото ценообразуване представлява важен аспект относно въздействието върху потребителските възприятия и решения за покупка. Настоящият доклад има за цел да представи теоретичен анализ на основните механизми на психологическото ценообразуване и тяхната роля в съвременната маркетингова среда. Анализът се основава на концепции от поведенческата икономика и маркетинговата теория, които обясняват начина, по който потребителите интерпретират ценовата информация чрез когнитивни евристики и референтни точки. Специално внимание се отделя на техники като ценообразуване с крайна цифра „.99“, ефекта на котвата и различните форми на представяне на ценовите отстъпки. Разглежда се също влиянието на онлайн и офлайн средата като контекстуален фактор при възприемането на цената. Представеният анализ очертава теоретичните основи на психологическото ценообразуване и формулира маркетингови импликации за неговото приложение в условията на омниканална търговия.*

Ключови думи: психологическо ценообразуване, омниканална търговия, ценови стратегии, ценова политика.

JEL: M31; D12; D91.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PRICING IN ONLINE AND OFFLINE ENVIRONMENTS: THEORETICAL ASPECTS

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Abstract: *Psychological pricing constitutes an important aspect of influencing consumer perceptions and purchase decisions. The present paper aims to provide a theoretical analysis of the main mechanisms of psychological pricing and their role in the contemporary marketing environment. The analysis is based on concepts from behavioral economics and marketing theory, which explain the way consumers interpret price information through cognitive heuristics and reference points. Particular attention is paid to techniques such as pricing ending in “.99,” the anchoring effect, and various forms of presenting price discounts. The influence of the online and offline environment as a contextual factor in price perception is also examined. The analysis outlines the theoretical foundations of psychological pricing and formulates marketing implications for its application in the context of omnichannel commerce.*

Keywords: psychological pricing, omnichannel commerce, pricing strategies, pricing policy.

JEL: M31; D12; D91.

Въведение

Цената е един от фундаменталните елементи на маркетинговия микс и традиционно се разглежда като икономически показател, отразяващ стойността на продукта или услугата. В съвременната маркетингова теория и практика обаче цената се възприема и като комуникационен сигнал, който оказва съществено влияние върху потребителските възприятия, нагласи и решения за покупка. Именно в този контекст се развива концепцията за психологическото ценообразуване, което използва когнитивни и поведенчески механизми за формиране на усещане за изгодност, достъпност или качество, често без промяна в реалната икономическа стойност на предложението. Паралелно с това, динамичното развитие на дигиталните технологии и нарастващата дигитализация на търговията водят до съществени промени в потребителското поведение. Онлайн и офлайн каналите вече не функционират изолирано, а съществуват в условията на омниканална среда, в която потребителите свободно преминават между физически и дигитални точки на контакт. Дигитализацията значително променя достъпа до ценова информация на потребителите и изправя компаниите пред нови предизвикателства, свързани с ценообразуването (Frohmann, 2018). В онлайн среда потребителите разполагат с повече ценова информация, офертите и цените са по-прозрачни и по-лесно се намират най-добрите оферти (Нецева-Порчева, 2023).

Онлайн средата се характеризира с висока степен на визуална динамика, възможност за бързо сравнение на алтернативи, ограничен физически контакт с продукта и често присъствие на дигитални стимули като таймери, банери и персонализирани оферти. За разлика от нея, офлайн средата предоставя сетивно преживяване, пространствено позициониране на продуктите, социално присъствие на други потребители и директно взаимодействие с търговската среда. Тези различия предполагат, че възприемането и интерпретацията на ценовите сигнали могат да се различават в зависимост от канала. Въпреки значителния брой изследвания, посветени на психологическото ценообразуване, сравнителният анализ на възприятието за ценови техники в онлайн и офлайн среда остава относително ограничен. Това създава изследователска празнина, свързана с разбирането на различията при специфичните канали и във възприятието за цени, завършващи на .99, ефектът на котвата и начина на представяне на отстъпките и сигналите за спешност.

Настоящият доклад има за цел да представи теоретичен анализ на основните механизми на психологическото ценообразуване в онлайн и офлайн среда, като разглежда ключови концепции от поведенческата икономика и маркетинговата теория. Основният фокус е поставен върху теоретичното разглеждане на механизмите, чрез които различните ценови техники влияят върху възприятието на потребителите в онлайн и офлайн среда.

Психологическо ценообразуване в контекста на поведенческата икономика

Психологическото ценообразуване се вписва в по-широката рамка на поведенческата икономика, която поставя под въпрос допускането за напълно рационално поведение на икономическите субекти. Класическите и неокласическите модели разглеждат потребителя като рационален субект, който взема решения въз основа на пълна информация и стабилни предпочитания. Поведенческите изследвания обаче показват, че реалните решения често се вземат при условия на ограничена рационалност, когнитивни ограничения и влияние (Simon, 1955). В този смисъл цената не се възприема единствено като икономически фактор, а като когнитивен стимул, който активира ментални връзки при вземане на решение. Kahneman и Tversky (1979) показват, че индивидите оценяват алтернативите относително, спрямо референтни точки, а не в абсолютни стойности. Това поставя основата за редица ценови техники, които целят да манипулират именно тези

референтни точки. Психологическото ценообразуване използва тези принципи, за да повлияе на възприятието за стойност, без да променя съществено реалната икономическа характеристика на продукта. От гледна точка на маркетинговата теория това превръща цената в комуникационен инструмент със символично и поведенческо значение, а не само в средство за покриване на разходи и формиране на печалба. Психологическите механизми, свързани с възприемането на цената, са тясно свързани и с процесите на ограничена рационалност и информационна асиметрия на пазара. Потребителите често не разполагат с пълна информация или време за детайлен анализ на всички алтернативи, което ги кара да използват опростени стратегии за вземане на решение. В този контекст ценовите сигнали могат да служат като индикатори за качество, изгодност или надеждност на даден продукт. Именно поради това начинът на представяне на цената се превръща във важен аспект на маркетинговата комуникация.

Ценообразуване с крайна цифра „99“ и ефектът на първата цифра

Ценообразуването с крайна цифра „99“, известно в литературата като „*charm pricing*“ или „*odd pricing*“, е сред най-изследваните техники на психологическо ценообразуване. Основният теоретичен механизъм зад този подход е т.нар. „*left-digit effect*“, при който потребителите придават по-голяма тежест на най-лявата цифра на цената (Thomas & Morwitz, 2005). В резултат цена от 9,99 евро се възприема като значително по-ниска от 10,00 евро, въпреки минималната реална разлика. Икономическата интерпретация на този ефект се свързва с дискретното възприятие на ценовите интервали и с начина, по който потребителите разкодират числовата информация. Изследванията показват, че ефектът на „99“ ценообразуването е по-силен при по-ниски ценови равнища и при продукти с по-ниска ангажираност, докато при високоангажирани покупки потребителите са по-склонни към аналитично сравнение (Gendall, Holdershaw & Garland, 1999). Контекстът на покупка също играе съществена роля. В офлайн среда цените с крайна цифра „99“ често се възприемат чрез визуални ценови етикети и пространствено сравнение между продукти, което може да засили ефекта. В онлайн среда обаче възможността за автоматично сортиране и директно сравнение на цени може да редуцира въздействието на този тип ценообразуване.

Ефектът на котвата, референтни цени и относително оценяване

Ефектът на котвата (*anchoring effect*) представлява главна концепция в поведенческата икономика и играе ключова роля при възприемането на ценовата информация. Според Kahneman и Tversky (1974) първоначално предоставената стойност служи като „котва“, спрямо която потребителите правят последващи оценки, дори когато тази стойност е произволна или икономически незначима. В контекста на ценообразуването, ефектът на котвата се проявява чрез използване на референтни цени – например първоначална „стара“ цена, препоръчителна цена или по-скъп продукт, който служи като база за сравнение. От икономическа гледна точка това означава, че възприеманата стойност на дадена оферта зависи не толкова от абсолютната ѝ цена, колкото от нейната позиция спрямо референтната точка (Mongee, 2003). Емпиричните изследвания показват, че този ефект е сравнително устойчив в различни канали, тъй като се основава на универсални когнитивни механизми. Въпреки това силата му може да бъде модерирана от фактори като доверие към търговеца, прозрачност на ценовата информация и предходен опит на потребителя.

Фрейминг на отстъпките и теория на перспективите

Фреймингът на ценовата информация намира теоретична обосновка в теорията на перспективите (*prospect theory*), разработена от Kahneman и Tversky (1979). Според тази теория потребителите реагират по различен начин на печалби и загуби в зависимост от начина, по който те са представени. В ценовия контекст това означава, че една и съща отстъпка може да бъде възприета по различен начин, когато е представена като процент или като абсолютна стойност. Процентните отстъпки често се възприемат като по-значими в онлайн среда, особено при визуално подчертаване чрез цветове, банери и анимации. В офлайн среда аналогична функция изпълняват табели и съобщения за ограничение във времето, които активират усещане за недостиг и загуба на възможност, ако покупката бъде отложена. От икономическа перспектива тези механизми могат да се разглеждат като инструменти за намаляване на разходи при вземане на решение и за ускоряване на избора в условия на неопределеност.

Каналът като модериращ фактор във възприятието за цена

Съвременната литература по маркетинг подчертава ролята на канала като модериращ фактор за възприемането на маркетинговите стимули (Verhoef et al., 2015). Онлайн и офлайн средата предоставят различни когнитивни и сетивни условия, които могат да усилят или отслабят ефекта на психологическите ценови техники. Онлайн средата благоприятства визуалния фрейминг и бързото сравнение, докато офлайн средата предоставя физическо присъствие и пространствен контекст. Тези различия обясняват необходимостта от по-задълбочен теоретичен анализ на начина, по който едни и същи ценови техники могат да бъдат възприемани в различни канали на покупка. В условията на нарастваща интеграция между физическата и дигиталната търговия компаниите все по-често разработват ценови стратегии, които трябва да бъдат ефективни едновременно в няколко канала. Това поставя нови изисквания към дизайна на ценовите съобщения и към начина, по който цената се комуникира на потребителите. Разбирането на специфичните характеристики на различните канали може да подпомогне разработването на по-ефективни ценови стратегии, които съчетават икономическата логика на ценообразуването с психологическите особености на потребителското поведение.

Заклучение

Психологическото ценообразуване представлява важен аспект на маркетинговата стратегия, който се основава на принципите на поведенческата икономика и на начина, по който потребителите възприемат и интерпретират ценовата информация. Вместо да разчита единствено на рационални икономически оценки, този подход отчита ролята на когнитивните евристики, референтните точки и контекстуалните фактори при формирането на потребителските решения. Теоретичният анализ показва, че техники като ценообразуване с крайна цифра „99“, ефектът на котвата и различните форми на представяне на ценовите отстъпки могат значително да повлияят върху възприятието за стойност и изгодност на дадена оферта. В същото време развитието на омниканалната търговия поставя нови предизвикателства пред ценовите стратегии на компаниите, тъй като онлайн и офлайн средата се различават по отношение на информационната прозрачност, визуалното представяне на цената и потребителското преживяване. По-задълбоченото теоретично разбиране на тези механизми е от съществено значение както за развитието на маркетинговата теория, така и за практическото приложение на ценовите

стратегии. В този контекст психологическото ценообразуване може да бъде разглеждано като ключов инструмент за адаптиране на ценовата комуникация към динамичната и все по-дигитализирана търговска среда. Развитието на електронната търговия, мобилните приложения и персонализираните маркетингови комуникации създава нови възможности за използване на ценови стимули, които могат да бъдат адаптирани към конкретния потребител и към конкретния канал на покупка. Това допълнително подчертава необходимостта от задълбочено теоретично изследване на механизмите, чрез които цената влияе върху потребителските решения.

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ETHICAL TRANSPARENCY IN AI-GENERATED ADVERTISING: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM A COSMETIC BRAND EXPERIMENT

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Abstract: *The present study examines how disclosure of the use of generative artificial intelligence in advertising design influences consumer perceptions. The study design is based on an experimental basis, focusing on hypotheses and scales related to manipulativeness, trust, and attitudes towards advertising. In the practical part of the study, participants were shown two versions of a cosmetic banner. The first version was labeled as generated by artificial intelligence, and the other without such disclosure. The study examines how transparency about the use of artificial intelligence influences ethical and emotional perceptions of online advertisements, assessed across the three investigated dimensions. The data were analyzed using reliability tests, descriptive statistics, and non-parametric tests. The study contributes to the growing literature on ethical communication with artificial intelligence by offering empirical insights into how transparency shapes consumers' cognition and emotions in an advertising context, in the cosmetic industry, where aesthetics and design are important. The findings offer practical guidance for marketers seeking to balance transparency with consumer trust in AI-assisted campaigns.*

Keywords: Marketing, Advertising, Ethical AI, Generative AI, Disclosure

JEL: M31; M37; O33

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence is becoming an integral part of modern marketing communication, changing the way brands create, distribute and personalize their advertising messages. With the

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increasing use of generative technologies, marketing content is increasingly shaped by automated systems capable of producing realistic visuals and persuasive text in minimal time. Along with these opportunities come new ethical questions about transparency and the extent to which audiences should be informed about the involvement of AI.

Transparency in advertising that includes AI-generated elements is one of the central issues discussed in both academic research and professional practice. Disclosing that an advertisement was created with AI demonstrates honesty and responsibility, but it can also lead to uncertainty among consumers. Transparency would be appreciated by some consumers, while others may perceive the message as less authentic or too technological, and still others will not even respond to such type of intervention (creativity). As digital transformation continues to evolve with new technologies and tools, these issues need to be addressed through a scientific lens.

This study examines how disclosing the use of AI in advertising affects consumers' perceptions of manipulateness, trust, and overall attitude toward advertising. The experiment compares two versions of a digital banner for a cosmetic product - one that includes a brief disclosure indicating the involvement of AI, and the other that does not. The goal is to better understand whether transparency enhances or weakens consumer reactions and to provide insights into the ethical challenges associated with the use of AI in marketing communication. This will be accomplished with scales prepared based on previous research that will help to identify the results towards the stated goal.

2. Literature review

Transparency & AI disclosure

Advertising has long served as a key intermediary between brands and consumers, shaping perceptions and driving purchase intent through a combination of creativity, strategy, and technological adaptation. In recent years, ad design has changed dramatically. We have seen banners evolve from static, hand-crafted visuals to data-driven formats optimized with data from algorithms. The transition, with the strong interaction of technologies such as artificial intelligence, has introduced new opportunities for efficiency and personalization, while raising ethical concerns about transparency, authenticity, and consumer trust in organizations.

Empirical research in the field shows that disclosing the use of generative artificial intelligence in the creation of advertising content leads to mixed reactions from consumers. A study by Wang et al. (2025) demonstrate that when viewers are informed about the involvement of AI in video advertising, disclosure can both reassure them about transparency and at the same time increase their knowledge of persuasion, which can reduce trust (Wang, et al., 2025). In another larger study (or rather, a collection of studies), Schilke and Reimann (2025) describe the existence of a “transparency dilemma.” In their series of studies, they demonstrate that disclosing the authorship of the technology can undermine consumers’ perceived credibility, even when it signals openness (Schilke & Reimann, 2025). In experimental prosocial advertising contexts, the authors found that disclosing information about AI can negatively affect ad evaluations if audiences interpret the automation as a reduction in authenticity or human care (Baek, et al., 2024).

Additional research confirms that this loss of authenticity can directly weaken trust and purchase intention. Kučinskas and Survilaite (2025) find that disclosing the involvement of AI reduces perceived authenticity, especially for well-known brands, and that reduced authenticity mediates a decline in brand trust and purchase intention (Kučinskas & Survilaite, 2025). This may lead businesses, in order to protect revenue and maintain consumer loyalty to their products, to make unethical decisions by not disclosing the use of generative AI in their communications processes.

Some scientists are investigating how disclosure and ad design cues shape trust in service providers, using a source credibility framework - showing that design choices in GenAI ads matter for consumer perceptions of provider trust and ad attitude (Grigsby, et al., 2025). In other perspectives invoking “artificial intelligence” in product descriptions can depress emotional trust and thereby lower purchase intentions (Hollenbeck, 2024). Complementing these consumer insights, a Yahoo/Publicis survey showed that among consumers who noticed the disclosure, perceived trust in the ad increased 73%, and trust in the brand rose 96%. This suggests that noticeability of the disclosure is a key moderator of its effect (Customer Data Platform Institute, 2024).

At the same time, the emerging regulatory and self-regulatory environment encourages explicit transparency about algorithmic content creation. The ICC Advertising and Marketing

Communications Code from 2024, in particular Chapter C, requires digital marketing communications to clearly identify their source (C2) and avoid misleading offers (C3), while data-driven advertising must respect consumer control and informed consent (C15-C17) (International Chamber of Commerce, 2024). From regulatory perspective, Article 50 of the EU AI Act mandates that “certain AI-generated or manipulated content must be labeled unless exemptions apply” (e.g. artistic, satirical, or fictional works). The implementation of these transparency obligations is phased, with full obligations regarding labeling of synthetic or manipulated content becoming applicable from August 2, 2026 in many cases. This framework shows businesses and marketers that formal jurisdiction is updated relatively frequently and that trustworthiness and ethics are essential pillars for responsible and regulated digital advertising.

Transparency is a central principle in the ethics of AI-augmented advertising. AI disclosure refers to clear labeling when content has been generated or substantially manipulated by artificial intelligence. Such disclosure allows consumers to be informed about the origins of the content and helps prevent misleading or deceptive practices. According to the EU Artificial Intelligence Act, providers and deployers of AI systems must disclose when content is artificially generated or manipulated, especially for systems that produce synthetic media such as images, audio, or deepfakes (EU Artificial Intelligence Act, 2025).

Taken together, this body of literature frames AI disclosure as a double-edged instrument. From one side it reinforces transparency and accountability, yet risks activating consumer skepticism, erosion of authenticity perceptions, and reduced persuasive effectiveness among certain segments. In our study, we will investigate whether AI disclosure in advertising imagery influences trust, perceived ethicality, manipulativeness, and intention to act.

Consumer perceptions of advertising manipulativenness, trust, and attitude toward the ad

Perceived manipulativenness refers to the extent to which consumers believe that an advertisement attempts to influence their thoughts, feelings, or behavior in a manner that is inappropriate, unfair, or not fully transparent. In the context of AI-generated or AI-augmented advertising, manipulativenness becomes especially salient because AI introduces powerful persuasion techniques (e.g., personalization, automation) that may not be obvious to the

consumer. Understanding perceived manipulateness is vital, as it mediates how disclosure, trust, and attitudes toward an ad interact. We focus on some of the latest research applying a tripartite structure to perceived manipulateness, drawing from generalized attitude models and AI exposure studies:

- **Cognitive dimension**

The cognitive dimension reflects how individuals analyze and interpret persuasive intent in AI-generated advertising. When audiences become aware that an advertisement has been created or optimized by artificial intelligence, they often begin to question the motives and fairness behind the message - “Is this content designed to exploit my data or predict my behaviour?” Such reasoning corresponds to the activation of persuasion knowledge, where consumers cognitively assess the transparency and purpose of the communication.

Recent open-access research supports this view. For instance, Tang et al. (2024) found that when users are informed that a conversational agent or advertisement involves AI, they engage in deeper cognitive scrutiny and are more likely to perceive attempts at persuasion as manipulative, particularly when the system uses personal data for message tailoring (Tang, et al., 2024). Similarly, Lim and Schmälzle (2023) show that readers of AI-generated news reports experience higher levels of perceived manipulation because they consciously evaluate the content’s authorship and credibility (Lim & Schmälzle, 2024). Complementary evidence demonstrates that cognitive assessments such as perceived realism and perceived intelligence of AI content strongly influence acceptance levels and perceived intent. When the output appears overly calculated or “too intelligent,” consumers infer manipulative motives and respond defensively (Gu, et al., 2024).

From the sources we can underline that the perceived manipulateness in AI-generated advertising is largely a cognitive appraisal process. Once individuals recognize algorithmic involvement, they begin to infer persuasive intent, evaluate ethical boundaries, and depending on their digital literacy or trust in AI either rationalize or reject the message.

- **Affective Dimension**

The affective dimension refers to emotional responses or feelings elicited by an AI-generated advertisement. This includes reactions such as discomfort, moral unease, annoyance, or perceived lack of authenticity. Recent findings also support that emotional and perceptual

reactions to AI-generated content depend heavily on consumers' perception of the ad's intelligence and realism. When the AI-generated endorser is perceived as knowledgeable and contextually relevant, trust and acceptance increase; conversely, when it evokes strangeness or artificiality, consumers report unease and reduced willingness to engage (Gampathirana, 2025).

Similarly, another study found that when participants were exposed to idealized (rather than naturalistic) visual features, they experienced more ambivalent feelings. While idealization increased attention (a cognitive reaction), it also amplified feelings of discomfort and emotional distance, reflecting an affective response (Xu, et al., 2025). These emotional reactions are critical because they often mediate or moderate the relationship between perceived manipulateness and downstream outcomes such as trust and intention. If consumers feel emotionally put off by the ad (e.g. because it seems manipulative, artificial or lacking human touch), they are less inclined to develop trust or favorable attitudes toward the brand.

- **Behavioral Dimension**

The behavioral dimension concerns actual or intended actions influenced by perceived manipulateness - for example, whether a consumer clicks, purchases, shares, or avoids the advertisement. Data shows that AI-related advertising strategies affect behavioral intention. Consumers exposed to personalized, algorithmically targeted marketing show higher purchase intentions, but only when perceived benefits outweigh privacy or manipulation concerns (Hao, 2025).

In addition, behavioral intentions are influenced by trust calibration, that is, how consumers dynamically adjust their willingness to act based on the perceived reliability and ethical integrity of AI systems. Recent research on human-AI interaction demonstrates that trust in algorithmic recommendations is adaptive rather than static - individuals continuously update their behavioral intentions (e.g., whether to follow an AI suggestion or engage with its output) according to contextual feedback and perceived transparency (Dhar, 2023). Applied to advertising, this suggests that consumers develop a form of situational trust, engaging only when algorithmic persuasion aligns with their ethical expectations and when perceived human oversight mitigates fears of manipulation.

Trust represents the extent to which consumers perceive the advertisement as credible, sincere, and consistent with their ethical expectations (Soh, et al., 2009). In the context of AI-

generated advertising, trust plays a pivotal role in determining whether individuals will engage with or reject a message. When AI disclosure is viewed as a sign of honesty and accountability, it may strengthen ethical perceptions but simultaneously reduce confidence in message credibility.

Attitude toward the advertisement refers to the consumer's overall evaluative and emotional response - whether they find the advertisement likable, engaging, and worth attention. A positive attitude is typically associated with higher trust and willingness to act, while a negative or skeptical reaction can suppress engagement. Recent literature confirms that attitude toward advertising remains a strong predictor of brand-related affect and behavioral intention, with positive advertisement evaluations transferring to brand perceptions (Sallam, 2024). In advertising practices with the involvement of AI, attitude formation depends not only on message design and aesthetic quality but also on how transparency is framed.

Therefore, perceived manipulateness can indirectly suppress behavioral outcomes by undermining both emotional comfort and cognitive trust in the brand's intentions. In AI-generated advertising, even subtle cues of automation may weaken behavioral engagement - especially when disclosure highlights machine authorship or algorithmic optimization. Conversely, when brands successfully balance technological transparency with human warmth, they may restore trust and stimulate meaningful behavioral responses such as clicking, sharing, or purchasing.

The literature so far summarizes that the disclosure of information in an advertising context through artificial intelligence can have multiple effects in the cognitive, affective and behavioral domains. First, in the cognitive aspect, it triggers the awareness of the need and the application of a critical assessment of the intention of the message by the consumer. In the affective aspect, the technology can cause discomfort or a reduced sense of authenticity, which leads to a reduced emotional connection. In the behavioral aspect, the actions can suppress consumer engagement and change their actions towards a given brand, especially when signals of automation overshadow the human factor. However, when technological transparency is balanced with signals of human influence, consumers can regain trust and even react positively to the given advertisement. Previous research remains fragmented and does not fully address the topic of the present study, setting it as a basis for empirically unifying the listed constructs -

manipulativeness, trust, and attitude towards advertising generated through artificial intelligence and communicated openly about it.

3. Methodology

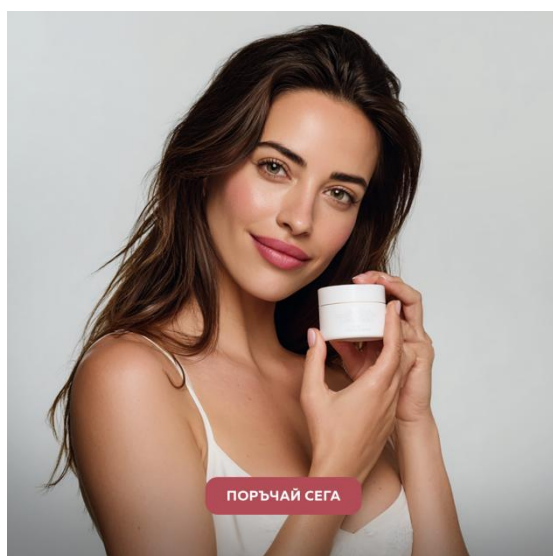
Research Design

The study applies a between-subjects experimental design to explore how the presence of an AI disclosure affects consumer perceptions of an online cosmetic advertisement in Bulgarian language. The experiment compares two visually identical banners created with generative artificial intelligence (Midjourney for image generation and Adobe Photoshop for textual elements). The only variation between the stimuli lies in the presence or absence of an AI transparency disclaimer.

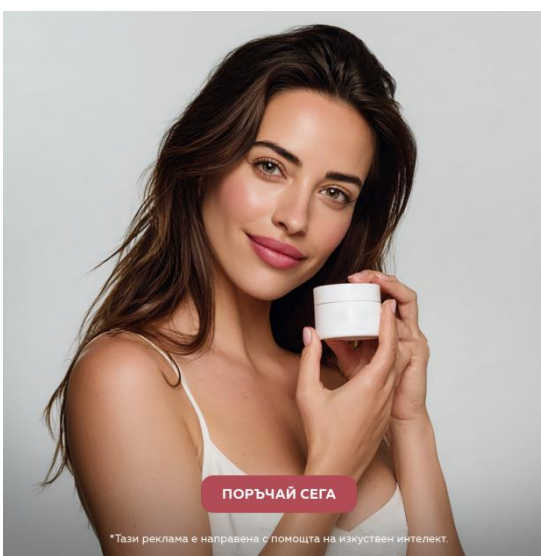
Banner A - without disclosure: Displays a female model holding a cosmetic cream jar with the call-to-action “Поръчай сега” (“Order now”).

Banner B - with disclosure: Contains the same visual and textual composition, with an additional note below the banner stating: “Тази реклама е направена с помощта на изкуствен интелект.” (“This ad was created with AI.”)

Banner A



Banner B



Source: Author’s visualization via AI (Banner 1)

Source: Author’s visualization via AI (Banner 2)

Both advertisements were designed for a fictional cosmetic brand, ensuring neutrality and the absence of prior brand attitudes. The cosmetics category is a suitable industry for analyzing

scales such as manipulation, trust and attitude with AI context because transparency, ethical data handling, and personalization critically shape consumer trust and authenticity evaluations in this sector (O'Higgins & Fatorachian, 2025).

The experiment’s goal is to measure differences in perceived manipulateness, trust, and attitude toward the ad between participants who viewed the banner with disclosure versus those who viewed it without disclosure. This approach follows established research traditions investigating transparency and ethical perception in AI-assisted advertising.

Survey Structure and Measurement Scales

The study employs a structured online questionnaire, distributed through social media and email networks for Bulgarian respondents. Data collection occurred over a two-week period in October 2025. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with informed consent provided prior to survey completion.

The questionnaire consisted of five sections:

1. Screening question - Determines whether respondents have purchased cosmetic products in the past three months.
2. Perceived Manipulateness - Three items assessing the extent to which the ad seems persuasive or misleading. (see Table 1)
3. Trust toward the Advertisement - Measures message reliability and perceived fairness. (see Table 1)
4. Attitude toward the Advertisement - Captures affective and evaluative responses. (see Table 1)
5. The final section included demographic questions (gender, age, education).

Table 1. Overview of Measurement Scales and Conceptual Sources

Scale	Questions	Item Statement (English)	Conceptual Source / Adaptation
Perceived Manipulateness	2.1	I feel that the banner ad is trying to persuade me in an inappropriate way.	Adapted from Berthiaume, B., Rajaobelina, L. and Ricard, L. (2024). <i>Multidimensional perception of manipulation scale validation and its impact on satisfaction with the visit.</i> Journal of Consumer Satisfaction,
	2.2	The banner prompts me to take an action that I would not otherwise take (e.g. click, interest)	

	2.3	I feel misled by this advertising material.	Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior, 37(1), pp.3-30. (Berthiaume, et al., 2024)
Trust toward the Advertisement	3.1	The information in this advertising banner is reliable.	Adapted from Wortel, N., Vanwesenbeeck, I. and Tomas, J., 2024.
	3.2	I can rely on the information in this banner, regardless of how it was created (with or without AI).	Made with Artificial Intelligence: The Effect of Artificial Intelligence Disclosures in Instagram Advertisements on Consumer Attitudes. Computers in Human Behavior, 158 (Wortel, et al., 2024)
	3.3	This banner ad helps me evaluate the product.	
Attitude toward the Advertisement	4.1	This banner ad brings me benefit/value.	Adapted from Walterrath, A., 2024.
	4.2	I like the design of this banner.	<i>Consumers' ambiguous perceptions of advertising disclosures in influencer marketing: Disentangling the effects on current and future social media engagement.</i> Electronic Markets, 34(8). (Waltenrath, 2024)
	4.3	This banner ad does not make me want to take action.	

Source: *Authors' adaptation*

All items were evaluated using a 7-point Likert scale (1= “I strongly disagree.”, 7 = “I strongly agree.”). Higher values indicate stronger agreement with the statements, reflecting higher perceived manipulateness, trust, or positive attitude depending on the scale.

***Note: Item 4.3 (“This advertisement banner does not make me want to take an action”) was reverse-coded prior to calculating the mean score for *Attitude*, ensuring that higher values consistently reflect more positive evaluations.**

The final sample consisted of 302 respondents. The total number of respondents from group 1 who participated in the survey with banner 1 without AI disclosure is n=153. The total number of respondents from group 2 who participated in the survey with banner 2 with AI disclosure is n=149. The sample was gender-balanced. The data was analyzed with the statistical software by IBM – SPSS.

4. Results and Discussion

The questionnaire for the banner with AI disclosure was completed by 155 respondents in total, of whom 153 provided valid responses for analysis. Almost all participants (98.7%) reported having purchased cosmetic products in the past three months, confirming relevance of the stimulus to the sample. The sample was balanced by gender and concentrated in the 18-35 age range (81.7%).

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each construct to summarize participants' overall evaluations of the AI-generated advertisement without and with disclosure (Table 2). All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). In interpreting the results, mean values below 3 were considered indicative of low levels of agreement, means between 3 and 5 reflected moderate or neutral evaluations, and means above 5 indicated highly positive perceptions.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Constructs

Scale	Banner Type	Mean	SD	Median	N
Manipulativeness	1	2,8568	1,318	2,6667	149
Manipulativeness	2	2,7081	1,140	2,6667	153
Trust	1	2,7204	1,501	2,6667	149
Trust	2	2,0763	0,952	2,0000	153
Attitude	1	3,4049	1,152	3,3333	149
Attitude	2	3,7342	0,680	3,6667	153

Source: *Authors' representation*

The results show relatively similar evaluations of manipulativeness across both conditions ($M_1 = 2.86$, $SD = 1.32$; $M_2 = 2.71$, $SD = 1.14$). These values suggest that participants generally perceived the advertisement as only slightly manipulative, regardless of whether the disclosure was present. The minor difference between the two conditions indicates that revealing the AI origin of the ad did not substantially increase perceptions of manipulation. In other words, transparency about AI makes respondents more aware that the ad might be technologically optimized rather than personally crafted, which slightly reduces their sense of authenticity and credibility.

In contrast, there is a more notable variation in trust. Respondents exposed to the banner without disclosure reported higher levels of perceived trust ($M_1 = 2.72$, $SD = 1.50$) compared to those who saw the disclosed version ($M_2 = 2.08$, $SD = 0.95$). This decline suggests that transparency about AI use may have undermined participants' confidence in the reliability of the advertising message. The median values (2.67 vs. 2.00) reinforce this tendency, indicating that disclosure triggered more skeptical or cautious attitudes toward the ad's credibility. Regarding attitude toward the advertisement, the pattern reverses: respondents expressed a

somewhat more favorable overall attitude toward the banner containing the AI disclosure ($M_2 = 3.73$, $SD = 0.68$) compared to the non-disclosed version ($M_1 = 3.40$, $SD = 1.15$). Although trust decreased, the presence of a disclosure may have enhanced the perception of openness or design appreciation, leading to a slightly improved affective evaluation.

Overall, these findings suggest a nuanced consumer response. While AI disclosure reduces trust, it does not significantly affect perceived manipulateness and may even slightly improve attitudes toward the advertisement. The results therefore indicate a nuanced effect. When an ad openly states that it was created with AI, people recognize the transparency and honesty behind it, but this also reminds them that the ad lacks a “human touch.” This effect is particularly pronounced in advertising contexts that emphasize ethical or emotional connection, where AI involvement may reduce perceived sincerity and trust. It is consistent with previous studies, which describe a so-called “transparency dilemma”: being open about AI use improves ethical credibility but may reduce trust and emotional connection with the advertisement (Kučinskas & Survilaite, 2025).

Non-parametric test

The Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine whether there are statistically significant differences between the two experimental groups - banner without disclosure ($n = 149$) and banner with AI disclosure ($n = 153$) - across the three constructs: Perceived Manipulateness, Trust, and Attitude toward the Advertisement (McKnight & Najab, 2010).

Perceived Manipulateness

The test shows no statistically significant difference ($p > 0.05$) in perceived manipulateness between the two conditions. This indicates that the presence of an AI disclosure did not influence how manipulative participants perceived the advertisement to be. Both groups rated the ad as moderately low in manipulateness, suggesting that disclosure itself does not amplify persuasion concerns (Table 3 and 4).

Table 3. Mean Ranks for Perceived Manipulateness

Ranks				
	Banner Type	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks

Mannip_mean	without discl	149	155,97	23239,50
	with discl	153	147,15	22513,50
	Total	302		

Source: *Authors' representation*

Table 4. Test Statistics for Perceived Manipulativeness

Test Statistics ^a	
	Mannip_mean
Mann-Whitney U	10732,500
Wilcoxon W	22513,500
Z	-,882
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,378

Source: *Authors' representation*

Trust

A statistically significant difference was found ($p < 0.01$), showing that respondents exposed to the banner without disclosure reported higher trust compared to those who saw the disclosed version. This finding suggests that revealing the AI origin of the ad reduced consumers' perceived reliability of the information (Table 5 and 6).

Table 5. Mean Ranks for Perceived Trust

Ranks				
	Banner Type	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Trust_mean	without discl	149	168,93	25170,50
	with discl	153	134,53	20582,50
	Total	302		

Source: *Authors' representation*

Table 6. Test Statistics for Perceived Trust

Test Statistics ^a	
	Trust_mean
Mann-Whitney U	8801,500
Wilcoxon W	20582,500
Z	-3,452
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,001

Source: *Authors' representation*

Attitude

The analysis reveals a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.01$), but in the opposite direction compared to trust: participants who saw the disclosed banner reported a more positive attitude toward the advertisement overall. Although trust decreased, disclosure appeared to enhance affective evaluations such as perceived honesty or appreciation of design, possibly due to the perceived ethicality of transparency (Table 7 and 8).

Table 7. Mean Ranks for Perceived Attitude

Ranks				
	Banner Type	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Att_mean	without discl	149	136,39	20322,00
	with discl	153	166,22	25431,00
	Total	302		

Source: Authors' representation

Table 8. Test Statistics for Perceived Attitude

Test Statistics ^a	
	Att_mean
Mann-Whitney U	9147,000
Wilcoxon W	20322,000
Z	-2,995
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,003

Source: Authors' representation

Taken together, the Mann–Whitney results reveal a differentiated consumer response to AI transparency in advertising:

- **Perceived manipulativeness** remained statistically unaffected ($p > 0.05$), suggesting that the AI disclosure did not intensify perceptions of persuasion or deceit. Participants consistently rated both versions of the banner as only mildly manipulative.
- **Trust**, however, significantly decreased when AI involvement was disclosed ($p = 0.001$), implying that transparency about the ad's algorithmic origin reduced confidence in its credibility and sincerity.
- **Attitude toward the advertisement** appeared slightly more favorable for the disclosed version ($p = 0.003$). Nevertheless, this finding should be interpreted cautiously, as the corresponding reliability test (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.124$) indicates poor

internal consistency of the attitude scale, limiting the interpretive validity of this result.

These findings illustrate a nuanced “transparency paradox”: openness about AI creation enhances perceived authenticity and ethical awareness but simultaneously diminishes trust in the advertising message. This pattern supports the idea that while transparency fosters cognitive acceptance, it can also evoke emotional ambivalence, especially when human agency in message crafting appears reduced.

Effect size analysis

Since the Mann-Whitney U test identifies whether a statistically significant difference exists but does not indicate the magnitude of that difference, effect size values (r) were calculated to assess the strength of the observed effects across the three constructs. The effect size r was computed using the formula:

$$r = \frac{Z}{\sqrt{N}}$$

...where Z represents the standardized test statistic and N is the total number of observations (302 in this study). Cohen’s (1988) guidelines were used for interpretation (Cohen, 1988):

- $r \approx 0.10$ indicates a small effect,
- $r \approx 0.30$ a medium effect,
- $r \geq 0.50$ a large effect.

Table 9. Hypothesis results

Construct	Z	N	r	Interpretation
Manipulativeness	-0.882	302	0.051	Small / negligible effect
Trust	-3.452	302	0.198	Small to medium effect
Attitude	-2.995	302	0.172	Small effect (interpret with caution due to low reliability)

Source: *Authors’ representation*

The effect size values indicate that the significant differences identified for *Trust* and *Attitude* represent small but meaningful effects. The strongest effect was observed for *Trust*, suggesting

that disclosure of AI use had a modest yet notable influence on participants' confidence in the advertisement. The weak effect for *Manipulativeness* confirms that AI transparency did not meaningfully alter perceived persuasion intent. These results collectively imply that while AI disclosure impacts affective and cognitive responses, the strength of these effects remains limited - reinforcing the interpretation that AI transparency triggers subtle perceptual shifts rather than major attitude changes.

Hypothesis results

Table 10. Hypothesis results

Hypothesis	Result	Significance (p)	Interpretation	Conclusion
H1	Not supported	p = .378	No difference between AI and human banners in perceived manipulateness	Rejected
H2	Supported	p = .001	AI disclosure significantly decreases perceived trust	Supported
H3	Statistically significant, but unreliable	p = .003	Low Cronbach's α (.124) — results not interpretable	Excluded from final interpretation

Source: *Authors' representation*

The hypothesis testing confirmed that AI disclosure significantly influences consumer trust, but not perceptions of manipulateness or overall attitude. While transparency reduced trust levels, it did not heighten perceived persuasion intent. The third construct “attitude” yielded statistically significant results but was excluded from interpretation due to low internal reliability ($\alpha = .124$). These outcomes collectively suggest that consumers are sensitive to AI transparency cues primarily on a cognitive rather than affective level.

5. Conclusion and future orientation

In conclusion, the study examines how transparency regarding the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in advertising affects consumer perceptions. The results reveal nuanced consumer responses across the scales tested - manipulateness, trust, and overall attitude toward a cosmetic brand. On the one hand, disclosing the use of AI in advertising material significantly reduces perceived trust, but does not increase perceptions of manipulateness. Interestingly, attitudes toward advertising labeled with AI are slightly more positive, although this result should be interpreted with caution due to the low reliability of the scale. From a

practical perspective, marketers with these results should treat transparency in the use of AI strategically, rather than as an automatic process, as it can directly affect consumers and the brand suffers. Disclosure of AI use can promote ethical credibility, but there is also a risk that this disclosure could undermine consumer trust if it is not accompanied by strong signals of human oversight or emotional resonance.

Future research could take several directions. On the one hand, this study does not strongly demonstrate the influence of consumer attitudes, as the items in the scales are not reliable with each other, and this distorts the results. The fact is that it may show a trend, but it is not statistically supported, which means that future research should build on this methodology and investigate this element on a larger scale and in more detail. On the other hand, the direction of the industry also has an impact, and other industries, such as pharmaceuticals, FMCG, services, etc., could be studied. Another direction would be cross-cultural validation. By using experimental designs combining behavioral and psychophysiological measures, they could further elucidate how consumers cognitively and emotionally process AI-driven advertising. Such work will deepen our understanding of how transparency and authenticity co-evolve in the era of intelligent marketing communication.

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IMPACT OF PRICE ON PERCEIVED QUALITY: AN EXPERIMENTAL TASTE TEST IN THE NATURAL JUICE CATEGORY

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Abstract: *This paper investigates whether price influences perceived product quality, using an experimental taste test in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) category. Based on the idea of price as a communication signal, the study examines how price information may shape consumers' subjective evaluations, even when product attributes are identical.*

Participants first evaluated the taste and quality of a product without knowing the price, followed by a second evaluation with a stated price. The results showed that higher prices tended to correspond with higher ratings of taste and quality, even when the product itself did not change.

These findings highlight the psychological role of price in shaping how consumers judge and assess products. They also offer practical ideas for pricing and positioning in the FMCG sector.

Keywords: price; perceived quality; taste test; consumer behavior

JEL: M3, L66

Introduction:

In consumer markets, price is a central element of exchange and plays a complex role in shaping perceptions of product quality. When consumers are unable to directly evaluate a product's attributes prior to purchase, price frequently serves as a key heuristic for forming expectations regarding quality and value.

This phenomenon is particularly salient in the context of fast-moving consumer goods, such as natural juices, where products often exhibit similar composition and sensory characteristics. In such cases, extrinsic cues—particularly price—can significantly influence consumer assessments, even after direct product experience. Consequently, perceived quality may diverge from objective product characteristics.

The present study builds on prior research by empirically investigating the role of price in shaping perceptions of quality within the natural juice category. By having participants evaluate identical products under varying price conditions, the research aims to assess the extent to which price information affects both taste and overall quality judgments.

Theoretical framework: Price as a signal of perceived quality

Price is a central element of market exchange, yet its definition is far from uniform. Academic literature offers multiple perspectives—economic, behavioral, and marketing-oriented—each emphasizing different facets of price. This diversity reflects the inherent

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complexity of price, which serves as both an objective economic indicator and a subjective evaluative cue in consumer decision-making.

From a marketing perspective, price is increasingly understood as a dual construct. On the one hand, it represents the monetary expression of product value; on the other, it functions as a psychological and communicative signal that shapes expectations and perceptions. Klasova defines price as the monetary value proposed by the producer and evaluated by the consumer through comparison with alternative offerings. This definition underscores the interpretative nature of price, positioning it both as an outcome of cost and competition and as a key element in consumer evaluation.² Kotler and Keller further note that price is unique within the marketing mix, as it is the only element that directly generates revenue while simultaneously serving as a strategic instrument for market positioning.³

The behavioral and marketing literature demonstrates that consumers frequently rely on price as an indicator of quality, especially in situations characterized by limited information. Classical signaling theory (Spence, 1973) explains this process: when product quality cannot be directly observed, consumers turn to observable signals such as price to infer unobservable attributes.⁴ In this context, price helps compensate for uncertainty and reduce perceived risk.

Empirical studies support the existence of a systematic—though not absolute—relationship between price and perceived quality. Early experimental research by Tull, Boring, and Gonsior found that identical products presented at higher prices were consistently rated as higher in quality, despite no objective differences.⁵ Subsequent meta-analyses by Rao and Monroe (1989) confirmed a positive, albeit moderate, correlation between price and perceived quality, particularly for products associated with greater uncertainty and limited evaluative criteria.⁶

More recent work views price less as proof of quality and more as a mental shortcut—a heuristic. Grewal et al. suggest price works as a signal, shaping what people expect in terms of quality, reliability, and value—often before they’ve even tried the product.⁷ Those expectations can stick, influencing what people think after they’ve had the actual experience, even down to details like how something tastes.

This effect is especially important for fast-moving consumer goods, where products are often very similar, and people can’t rely on big differences in features. In these cases, price doesn’t just come before evaluation—it actively frames it. Monroe points out that price shapes how we interpret quality, not by proving one product is better, but by setting a reference point for our judgment.⁸

Building on this foundation, the present study examines price as a form of communication in a controlled taste test. By changing only the price and keeping everything else about the

² Klasova, S. (2011) *Prices in the Marketing System*. Sofia: UNWE Publishing House, p. 15. (in Bulgarian)

³ Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L. (2015). *Marketing Management* (15th ed.). Pearson Education, Harlow.

⁴ Spence, M. (1973). Job Market Signaling. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 87(3), 355–374.

⁵ Tull, D.S., Boring, R.A. and Gonsior, M.A. (1964) ‘A note on the relationship of price and product quality’, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 48(5), pp. 301–304.

⁶ Rao, A.R. and Monroe, K.B. (1989) ‘The effect of price–perceived quality relationship: A meta-analysis’, *Journal of Marketing Research*, 26(3), pp. 351–360.

⁷ Grewal, D., Monroe, K.B. and Krishnan, R. (1998) ‘The effects of price-comparison advertising on buyers’ perceptions of value, fairness, and quality’, *Journal of Marketing*, 62(2), pp. 46–59.

⁸ Monroe, K.B. (2003) *Pricing: Making Profitable Decisions*. 3rd edn. New York: McGraw-Hill/Irwin.

product the same, we can see directly how price shapes what people think about quality, especially taste and appearance, in a familiar, low-involvement product category.

Selection of the product category

Within the FMCG sector, the category of natural juices for home consumption was chosen because of its broad popularity among Bulgarian buyers. According to data from the National Statistical Institute (2024)⁹, the category of juices, syrups, and nectars shows a growing trend. In 2024, annual consumption reached 17 kg per household member, with an average price of BGN 2.88 per liter. The high purchase frequency and the routine nature of consumer behaviour in this category provide a solid basis for comparing “established” and “new” brands, as well as familiar and hypothetical brands. Consumers have accumulated experience with different brands and price levels, which makes their evaluations more stable and relevant for analysing the role of price as a communication signal within the category.

Methodology

To empirically examine the influence of price on perceived quality, a controlled taste test was conducted with two widely recognized natural juice brands: Florina and Pfanner. These products were selected to represent distinct pricing tiers within the market—Florina as a mid-range option (BGN 2.60 per liter) and Pfanner as a premium choice (BGN 3.80 per liter). This approach enabled a rigorous assessment of how real-world price differentials shape consumer perceptions of quality.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three independent experimental groups, each consisting of 20 individuals and exposed to a distinct tasting condition. The blind-tasting protocol ensured that participants were unaware of the specific brand being sampled, thereby minimizing the potential for bias stemming from prior attitudes, brand familiarity, or prior experience with the products.

The first group evaluated the juices at their actual market prices: Florina (BGN 2.60 per liter) and Pfanner (BGN 3.80 per liter). The second group encountered reversed price labels - Florina was the higher-priced option (BGN 3.80), and Pfanner was the lower-priced alternative (BGN 2.60). The third group served as a control, tasting the juices without any price information and with only neutral codes (“R” and “M”) provided. This design facilitated a robust analysis of how price cues, independent of product identity, affect quality perceptions.

Results and discussion

Before presenting the empirical findings, it is important to clarify the rationale behind the selected evaluation criteria. The selection of taste and appearance as dependent variables is methodologically justified. Both indicators represent direct, subjective measures of perceived quality in the natural juice category. They are among the primary characteristics on which consumers base their initial evaluations and are influenced not only by the product's intrinsic properties but also by prior attitudes and expectations - including those shaped by price.

The influence of price on appearance perception

⁹ <https://www.nsi.bg/statistical-data/248/793>

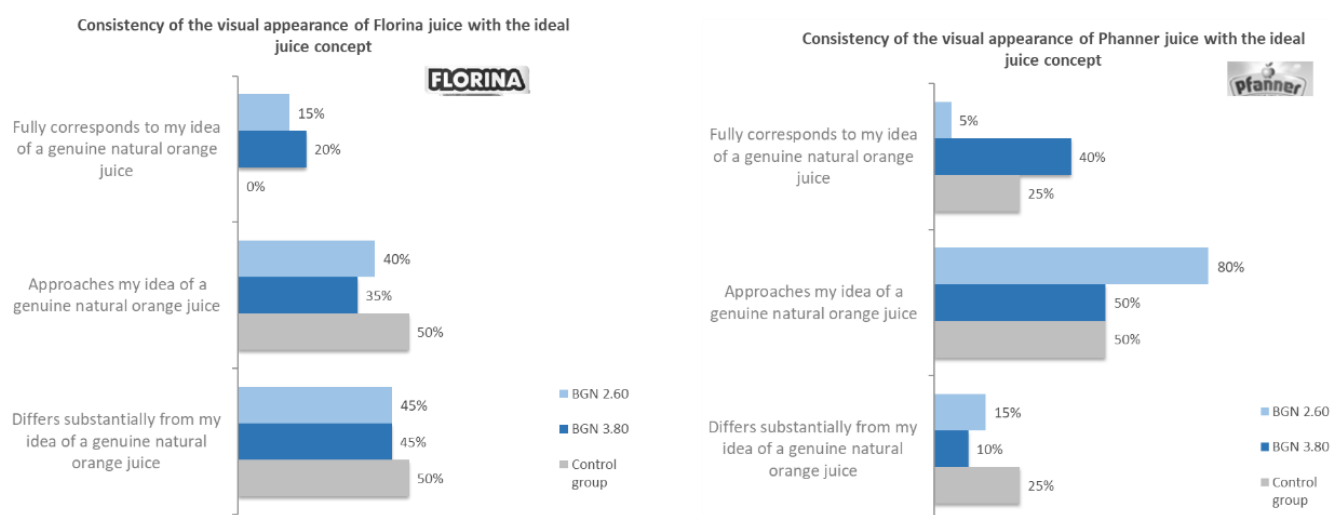
Analysis of the three experimental groups reveals that price information affects perceptions of the appearance of both tested products, with the effect's strength varying according to the brand's initial positioning. The ratings reflect the extent to which the product's appearance matches the consumer's image of a real, natural juice.

For Florina, the presence of price information - both at its actual price of BGN 2.60 and the higher, switched price of BGN 3.80 - leads to more favorable visual assessments compared to the control group without price information. In the absence of a price cue, none of the participants rated the product's appearance as fully matching their idea of a true natural juice, whereas in both experimental groups, there was a clear shift toward more positive evaluations. Although the differences do not reach statistical significance due to the limited sample size, the direction of the effect is consistent, suggesting that the mere presence of a price forms more positive visual expectations.

For Pfanner, the price cue exerts a stronger influence. When the product is presented at a lower price, visual ratings decrease compared to the condition with the actual higher price, while presenting it as the more expensive option results in the most favorable assessments. Results from the χ^2 analysis indicate a marginally significant association between price level and appearance rating ($p < 0.10$), with the effect direction clear: a higher price is associated with more positive visual perception. (Fig. 1.)

In summary, the results indicate that price functions as a visual signal of quality. A higher price enhances perceptions of an appetizing, more "authentic" appearance, while a lower price diminishes these evaluations, even when the product's actual characteristics remain unchanged.

Fig. 1. Percentage of each subsample for Question: Based on the appearance of this juice, what would you say about it?



Source: Author's own research, taste test, natural juices, $n = 60$

The influence of price on taste perception

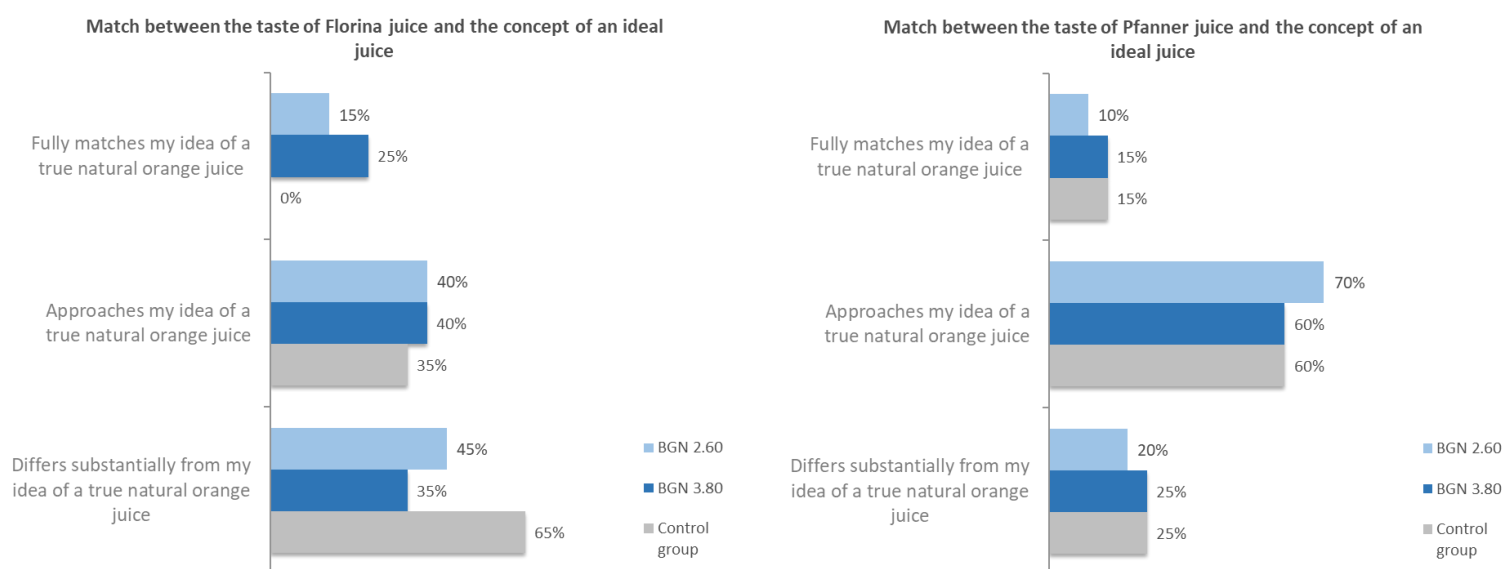
Analysis of the three experimental groups indicates that price information also affects perceptions of taste, although the strength and consistency of this effect differ between the two tested products. Taste evaluations reflect the extent to which the flavor of the juice corresponds to consumers' expectations of a real, natural juice.

For Florina, the presence of price information leads to more favorable taste assessments compared to the control group without price cues. When the product is presented with its actual price of BGN 2.60, respondents provide slightly higher taste ratings than those in the no-price condition. The effect becomes more pronounced when Florina is presented with the higher, switched price of BGN 3.80, at which point taste evaluations increase significantly. Statistical testing confirms this pattern: the comparison between the high-price condition and the control group is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating that a higher price enhances perceived taste quality, even though the product itself remains unchanged. This suggests that price information shapes taste expectations, which, in turn, influence sensory judgments.

In contrast, for Pfanner, taste perceptions remain relatively stable across all experimental conditions. Whether the product is presented with its actual higher price, a lower switched price, or no price information at all, taste ratings show minimal variation. This indicates that, for a product with a stronger initial quality position, taste perception is less susceptible to price manipulation. Unlike visual appearance, which responds more clearly to price cues, Pfanner's taste evaluations appear anchored in the product's intrinsic characteristics. (Fig 2.)

Overall, the findings suggest that price functions as a taste-related quality signal primarily for products positioned in the middle price segment. A higher price enhances perceived taste quality for Florina, while for Pfanner, taste judgments remain largely unaffected by price changes. This pattern supports the interpretation that price exerts a stronger influence on taste perception when initial quality expectations are weaker or less firmly established.

Fig. 2. Percentage of each subsample for Question: To what extent does the taste of this juice correspond to your idea of a real natural juice?



Source: Author's own research, taste test, natural juices, $n = 60$

Assessment of the impact of price on perceived quality

The previous subsections examined visual and taste-related characteristics of the two products separately under different price conditions. When these indicators are considered

jointly as empirical measures of perceived quality—overall taste evaluation, visual appearance, and perceived correspondence to the idea of a “real natural juice”—a relatively consistent pattern emerges regarding the role of price.

First, a statistically significant effect is observed for the lower-positioned brand, Florina. With regard to the indicator “the extent to which the taste corresponds to the idea of a real natural juice,” participants who evaluated the product under the higher price condition (BGN 3.80) provided significantly more favorable assessments compared to the control group without price information ($t(38) = -2.65, p = 0.012$). This suggests that perceived authenticity of taste—central to the concept of quality in this product category—is particularly sensitive to price cues when evaluating a mid-range brand.

For the remaining indicators—appearance evaluation, overall taste rating on a ten-point scale, and correspondence to the image of a “true” natural juice—the mean values show a clear pattern. For both products, evaluations of taste, appearance, and perceived authenticity are highest when the juice is priced higher (BGN 3.80), more moderate at the lower price (BGN 2.60), and lowest when no price information is provided. This pattern is especially pronounced for Florina, whereas for Pfanner, the effect is more evident in visual perception than in taste evaluation.

The consistency of these results supports the interpretation of price as a quality signal. Prior information indicating a higher price appears to generate more positive expectations, which subsequently “color” the actual sensory evaluation of both appearance and taste.

The limited number of statistically significant differences can largely be attributed to the relatively small sample size ($n = 60$) and to natural variations in individual taste preferences. Nevertheless, the consistency of the mean values reveals a stable tendency among participants to associate higher prices with higher quality.

From the perspective of theoretical models in consumer behavior, these findings can be interpreted as an empirical illustration of the symbolic and prestige value of price. A higher price level not only signals a “better” product but also effectively enhances perceived quality—both in terms of taste and visual characteristics.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of price on perceived quality through an experimental taste test in the natural juice category. The results provide empirical evidence that price functions not only as an economic indicator, but also as a psychological and communicative signal that shapes consumer perceptions of quality.

The findings demonstrate that higher prices are consistently associated with more favorable evaluations of product quality, even when the product's objective characteristics remain unchanged. This effect is particularly pronounced for the mid-range brand Florina, where higher prices significantly improve perceived taste authenticity and overall quality assessments. In contrast, for the premium-positioned brand Pfanner, taste perceptions remain relatively stable across price conditions, while visual evaluations show greater sensitivity to price cues.

Overall, the results confirm that price influences perceived quality by shaping expectations. Prior information about a higher price appears to create positive expectations that subsequently affect sensory evaluations of both appearance and taste. These findings support theoretical perspectives that conceptualize price as a quality signal and a symbolic indicator of value, especially in product categories characterized by limited objective differentiation.

From a practical standpoint, the study highlights the importance of pricing decisions within broader positioning and communication strategies in fast-moving consumer goods

markets. Price not only reflects value but also actively shapes how quality is perceived and experienced by consumers.

Limitations and directions for future research

Despite the insights provided, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size is relatively small ($n = 60$), which restricts the statistical power of the analysis and limits the generalizability of the findings. Although clear and consistent patterns emerge, future studies with larger and more diverse samples would allow for more robust statistical testing and broader conclusions.

A second limitation is the narrow lens of the experiment. By focusing on natural juices and only two well-known brands, we were able to dig deeply into one context but at the expense of broader generalizability. It remains an open question whether similar effects would appear in other product categories—say, dairy, snacks, or new functional foods. Testing these effects across a wider set of goods would definitely strengthen the case.

Finally, people are complex, and price is just one piece of the puzzle. Factors like how familiar someone is with a brand, how much they know about the product category, or even how sensitive they are to price changes could all play a part in shaping perceptions. Future studies that weave in these personal and contextual factors will help us understand not just if price matters, but when, how, and for whom it makes the biggest difference.

In short, while this study takes an important step forward, there's much more to explore. By building on these findings with bigger, broader, and longer-term research, we can better map out the many ways price touches our perceptions and choices as consumers.

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STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES ON DIGITAL FISCAL TRANSFORMATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ALBANIA AND BULGARIA

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Abstract: *This paper explores how digital transformation in fiscal governance influences strategic planning for sustainable and inclusive growth in emerging European economies, focusing on a comparative perspective between Albania and Bulgaria. Both countries are engaged in reforming their public finance systems through digitalization, transparency, and innovation, yet they differ in institutional capacity and their degree of integration into the European Union.*

The study analyzes how digital fiscal tools, such as e-invoicing, online tax portals, and open budget platforms, enhance strategic policy planning, public accountability, and efficiency in resource management. By integrating digital technologies with traditional fiscal mechanisms like taxation, subsidies, and budgeting, governments are developing more data-driven and forward-looking approaches to fiscal policy. The paper highlights how these innovations contribute to green budgeting, climate-responsive investments, and improved citizen engagement.

Albania, as an EU candidate country, has shown significant commitment to digital reforms through its Transparent Albania platform and fiscalization process, though institutional and capacity challenges remain. Bulgaria, as an EU member, benefits from structured funding and established frameworks for digital governance, but inclusivity and equitable access to digital services still require further development.

The comparison provides strategic insights into how digital transformation supports fiscal modernization and sustainable policy planning. It also shows that effective digital governance depends not only on technology but on strategic coordination, institutional readiness, and public trust.

Keywords: Digital transformation, strategic planning, fiscal policy, sustainable development, Albania, Bulgaria, EU integration.

JEL classification: O3, O2, E62, Q1, F15

1. Introduction

Digital transformation increasingly shapes public sector reform by altering how governments design, manage, and distribute public resources. Within public administration scholarship, this transformation is understood not merely as a technical shift toward automation, but as a broader reconfiguration of how public institutions engage with citizens. (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Heeks, 2018). In increasingly interconnected governance environments, the growing use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in fiscal management plays a dual role: it enhances administrative efficiency while simultaneously strengthening transparency and public accountability (OECD, 2024). From this perspective, digital fiscal governance has evolved from a supporting technical tool into a strategic pillar of sustainable development and contemporary good governance (Hood, 1991).

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At the European level, fiscal digitalization has become a central component among the European Union's key political and economic objectives. EU policy frameworks increasingly frame digital transformation as a key instrument for reinforcing institutional capacity, improving public financial management, and advancing sustainable development objectives, particularly in countries undergoing transition or accession processes (European Commission, 2023). From an institutional economics standpoint, regulatory alignment and convergence toward shared international standards exert a decisive influence on policy effectiveness and institutional performance (North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). As a result, Western Balkan countries have been encouraged to pursue digital reforms aimed at harmonizing administrative practices with European norms by increasing access to digitally delivered public services and the modernization of public administration.

Within this context, Albania and Bulgaria offer two distinct yet comparable institutional settings for examining how digital fiscal transformation translates into concrete governance outcomes. Albania, as a candidate country for EU membership, has taken important steps toward strengthening the digital foundations of public service delivery, particularly through the e-Albania platform and the fiscalization system, both designed to improve administrative efficiency and strengthen revenue collection (AKSHI, 2021; AKSHI, 2023). Bulgaria, by contrast, as an EU member state, benefits from direct access to financial instruments such as the Recovery and Resilience Plan, which channels substantial investments toward digital transformation and the green transition (European Commission, 2023). Nevertheless, differences in institutional capacity, financial resources, and levels of citizen engagement generate divergent reform outcomes, supporting the theoretical argument that technological solutions yield meaningful results only when embedded within effective institutions and accountability mechanisms (Fung et al., 2007).

2. Theoretical Background and Conceptual Framework

Digital fiscal transformation describes the use of digital technologies in public governance to improve administrative performance, enhance institutional responsibility, and facilitate broader citizen engagement in managing public finances (OECD, 2024). In line with digital-era governance theories, this process extends beyond the technical deployment of digital tools to include organizational restructuring and a reassessment of traditional public administration models (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The conceptual framework developed for this analysis relies on the interaction between the level of European integration, institutional capacity, and the practical use of digital fiscal instruments.

From an institutional theory perspective, variations in European integration status directly shape access to financial resources, the strength of regulatory frameworks, and the extent to which public institutions are able to develop and apply digital fiscal reforms (North, 1990). Instruments such as e-tax systems, e-procurement platforms, and open budget initiatives play a crucial role in improving revenue administration and expenditure efficiency, while also fostering public trust in fiscal governance (Hood, 1991; Open Government Partnership, 2023). Their effectiveness is reflected in measurable outcomes such as fiscal transparency and citizens' use of e-government services.

A core dimension of the theoretical framework relates to long-term strategic planning and the integration of sustainable development objectives into fiscal policy. The public management reform literature highlights that open data and digital platforms enhance societal monitoring capacity and improve policy orientation toward long-term results, including environmental

sustainability (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; World Bank, 2022). In this regard, European funding mechanisms and pre-accession instruments play differentiated roles in supporting digital fiscal transformation across countries at varying stages of integration.

Finally, research on transparency and open governance emphasizes that the benefits of fiscal digitalization depend on citizen access, digital literacy, and meaningful participation mechanisms. Previous research by Fung, Graham, and Weil (2007) suggests that transparency improves governance outcomes only when information is accessible, understandable, and connected to real accountability channels. This perspective supports the view that digital fiscal transformation is inherently multidimensional, requiring the combined advancement of technological infrastructure, institutional reform, and social capacity-building in order to produce sustainable governance outcomes (Heeks, 2018; Smart Balkans Project, 2025).

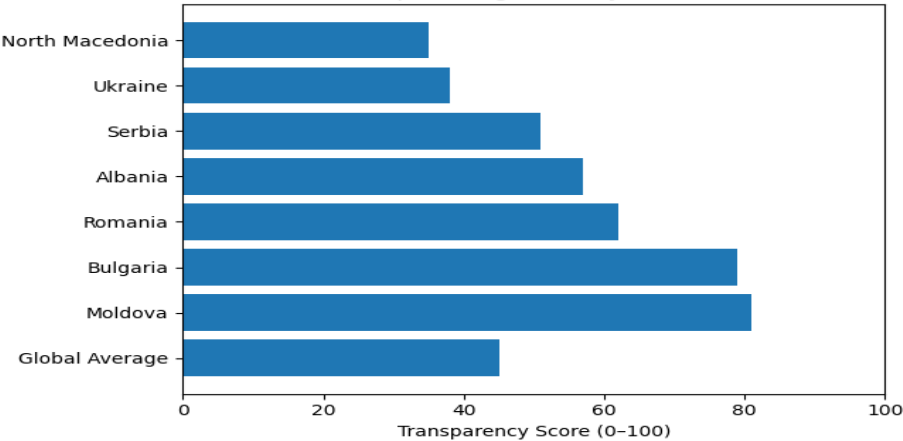
Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results, as the exclusive reliance on secondary data reduces the scope for capturing deeper qualitative dimensions, such as the perceptions of institutional actors and internal decision-making processes. Second, the focus on two case studies restricts the generalization of the findings to other institutional contexts. Finally, the use of aggregated indicators may not fully reflect the quality of the practical implementation of digital fiscal tools at the operational level.

3. Comparative Analysis: Albania and Bulgaria
– Fiscal Transparency and Public Participation

Evidence from the Open Budget Survey 2023 reveals marked differences in the extent of fiscal transparency between Albania and Bulgaria. Within public finance theory, fiscal transparency is widely recognized as a critical mechanism for reducing information asymmetries between governments and citizens, while also strengthening budgetary discipline and democratic accountability (Alt & Lassen, 2006; de Renzio & Wehner, 2017).

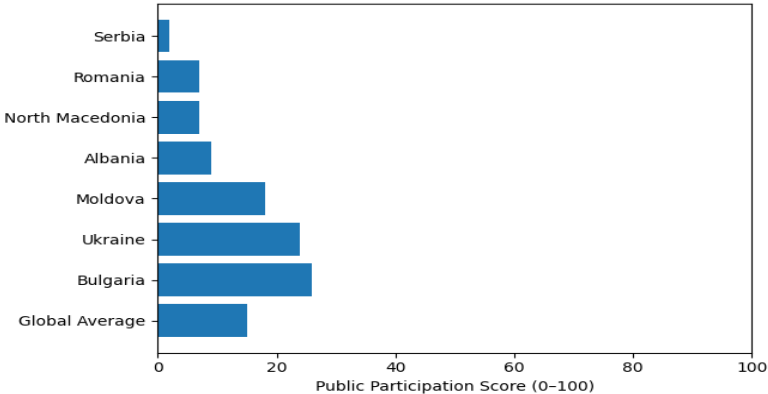
Graph 1. Fiscal transparency in Bulgaria compared to Albania and other countries in the region (Open Budget Survey 2023).



Source: International Budget Partnership (2023).

As illustrated in Graph 1, Bulgaria records a high level of budget transparency, scoring 79 out of 100, which places it well above Albania, whose score of 57 classifies it within the category of “adequate” transparency (International Budget Partnership, 2023). Bulgaria’s stronger performance reflects a more consolidated institutional framework, developed through the EU accession process and reinforced by legally binding requirements for the systematic publication of key budget documents, including draft budgets, execution reports, and audit findings (European Commission, 2023).

Graph 2. Public participation in budget processes in Bulgaria compared with Albania and other countries in the region (Open Budget Survey 2023).



Source: International Budget Partnership (2023).

However, Graph 2 highlights a significant gap between formal transparency and effective public participation in budgetary processes. Despite its higher transparency score, Bulgaria achieves only 26 points in public participation, while Albania scores even lower, with just 9 points (International Budget Partnership, 2023). These results support theoretical arguments suggesting that transparency, when understood solely as access to information, is insufficient to foster meaningful citizen engagement in the absence of active consultation mechanisms and genuine opportunities to influence decision-making (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, Graham, & Weil, 2007).

Taken together, the two graphs indicate that Bulgaria’s institutional advantage in fiscal transparency does not automatically translate into broader public involvement, while Albania faces even greater challenges in establishing formal participation mechanisms. This contrast underscores that the quality of fiscal governance depends not only on the volume of information disclosed, but also on how budgetary processes are structured to enable real citizen influence over public decisions (European Commission, 2023).

– **Use of e-Government and Citizen Engagement**

In contrast to fiscal transparency, the practical use of e-government services displays an inverse pattern between the two countries. As summarized in Table 1, Albania exhibits a substantially higher level of interaction between citizens and public administration through digital channels, with approximately 51–60% of the population using the e-Albania platform. In Bulgaria, by comparison, the share of the population engaging with e-government services reaches only 31.8% (INSTAT, 2023; Eurostat, 2024).

Table 1. Use of e-government services in Albania and Bulgaria

Dimension	Albania	Bulgaria
Use of e-government services	51–60% of the population	31.8% of the population
Access model	Centralized platform (e-Albania)	Fragmented access
Status of online services	Many services are mandatory	Offline alternatives maintained
Dominant demographic profile	Younger population	Older population
Digital skills	High use of mobile technologies	Digital skills gap
Main influencing factors	Mandatory policies and centralization	Fragmentation and lack of institutional pressure

Source: Author’s elaboration based on INSTAT (2023), Eurostat (2024), and International Budget Partnership (2023).

This divergence is closely linked to differences in access models. Albania has adopted a centralized platform and introduced relatively mandatory policies that encourage or require

the transition toward online services. Bulgaria, by contrast, has maintained a more fragmented digital architecture and preserved multiple offline alternatives. Demographic characteristics and digital skills further reinforce this pattern. Albania's younger population and widespread use of mobile technologies facilitate digital uptake, whereas Bulgaria's older population structure and more pronounced digital skills gap constrain broader adoption.

From a technology adoption perspective, citizens' use of digital public services reflects both the availability of technology and how useful, user-friendly, and institutionally supported these services are perceived to be. (Davis, 1989; OECD, 2024). These findings suggest that citizen engagement in e-government depends on the combined interaction of institutional design, regulatory pressure, and user capabilities, rather than on technological infrastructure alone.

— **Digital Fiscal Tools: Mandatory Versus Voluntary Approaches**

Albania and Bulgaria have pursued distinct institutional strategies in the implementation of digital fiscal instruments, leading to different adoption outcomes. Albania has introduced a centralized and regulatory-driven model through its fiscalization system, making electronic invoicing mandatory across all categories of economic transactions (B2G, B2B, and B2C) (Republic of Albania, 2019; AKSHI, 2021). This approach has strengthened transaction transparency and enhanced the tax administration's capacity for real-time monitoring and the prevention of fiscal evasion (IMF, 2022; OECD, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, regulatory mandatoriness represents an effective tool for increasing compliance, particularly in contexts where voluntary adoption may result in uneven or fragmented participation (Ayres & Braithwaite, 1992; Slemrod, 2007). By contrast, Bulgaria operates a functional but less compulsory digital fiscal framework. In line with EU Directive 2014/55/EU, electronic invoicing is compulsory primarily for public procurement activities, while adoption in the private sector is mostly voluntary (European Commission, 2014; European Commission, 2023).

Pursuant to EU Directive 2014/55/EU, electronic invoicing obligations are concentrated primarily in public procurement, while implementation in the private sector remains largely voluntary. Despite Bulgaria's investments in advanced digital solutions, including the Centralized Automated Information System for Electronic Public Procurement (CAIS EPP), and the planned introduction of the Standard Audit File for Tax (SAF-T) from 2026, limited regulatory enforcement has constrained the overall scale of adoption (Public Procurement Agency of Bulgaria, 2022; OECD, 2024). Taken together, this comparison illustrates that the success of digital fiscal reforms depends not only on the technical sophistication of digital systems but equally on policy coherence and the strength of regulatory enforcement mechanisms that support their widespread use.

— **Institutional Capacity and Financing of Digital Transformation**

Differences in the adoption and performance of digital fiscal tools are closely linked to the financial and institutional capacities of the two countries. As an EU member state, Bulgaria benefits from substantial resources under the Recovery and Resilience Plan, which provides a solid financial base for investments in digital transformation and the green transition (European Commission, 2022; European Commission, 2023). Investments in public administration digitalization, broadband expansion, and cybersecurity place Bulgaria in a structurally advantageous position for long-term modernization. Albania, lacking access to instruments such as the RRP, relies primarily on pre-accession IPA funds and fragmented donor support. While these mechanisms, together with the Western Balkans Growth Plan, provide important financial assistance, the absence of a unified funding framework constrains long-term strategic planning and the implementation of large-scale, coordinated digital reforms (European Commission, 2023; World Bank, 2023; IMF, 2024). Overall, the comparative analysis shows

that Bulgaria outperforms Albania in formal fiscal transparency and institutional capacity, while Albania demonstrates stronger results in the practical use of digital services driven by regulatory mandatoriness and platform centralization. This contrast highlights that successful digital fiscal governance requires a balanced interaction between transparency, institutional design, regulatory enforcement, and citizen engagement. In the absence of such a balance, digital infrastructure risks remaining either formally transparent but weakly used or functionally effective without contributing to greater improvements in public governance.

4. Key Challenges and Opportunities

Beyond official indicators, the analysis identifies a set of social and structural challenges that directly shape the effectiveness of digital fiscal transformation in both Albania and Bulgaria. A central constraint remains the persistence of the digital divide within the population, reflecting ongoing inequalities in access to internet infrastructure as well as disparities in digital skills. In information society theory, the digital divide extends beyond connectivity to include disparities in access, skills, and effective use of digital technologies (van Dijk, 2005). These inequalities limit effective citizen participation in online public services and weaken the transformative potential of fiscal digitalization (OECD, 2024).

In Albania, gaps in rural broadband access and digital skills among vulnerable groups continue to limit the uptake of electronic public services (World Bank, 2023; Smart Balkans Project, 2025). As a result, the formal availability of digital services does not automatically translate into effective usage. This pattern is consistent with theoretical perspectives emphasizing that public sector digitalization, when not accompanied by inclusive capacity-building policies, risks reproducing or even deepening existing social inequalities (Heeks, 2018). Consequently, a segment of the population remains effectively excluded due to limited access or insufficient digital competencies, a phenomenon widely observed across the Western Balkan region (Smart Balkans Project, 2025).

Similar constraints are evident in Bulgaria, though they are primarily linked to demographic structure and territorial disparities. The relatively high average age of the population and lower digital skills among older cohorts negatively affect the uptake of e-government services, creating a visible mismatch between the supply of digital solutions and citizens' readiness to adopt them (European Commission, 2023). In the literature on institutional reform, such mismatches are often interpreted as a lack of social and administrative absorptive capacity, which restricts the translation of technological investments into concrete outcomes for citizens (Andrews, 2013). Although urban areas benefit from more advanced broadband infrastructure, the limited expansion of high-capacity networks in peripheral and rural regions continues to constrain equitable access to digital public services (European Commission, 2023).

From a broader comparative perspective, countries in the Western Balkans and Southeast Europe, including Albania and Bulgaria, have achieved levels of basic internet access that are relatively close to the EU average. Nevertheless, active use of digital public services and more advanced forms of electronic interaction with public administration remain at approximately half of the EU levels. This gap points to social and institutional constraints that extend beyond technological availability alone (OECD, 2024). These findings clearly indicate that digital fiscal transformation must be accompanied by comprehensive inclusion-oriented policies and sustained investments in digital skills development to ensure that no segment of society is left behind (OECD, 2024).

At the institutional level, strategic planning and cross-sectoral coordination emerge as critical challenges, particularly in Albania. The absence of a comprehensive framework comparable to the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) compels the country to rely largely on fragmented programs, reducing reform coherence and limiting long-term impact (European

Commission, 2023). In Bulgaria, by contrast, the main challenge does not lie in the availability of strategic or financial instruments, but in ensuring that substantial EU-funded investments are translated into tangible benefits for citizens. Achieving this requires sustained reform momentum, strong administrative capacity, and enhanced public engagement to increase both usage and trust in newly introduced digital tools (European Commission, 2023).

At the same time, the analysis highlights an important strategic opportunity for both countries: aligning the digital fiscal transformation agenda with green budgeting and sustainable development objectives. The public policy literature suggests that integrating digital and environmental agendas enhances reform coherence and strengthens the state's monitoring and evaluation capacity (World Bank, 2022). In this context, digital fiscal tools for tracking emissions, monitoring green spending, and assessing environmental indicators offer a clear opportunity for mutual learning and structured cooperation between Albania and Bulgaria. Such an approach can simultaneously improve transparency, accountability, and the overall effectiveness of public policy.

5. Conclusions

This paper highlights that digital fiscal transformation constitutes a significant driver of public finance modernization in both Albania and Bulgaria, yet its outcomes are strongly shaped by institutional context, financial capacity, and implementation strategies. The comparative analysis demonstrates that there is no uniform model of success in digital fiscal governance. Instead, different reform trajectories generate distinct strengths and weaknesses depending on national circumstances.

Albania's progress in digital public service delivery has been strongly supported by the widespread implementation of the e-Albania platform. Despite limited financial and institutional resources, more than half of the population actively uses electronic services, reflecting the effectiveness of centralized platforms and regulatory incentives. However, this progress remains vulnerable due to persistent structural challenges, including gaps in digital skills, uneven infrastructure coverage, and fragmented strategic planning. Without addressing these constraints, digitalization risks remaining largely functional rather than transformational in terms of accountability and fiscal governance quality.

Bulgaria, by contrast, benefits from stronger institutional frameworks and substantial financial support through European Union mechanisms such as the Recovery and Resilience Plan. This has contributed to higher levels of formal fiscal transparency and institutional consolidation. Nevertheless, citizen engagement and the actual use of e-government services remain relatively limited. These findings suggest that technological investments and formal compliance with EU standards do not automatically translate into active public participation or increased trust in digital governance tools.

The main policy implication for both countries is that technology alone is insufficient to deliver meaningful improvements in fiscal governance. Digital fiscal transformation must be embedded within a broader reform agenda that integrates legal frameworks, institutional coordination, human capital development, and citizen engagement. Investments in digital infrastructure should be complemented by efforts to improve digital literacy, simplify access to services, and strengthen cybersecurity and trust mechanisms.

Overall, the study confirms that digital fiscal transformation can enhance transparency, efficiency, and resilience, but only when supported by inclusive policies and effective institutions. Mutual learning and adaptation of best practices between Albania and Bulgaria can

further support the development of sustainable and accountable digital fiscal governance systems.

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RETHINKING RURAL POTENTIAL: RURAL AREAS - HOME OF INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS

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Abstract: *Regional development and innovation policies in Europe and globally have traditionally focused on urban areas, often underestimating the potential of rural territories. Emerging evidence from recent European and international studies and reports highlight the growing importance of rural regions for economic performance, resilience, and knowledge creation. This paper explores the concept of an innovation ecosystem and its evolvement, with a specific focus on its relevance to rural development. The study reviews good practices and case studies while comparing relevant policy models - such as the LEADER approach, Smart and Startup Villages, Agri-tech ecosystems, Regional Innovation Valleys, and Digital Innovation Hubs - to identify the elements and dynamics that underpin successful rural innovation ecosystems. Key characteristics and enabling conditions of rural innovation ecosystems, addressing regional development potential, are examined and highlighted. The applications of this research results are to be incorporated in a larger scale study focused on developing a Regional Innovation Ecosystem model applicable for Bulgaria.*

Keywords: Innovation; Innovation Ecosystem; Rural Development; Rural Areas; Rural Innovation Ecosystem; Regional Development

JEL: O360; R1; R58; R59

Introduction

Innovation and regional development policies have long prioritized urban areas as the primary engines of competitiveness, knowledge production, and technological progress (European Commission, 2022). This urban-centric orientation has contributed to a persistent underestimation of the innovative potential embedded in rural areas. (OECD Rural Studies, 2022). Deeper analyses highlight that rural regions possess unique assets—natural resources, strong community cohesion, specialised industries, and opportunities for the green and digital transitions, which position them as relevant contributors to broader development objectives and allow them to bridge the innovation gap (OECD Rural Studies, 2025).

At a time when the European Union (EU) emphasises territorial cohesion and balanced development across regions, the concept of **innovation ecosystem** offers a useful lens through which to rethink the role of rural areas (Bravaglieri, et al., 2025). Rural innovation ecosystems may differ significantly from urban ones, yet they can foster entrepreneurship, technological adoption, knowledge transfer, and sustainable economic diversification.

This paper aims to explore the applicability of the innovation ecosystem approach to rural development. It analyses the conceptual foundations of innovation ecosystems, examines emerging models in rural settings, and identifies key characteristics and enabling conditions relevant to rural regions. Good practices from Europe, Asia-Pacific, and Australia provide empirical grounding. The study is limited to exploring mostly papers discussing European rural policy. Some of these have proposed emerging models of rural innovation ecosystems. They are primarily relevant to the

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European context. The analyses related to the key characteristics of the rural innovation ecosystem are based on case studies and scientific findings. The insights presented here also contribute to a larger-scale research effort to develop a regional innovation ecosystem model applicable to Bulgaria.

1. Methodology

A mixed methodology has been used in carrying out this research. The paper follows a desk research design based on systematic review of scientific literature, policy reports, and institutional documents. A comparative analysis framework is used to identify common characteristics and enabling conditions of rural innovation ecosystems. Case selection is based on representativeness (geographic and thematic diversity), documented outcomes, and institutional maturity. The methodology prioritises interpretative analysis rather than econometric modelling, consistent with the exploratory aim of the study. It suggests possible implications for Bulgaria, facilitating the development of a regional innovation ecosystem model.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptual Background: Innovation Ecosystem (IE)

The concept of innovation ecosystem has evolved from earlier theoretical frameworks such as national and regional innovation systems (Granstrand & Holgersson, 2020), cluster theory (Maskell & Kebir, 2006), and triple or quadruple Helix models (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009). While earlier models emphasised structures and institutions, innovation ecosystems highlight dynamic interactions, interdependencies, interconnectedness and collaborative value creation among diverse actors (Rodríguez-Romera, et al., 2026). Further to these findings, innovation systems differ to innovation ecosystems as the latter consist not only of economic agents and economic relations, but also of non-economic components, such as institutions, sociological interactions, culture, innovation structures and technology (Mercan & Göktaş, 2011). Brazilian researchers explored the concept of innovation ecosystem up until 2020 and contributed to the literature based on a co-citation analyses. The scholars from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul proposed a theoretical framework based on two approaches when mapping and assessing the development of the innovation ecosystem concept. In their findings they suggest that the IE can be approached either as territory bound, or as a platform (Frantz dos Santos, et al., 2024). Earlier studies consider the components of innovation ecosystem primarily based on the geographical approach (Mercan & Göktaş, 2011).

2.2. Key Elements of the Innovation Ecosystem (IE)

The innovation ecosystem is populated by a diverse set of **actors**, more often recognized as stakeholders. They can be entrepreneurs, startups, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), regional or international companies; public-private entities, business associations, universities, other academic and/or scientific institutions, government and/or municipal bodies, intermediaries, civil society, NGOs and community organisations. **Resources** within the IE primarily include knowledge, talent (human capital), finance, infrastructure (digital and/or physical), and in the case of regional IE - properties and land. Supportive policies and a conducive culture are also considered valuable resources by both practitioners and researchers (Brown, 2018). **Interactions** within the ecosystem are crucial for the value and innovation co-creation, as well as for its sustainability and efficiency. Different IEs foster and enhance a variety of interactions such as knowledge flows, partnerships, supply chains, value and innovation co-creation, resource orchestration, etc. The relationships between actors within any

given innovation ecosystem are often quite complex (INNOBASE, 2025). Scholars also acknowledge that relations of competition and collaboration are possible within the scope of one IE (Primario, et al., 2024). Chinese researcher from Anhui University argues, that the mechanisms of competition and cooperation between factors support the more effective absorption of knowledge and resources, thus result in more efficient innovation creation and processing (Zhao, 2021). Furthermore, the **governing** of the innovation ecosystem is considered a very important component which differs broadly according to the type, scope and advancement of the IE (Hoffmann, et al., 2022; Reiter, et al., 2024).

2.3. Rural Development Through IE: Approaches and Good Practices

Rural areas challenge conventional assumptions about ecosystems: they are less dense, often more remote, with smaller populations and fewer institutions, often lacking adequate resources. Yet these conditions can encourage strong relational networks, trust, and embeddedness - qualities that support ecosystem development (Perpiña Castillo, et al., 2024).

Opportunities and constraints lie ahead of the concept of rural innovation ecosystems. Rural-focused innovation policies are the possible means to overcome challenges (Özen, & Hernández, 2025). Some of the opportunities rural regions can take advantage of, introducing the innovation ecosystem concept, are related to the areas of bioeconomy and green transition, community cohesion, local identity, sustainability-driven innovation, and new digital possibilities (Interreg Europe, 2024). The multi-actor rural innovation ecosystem model, explored by Italian researchers, suggests that rural territories and communities have the capacity to become “vibrant centers of innovation based on local resources” (Bravaglieri, et al., 2025). In the last few years, the potential for innovation in rural areas has been acknowledged by researchers, whereas efforts have been made by practitioners to adapt the concept of innovation ecosystems to such regions (Madureira & Torre, 2019). Approaches and good practices which have been studied in this paper reveal the development of this motion more comprehensively.

2.3.1. The LEADER Approach and Bottom-up Development

The European Network for Rural Development has long promoted the **LEADER approach**, introduced in 1990 to address the shortcomings of top-down rural policies. The acronym derives from the French “*Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale*,” meaning “*links between actions for the development of the rural economy*” (European LEADER Association for Rural Development, 2019). The LEADER model positions local communities as **active co-creators**, not passive recipients. Through Local Action Groups (LAGs) - partnerships between public, private, and civil society actors, this approach fosters participatory governance, community-driven development, and experimentation. These features resonate strongly with innovation ecosystem thinking, particularly regarding local ownership, interactive governance, and territorial embeddedness. LEADER is an active program which is updated each year through research, development and innovation. LAGs build local development strategies that are tailored to specific community challenges, making the best use of local resources and maximizing potential, while meeting the needs of the local community. By bringing together a diverse range of local stakeholders, LAGs create more robust and resilient networks that support ongoing innovation and development.

2.3.2. Emerging Models of a Rural Innovation Ecosystem (RuIE)

Innovation ecosystems in rural areas have been poorly researched by scholars. They have been referred to well-organized clusters in rural areas by Marshall & Murphy, (2017). Recently, rural development policies gain greater attention on a European level with bottom-up approaches supporting local communities while shaping regional policy frameworks (Özen, &

Hernández, 2025). A variety of models have also gained prominence and have been reviewed in this paper with the aim of systematizing the main characteristic of a competitive Rural Innovation Ecosystem model.

Aligned with the New European Innovation Agenda (European Commission, 2022) the **Regional Innovation Valleys (RIVs)** initiative aims to promote deep-tech innovation and reduce territorial disparities. Currently 147 regions have been identified as Regional Innovation Valleys across Europe of which 30% are strong innovators. Already 4 Bulgarian regions on NUTS 2 level have been proposed to become RIVs – North-Central; South-East; South-West and South-Central (Sandeva, 2024). One of the objectives of the program is to connect less developed regions with innovation leaders as to enhance the local/regional development. Currently, RIVs remain more focused on growth and development in their assigned territory, whereas researchers as Marshall & Murphy, (2017) hypothesize that a successful rural innovation ecosystem should be more focused on “sustainability, wellbeing and balance, rather than primarily on ambition and growth”. This argument has not been evidently supported by other scholars as the concept of rural innovation ecosystem is still being explored and structured.

Agri-Tech Innovation Ecosystems focus on applying technology, data analytics, and sustainable practices to agriculture and food systems. Indian researcher Pasupuleti, (2024) reviews the potential of Agri-Tech innovations in revolutionizing the modern agriculture concept. In his study he discusses the socio-economic implications of Agri-Tech “revealing its potential to boost profitability, stimulate rural development, and create employment opportunities”. (Pasupuleti, 2024). Urban-oriented countries also recognize the potential Agri-Tech has for the development of rural areas. Singapore offers an urban–rural hybrid example where the state aims to become a leading agri-food innovation hub in Asia by supporting technological innovation through Enterprise Singapore (Kok, 2020). This example shows that even resource-constrained environments can develop strong Agri-Tech ecosystems through targeted policies and global partnerships.

Research and Innovation Centers (RICs) situated in rural areas often act as innovation ecosystems by offering the opportunities of resource sharing and optimization; value co-creation; supporting urban-rural-education relationships and promoting innovation processes (Meili & Shearmur, 2019). The typology of RICs varies across different industries, regions and strategic objectives. Rural Health Research Centers, for example, have great value and gain much popularity by collaborating with state universities (Rural Health Information Hub, 2025). In the Agricultural sector, Australia's Goondiwindi region seeks to become an Agricultural Center of Excellence, prioritising innovation, value-added industries, and emerging industries and markets (SC Lennon & Associates Pty Ltd, 2023). The interconnections between academia and local industries suggest that RICs in rural areas foster innovation and value co-creation, thus have the potential to be modeled as RuIEs.

The concept from Smart Cities to **Smart Villages** also enables stronger urban-rural linkages which resemble interactions of IE. The Smart Village initiative has been promoted by the European Union (EU) under several programs and actions, emphasizing participation, digital tools, and community-driven solutions across agriculture, mobility, health, and culture (Martinez & McEldowney, 2021). On the global perspective, case studies from Indonesia reveal both opportunities and limitations: while ICT tools improve local capacity, broader components such as smart governance and community engagement remain critical for reaching the innovation potential of the ecosystem (Muhtar, et al., 2023). Bulgaria has also recognized the potential in the Smart Villages concept by launching the *Smart Rural 27* project for the period 2021-2024 aiming to improve the framework for supporting Smart Villages at both local

(developing rural communities) and regional/national (supporting policy making) levels (Smart Rural 27, 2024).

The **Startup Village** concept, developed by the Joint Research Centre, (2024) focuses on innovation-driven entrepreneurship in rural areas. Key components include multi-scalar governance, diverse resources, and interconnectedness across ecosystems. Compared to the Smart Village concept some of the key elements differ slightly. Innovation – driven entrepreneurship is the economic empowerment Startup Villages are focused on, whereas Smart Villages aim broadly to create sustainable livelihood opportunities (Głębocki, 2023). Sustainability, however, is the common denominator and a crucial element in both concepts.

Researchers from the University of Ljubljana discuss the potential of **Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs)** in rural competitiveness, positioning them as sustainable business models in rural areas (Stojanova, et al., 2022). DIHs offer tailored technical support, resource sharing, and capacity building for rural enterprises, fostering innovation and growth. The Slovenian scholars conclude that DIHs are to be considered a “key policy instrument model with great potential for the long-term visions of rural areas” (Stojanova, et al., 2022, p. 2).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. *Characteristics and enabling conditions of Rural Innovation Ecosystems*

Rural innovation ecosystems (RuIEs) possess distinct characteristics that can enhance competitiveness, resilience, and long-term development. Based on the researched models of regional structures which resemble innovation ecosystems, and the reviewed good practices from Europe and globally, eight key characteristics of rural IEs have been outlined as relevant to competitiveness in **Table 1** and further detailed in the paragraphs below.

Table 1. Key Characteristics of Rural Innovation Ecosystems Supporting Competitiveness

Characteristic	Relevance to enhancing competitiveness
Economic diversification	Transition from single-sector to multi-sector rural economies
Market access & networks	Integration into broader supply chains and innovation networks
Talent attraction	Creating conditions that retain and attract skilled workers
Collaboration & governance	Partnerships among public, private, academic, and civil actors
Resource orchestration	Coordinated use and sharing of resources among stakeholders
Support infrastructure	Access to incubators, accelerators, mentors, and funding
Knowledge transfer	Links to universities, research institutions, and urban centres
Branding & visibility	Promoting rural identity, sustainability, and innovation

Source: Author’s own work

Economic Diversification: Economic diversification, often central in innovation ecosystems, can be transformative for rural areas historically dependent on a single sector (Wijijayanti, et al., 2025). By supporting agribusiness, renewable energy, creative industries, and technology sectors, RIEs open access to new markets and revenue streams, reducing vulnerability and enhancing resilience.

Market Access, Networks, and Supply Chains: RIEs connect rural enterprises to urban firms, investors, mentors, and supply chains. Cross-sector partnerships expand market opportunities and improve the visibility of rural enterprises (Wijijayanti, et al., 2025).

Talent Attraction and Retention: Although skilled labour is often scarce in rural areas, innovation ecosystems attract entrepreneurs, professionals, and innovators by improving the local quality of life, offering entrepreneurial opportunities and strengthening professional networks (Mariotti & Sasso, 2024).

Collaboration and Strategic Partnerships: Ecosystems foster multi-stakeholder collaboration across universities, firms, government bodies, business associations, non-profit and community organisations. Schiuma & Carlucci (2018) propose frameworks for understanding and facilitating strategic partnerships in geographically distributed ecosystems. The scholars discuss the role of universities as knowledge-intensive producers in the development of local innovation ecosystems and strategic partnerships with local businesses within the scope of a regional innovation ecosystem.

Resource Orchestration: Innovation ecosystems enable shared resource use and coordinated investment. Comparative research shows that stakeholder orchestration enhances competitiveness and ecosystem health (Bittencourt, et al., 2021). Schiuma & Carlucci (2018) have acknowledged the importance of resource orchestration in the entrepreneurial innovation ecosystem and the regional health technology ecosystems (Tabas, et al., 2023). Ecosystem orchestration allows stakeholders to coordinate these resources collectively, creating competitive advantages and shared value.

Support Infrastructure: Incubators, Accelerators, Funding: Innovation ecosystems provide access to incubators, accelerators, mentoring, and distributed funding. A systematic literature review of Portuguese scholars encompasses the research topic of Business Incubators and Business Accelerators concerning the relationship between the incubation structures and the performance of technology-based ventures (Leitão, et al., 2022). In both cases, they perform as support infrastructure or even as key stakeholders within the innovation ecosystem.

Knowledge Transfer and Technology Adoption: By linking rural firms with universities and research institutions, ecosystems enable knowledge transfer and technology adoption. This accelerates technological advancement and promotes modern practices that enhance productivity and competitiveness in rural areas (Theodorakopoulos, et al., 2012).

Branding and Visibility: Rural regions often suffer from low visibility. Research shows that strong branding linked to sustainability and innovation can attract tourism, investment, and talent (Yavuz & Madran, 2024). Ecosystems help promote rural identity and unique strengths. Furthermore, established RuIEs contribute to branding rural regions as innovative, sustainable, and attractive (Surya, et al., 2024). OECD Rural Studies, (2025) reveal that targeted rural tourism strategies support economic resilience while protecting local identity.

3.2. Implications for Bulgaria: Emerging Practices and Pilot Initiatives

Following the mixed approach to RIE modeling: the extracted recommended key characteristics and the good practices around the world, as well as the contextualized knowledge and research, practical implications for Bulgaria are suggested, hereafter.

Bulgaria possesses significant rural potential - rich biodiversity, agricultural capacity, cultural heritage, and emerging digital initiatives (European Commission: Agriculture and Rural Development, 2025). Yet challenges such as depopulation, limited digital infrastructure, and fragmented governance persist. Nevertheless, the country can enhance the development

and competitiveness of its rural regions by adopting an innovation ecosystem-oriented approach to rural policy. Rather than relying on fragmented, sector-based interventions, the ecosystem perspective would enable the integration of innovation, entrepreneurship, governance, skills, and territorial assets within a coherent, place-based framework.

A key implication concerns policy coordination. Bulgaria already applies multiple instruments relevant to rural development and innovation, including the Common Agricultural Policy, the Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation, LEADER, and cohesion policy programmes. Explicitly recognising **Rural Innovation Ecosystems** as a policy concept would allow these instruments to be better aligned around shared territorial objectives, without requiring new institutional structures. The LEADER approach offers a practical foundation for ecosystem governance. LAGs can evolve from project administrators into facilitators of collaboration among municipalities, SMEs, farmers, educational institutions, and civil society, provided that their innovation-related capacities are strengthened. Complementing this governance layer, rural-oriented DIHs can support SMEs and local authorities through access to digital technologies, advisory services, and skills development, while connecting rural actors to wider innovation networks. Further opportunities lie in the creation of Agri-Innovation and bioeconomy experimentation zones, leveraging Bulgaria's strong agricultural and natural resource base. In parallel, emerging EU initiatives such as Smart and Startup Villages can be implemented as complementary components of territorial IEs, linking digital service innovation with entrepreneurship and market integration.

Several obstacles to rural development in Bulgaria have already begun to be addressed through recent policy initiatives and pilot implementations. The role of the bioeconomy in regional development has been highlighted in academic research (Popova, 2022) and reflected in practice through the launch of the first Bioeconomy and Food Regional Innovation Valley in Plovdiv (Council of Ministers of R Bulgaria, 2023), as well as through projects linked to the emerging Hydrogen Innovation Valley in the Stara Zagora region (EC: Horizon Europe, 2024). Systematic monitoring of these pilot initiatives is essential for understanding how regional and rural innovation ecosystem models can be expanded and replicated. Evidence of emerging good practices is provided, also, by the EU CAP Network, which highlights Bulgarian initiatives such as the revitalisation and digitalisation of rural community hubs, efforts to address depopulation by engaging youth through culture, education and innovation (EU CAP Network, 2026). While these initiatives demonstrate growing momentum, Bulgaria continues to lack fully coordinated rural innovation ecosystem structures, underscoring the relevance of the ecosystem-based approach proposed in this study. Strengthening university-rural partnerships and introducing basic ecosystem monitoring indicators would support knowledge transfer, talent retention, and evidence-based policymaking. Overall, the IE approach provides Bulgaria with a realistic pathway to transform rural development through integrated, place-based, and scalable solutions.

Drawing on the analysis presented in this study, an initial **Bulgarian Rural Innovation Ecosystem** model should incorporate strong local governance and community participation; regionally embedded DIHs; possible Agri-Tech and bioeconomy experimentation zones; cross-sector partnerships; coordination with Smart Specialisation Strategy priorities (STIP Compass, 2023), and improved branding and international visibility. Such tailored model has the potential to enhance rural competitiveness, strengthen resilience, and align Bulgaria with contemporary EU innovation objectives.

4. Conclusion

Rural areas have the capacity to become dynamic innovation spaces when supported by appropriate governance, infrastructure, and community engagement. Through diverse models - from Smart and Startup Villages to Agri-Tech and digital hubs and research centers - innovation ecosystems offer frameworks for revitalising rural economies and enabling them to participate fully in technological and socio-economic transformations.

The study synthesises global and European practices, highlights shared characteristics and enabling conditions of rural innovation ecosystems, and outlines actionable implications for Bulgaria. Within the broader research framework focused on designing a regional innovation ecosystem model for Bulgaria, the implications derived from this study should be applied both in the assessment and structuring phases of the modelling process. Rural areas in Bulgaria possess the potential to function as innovation ecosystems; therefore, the *Rural Innovation Ecosystem* model should be considered as one of the possible territorial configurations within the national innovation ecosystem landscape. In this process, the perspectives of key stakeholders on partnership formation, development priorities, and innovation co-creation should be analysed in parallel with the findings of this study. Finally, both Bulgarian and European policy frameworks, and their modes of implementation, are expected to significantly influence the research process and its outcomes.

Rethinking rural potential through the lens of innovation ecosystems is essential for achieving inclusive, balanced, and future-oriented regional development.

Acknowledgements / Disclaimer

This research has been carried out within the framework of Project NI-17-2023 “Development of a Model for Evaluating the Competitiveness of Rural Regions in Bulgaria” funded by the “Scientific Research” Fund of University of National and World Economy.

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PROMOTING OBSTETRIC NURSING PRACTICE: A FOCUSED LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: Maternity Hospital of Tirana “Queen Geraldina”

This focused literature review synthesizes recent evidence on strategies to promote obstetric nursing practice, emphasizing quality-improvement initiatives, standardized triage, respectful and equitable care, and expanded nurse-led preventive roles. Findings indicate that implementing nursing-sensitive quality indicators within continuous improvement cycles, adopting acuity-based obstetric triage, and integrating anti-racism/respectful maternity care training improve clinical processes, patient experience, and equity. Practical recommendations for educators, clinical leaders, and policy makers are provided.

Keywords: obstetric nursing; nursing education; quality improvement; triage; respectful maternity care; racial equity; nursing-sensitive indicators; PDCA; preventive care; cardiovascular health; clinical practice; workforce development

JEL: L1; L14; L25: 24

Introduction

Obstetric nurses are central to maternal and newborn safety, quality of care, and patient experience. Contemporary challenges—ranging from preventable adverse outcomes to inequities driven by systemic racism—require targeted strategies that combine measurement, process standardization, workforce development, and culturally respectful practice. This review synthesizes selected literature (2010–2023) to identify actionable interventions and educational priorities to promote obstetric nursing practice.

Methods

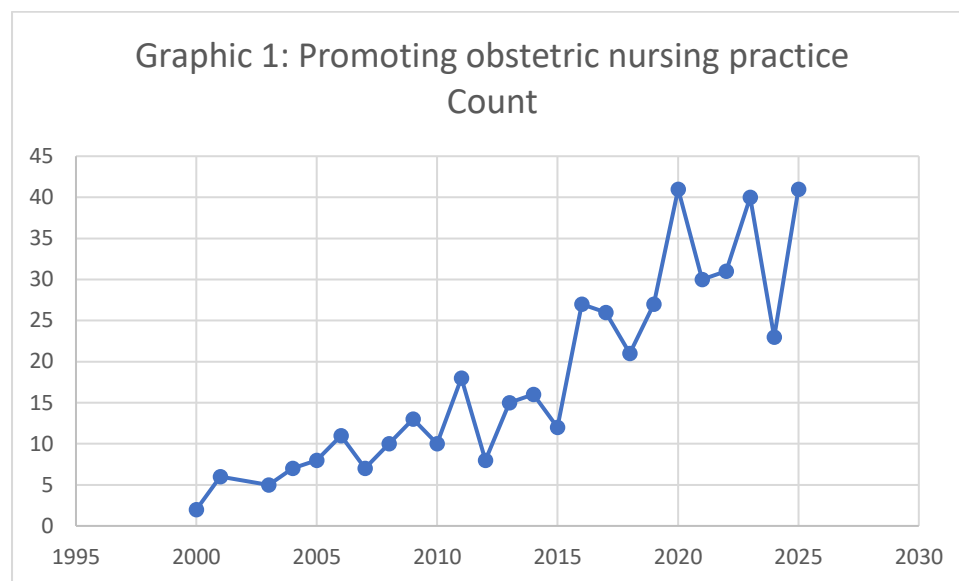
This is a focused, discursive literature synthesis of the provided articles including empirical studies, practice guidelines, and discursive reviews relevant to obstetric nursing quality, triage,

¹ PhD

respectful maternity care (RMC), and nurse-led preventive care. Studies were summarized thematically to extract interventions, outcomes, and implications for practice and education.

Findings and Thematic Synthesis

Based on the search of PubMed, we have found these findings:



(Reference: *Promoting obstetric nursing practice - Search Results - PubMed*. (2026.).)

Nursing-sensitive quality indicators and continuous quality improvement Evidence supports the use of nursing-sensitive quality indicators combined with structured continuous quality improvement (CQI) cycles to improve obstetric outcomes. In a retrospective comparison, units that implemented obstetric nursing-sensitive indicators with a PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle reported improvements in early skin-to-skin contact, exclusive breastfeeding rates, patient and nurse satisfaction, and reductions in neonatal asphyxia and postpartum hemorrhage (Luo et al., 2022). These findings indicate that measurable, nurse-focused indicators—when embedded in CQI frameworks—can produce meaningful clinical and experiential gains and are amenable to wider implementation.

Standardized obstetric triage to improve timeliness and flow Standardizing triage with acuity-based obstetric triage scales enhances patient flow, timeliness of assessment, and resource allocation. Reviews and implementation reports note that acuity-based triage (rather than arrival-time-based sorting) produces more timely initial assessments, reduced wait times, and provides acuity/volume trends that inform staffing decisions (Ruhl et al., 2020). Adoption of

standardized triage tools at the facility or system level appears to be a practical lever to improve safety and operational efficiency in obstetric settings.

Respectful maternity care and racial equity Racial discrimination, implicit bias, and systemic racism have been identified as central drivers of poorer intrapartum outcomes for Black birthing persons (Gillette Pierce et al., 2023). Discursive analyses emphasize that social determinants alone do not fully explain disparities; clinician attitudes, stereotypes, and institutional practices contribute substantially. Parallel scholarship advocating for respectful maternity care frames dignity, autonomy, and non-abusive practices as human rights, recommending international guidelines and implementation strategies to mainstream respectful care (Puthussery et al., 2023). Collectively, this body of work points to the need for targeted anti-racism education, accountability mechanisms, and policies that embed RMC principles into clinical practice.

Nurse-led preventive care and broader clinical roles Practice guidance on women's cardiovascular health underscores the expanding role of obstetric and perinatal nursing in prevention, screening, and health promotion (Association of Women's Health, Obstetric & Neonatal Nursing, 2011). Integrating cardiovascular risk assessment and nurse-led education into perinatal pathways reflects an opportunity for nurses to address longer-term maternal morbidity and mortality through prevention and continuity of care.

Discussion

The reviewed evidence indicates three intersecting priorities for promoting obstetric nursing practice:

Measurement and CQI: Nursing-sensitive indicators aligned with CQI methodologies yield measurable improvements in core clinical outcomes (e.g., breastfeeding, postpartum hemorrhage rates) and experience metrics. Successful scale-up requires leadership support, data infrastructure, and frontline nurse engagement.

Process standardization: Acuity-based triage instruments and standard operating procedures enhance timeliness, reduce variability, and enable data-driven staffing. Training and change management are prerequisites for effective adoption.

Equity and respectful care: Redressing inequities requires explicit curricula on implicit bias and anti-racism, embedding RMC into institutional policies, and monitoring respectful care metrics. Education alone is insufficient without system-level accountability and culture change.

Implications for Practice, Education, and Policy

Implement and monitor nursing-sensitive obstetric quality indicators within CQI cycles; provide training in data use and quality methods for nursing teams.

Adopt standardized acuity-based obstetric triage tools and integrate triage data into staffing and resource-planning processes.

Incorporate anti-racism, implicit-bias, and respectful maternity care modules into prelicensure and continuing education; align competency assessments with respectful care outcomes.

Expand nurse-led preventive services (e.g., cardiovascular risk screening/counseling) across antenatal and postpartum care pathways.

Establish institutional metrics for respectful care and equity, and require transparent reporting and remediation processes.

Limitations

This review is a focused synthesis of a limited set of articles rather than a systematic review. The selection may not capture all relevant literature, and study designs varied in rigor; recommendations should be applied alongside broader evidence appraisal.

Conclusion Promoting obstetric nursing practice requires integrating measurable quality indicators with CQI processes, standardizing critical workflows such as triage, and centering equity and respectful care in education and policy. Educators, clinical leaders, and policymakers should prioritize these strategies to advance safety, quality, and equity in obstetric services.

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UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF DIGITAL MARKETING IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY: TRENDS, APPROACHES, AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Elton Noti¹

Abstract: *Digitization, which has revolutionized the tourism industry, also altered the manner in which value is created and communicated to customers by businesses. This paper introduces a literature review on the development process and best practices focused on digital marketing in the tourism sector. Over the past decade, there have been numerous peer-reviewed articles written on previously unexplored aspects regarding how businesses derive and communicate values to their target audiences. The review integrates current situations and findings from theoretical approaches on digital marketing environments such as social media marketing, content marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), influencers, and personalization enabled by data analytics. The conclusion shows an increasing trend among successful tourism businesses on implementing total digital marketing strategies to utilize multiple digital tools to improve overall customer engagement and conversion rate on bookings. It also focuses on areas where there is a knowledge gap among smaller tourism businesses regarding insufficient expertise to develop optimized digital marketing practices.*

Keywords: digital marketing, tourism enterprises, literature review, social media, brand loyalty, online engagement, destination marketing

JEL: M31, L83, O33

Introduction

The global economy's rapid transformation in the digital age has radically changed the nature of the tourism sector, impacting the ways in which value can be created, communicated, and delivered to the customer. During the last decade, the tourism sector has witnessed the growing use of digital marketing channels by tourism businesses in order to raise competitiveness and conversion rates (Tafesse & Wien, 2018; Mariani et al., 2019). The use of various forms of digital technologies such as: social media networks, search engines, influencers, and personalized systems has gradually become a fundamental support for tourism businesses in order to target their desired audiences more efficiently and gain increased brand loyalty. The growing use of digital marketing in the tourism sector has become a fundamental need for tourism businesses in order to gain increased significance in the competitive tourism market. This concept is supported by various recent studies in the field of tourism management (Leung et al., 2013; Kaur, 2017).

Despite the current level of sector development, it becomes clear that certain digital marketing disparities do exist, and small and medium enterprises within the tourism industry may not possess either the digital knowhow or strategic perspectives required for their comprehensive and informed implementation of digital marketing opportunities. Furthermore, tourism businesses are currently facing new needs and challenges that require systematic and comprehensive academic review. Such reviews are essential for summarizing and critically analyzing recent trends and developments in digital marketing. In particular, they help clarify how digital marketing practices and processes contribute to value creation within tourism contexts.

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Given the above considerations, this study conducts a comprehensive literature review covering the past ten years, with a specific focus on digital marketing approaches used by tourism enterprises. By examining peer-reviewed journal articles, the review aims to highlight contemporary developments, identify best practices, and outline existing limitations in digital marketing adoption. The paper also discusses implications for future research and offers insights for enhancing digital readiness among tourism businesses.

The main aim of this study is to explore the current digital marketing practices in the tourism sector by analyzing trends, theoretical approaches, and evidence from peer-reviewed literature published over the past decade.

Research Objectives

This study aims to address the following objectives:

1. To analyse the main digital marketing tools and platforms, including social media, content marketing, SEO, influencer marketing, and personalization—used within the tourism industry.
2. To explore the best practices implemented by successful tourism enterprises that bring higher customer engagement and conversion rates.
3. To identify existing gaps and challenges, particularly among SME-s tourism businesses with limited digital capabilities.
4. To provide some proposals for future research focused on improving digital marketing strategies in the tourism sector.

Research Questions

Based on the above objectives, the study raises the following research questions (RQs):

- Which digital marketing tools and platforms have been most commonly found within tourism businesses based on findings from research studies?
- What best practices determine successful digital marketing performance for the tourism industry?
- What limitations and capabilities gaps exist for the adoption of efficient online digital marketing strategies specifically by SME-s?
- How this research can support tourism businesses in improving their digital transformation readiness?

Literature review

Digital marketing has become an important part of the tourism industry's change, transforming how travel companies demonstrate value, talk to customers, and get an advantage over their competitors. Research indicates that digital technologies ranging from social media to data analytics are becoming vital to corporate success and tourist decision-making (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015)

The shift from traditional advertising to interactive and customer-centered communication is the theoretical basis for digital marketing in the tourism sector. Xiang et al. (2015) say that digital platforms allow travelers access to content, reviews, and real-time information made by other travelers, which impacts how they make judgments. Buhalis and Foerste (2015) argue that "smart tourism" ecosystems integrate contextual, social, and mobile data to generate customized experiences and collaboratively create value for both enterprises and tourists.

These conceptual frameworks show that digital marketing is a dynamic system that relies on technology enabled value creation, instead of just being an extension of traditional marketing.

Social media is one of the most important digital marketing tools for the tourism business actually. Leung et al. (2013) found that platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are very important channels for making a place look good and bringing in tourists. According to empirical studies (Mariani, Di Felice, & Mura, 2019), the management of online communities and user-generated content (UGC) has a significant effect on travel intentions and brand loyalty.

The strategic value of social engagement is reflected in increased interaction levels, stronger electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) effects, and an enhanced destination image among destination marketing organizations (DMOs) that strategically utilize social media

To understand what people think about a business and how they act when they visit it, it is important to have high quality digital material including blogs, videos, infographics, and virtual tours. Hassan and Soliman (2021) say that good content marketing makes customers think more highly of the reliability of a site, encourages repeat commerce, and builds trust in visitors.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is an important part of digital marketing performance since studies demonstrate that optimized keywords, mobile responsiveness, and website loading speed have a direct effect on how visible a website is online and how many people react.

Influencer marketing is a rapidly growing sector of travel marketing. Influencers are trustworthy people who shape opinions, provide authenticity, and influence customer decisions. Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2018) say that the credibility of an influencer affects the image of a destination, gets followers more involved, and makes people more likely to visit promoted places.

The results show how important real communication and social proof are in today's digital tourism marketing.

In sophisticated digital marketing, personalization, AI, and data analytics are becoming more and more crucial. Also, tourism businesses who are good at digital marketing, including using analytics, targeting, and automation, have much happier customers and better marketing results.

Personalization tactics that tailor communications to each person's preferences can help businesses better serve their consumers and increase conversion rates.

In addition to this, SME-s still face certain problems with digitalization. Navío-Marco et al. (2018) highlight that many small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) don't have the financial resources, strategic skills, or tech knowledge to use the latest digital marketing technologies. Because of this difference, they are less visible, have fewer chances to connect with customers, and are less competitive than bigger companies.

The literature consistently recommends for enhanced support, digital training programs, and readily accessible technologies to improve SMEs' digital readiness and reduce capability gaps.

Some of the newest trends affecting digital marketing are chatbots powered by artificial intelligence for customer service, immersive technologies like AR and VR, the Internet of Things (IoT) in smart tourism ecosystems, and online communication that focuses on sustainability.

Researchers underline that tourism organizations need to quickly adapt to new technologies in order to stay competitive and suit the changing needs of visitors.

Methodology

This study is based on a systematic literature review methodology to examine current trends, approaches, and future perspectives of digital marketing within the tourism industry. The purpose of the

methodological process is to ensure a rigorous and transparent procedure for identifying, selecting, analyzing, and synthesizing peer-reviewed academic research published over the past decade.

A systematic literature review (SLR) was chosen as the primary research design because it enables the integration of diverse empirical and theoretical findings into a coherent analytical framework. The SLR approach is widely recognized for its capacity to minimize bias, enhance reliability, and provide a comprehensive assessment of existing literature. This methodology aligns with the study's aim to provide an evidence based understanding of digital marketing strategies implemented in the tourism sector.

A structured research was conducted in major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, Google Scholar etc. Search terms were developed using a combination of keywords, Boolean operators, and controlled vocabulary where available, such as: *“digital marketing” and tourism*, *“social media marketing” and tourism*, *“content marketing” and “tourism industry”*, *SEO or “search engine optimization” and tourism*, *influencer marketing and tourism etc.*

Searches were limited to articles published between 2013 and 2024, reflecting a decade of research influenced by rapid technological progress in tourism. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were included.

To ensure quality and relevance, articles were selected according to predefined criteria such as:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Published between 2013–2024
- Focus on digital marketing within tourism, hospitality, or destination marketing
- Empirical, conceptual, or theoretical studies
- Articles published in English
- Studies examining tools such as social media, SEO, content marketing, influencers, or data-driven personalization

Due to the fact that this study relies only on secondary data from published sources, people were not and no ethical approval was required.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study show several consistent patterns in how digital marketing is applied, optimized, and positioned within the tourism industry. Among the reviewed studies, digital marketing is introduced as a strategic process that integrates multiple online platforms and data-driven tools to enhance customer engagement and business performance. The results reflect both the effects of digital marketing practices among leading tourism enterprises and the persistent challenges faced by smaller businesses in achieving digital transformation.

The literature consistently show that successful tourism businesses adopt comprehensive and integrated digital marketing strategies. Rather than relying on a single platform, high-performing tourism enterprises combine (See figure 1):

- Social media marketing
- Content marketing
- Search engine optimization (SEO)
- Influencer partnerships
- Personalization and data analytics

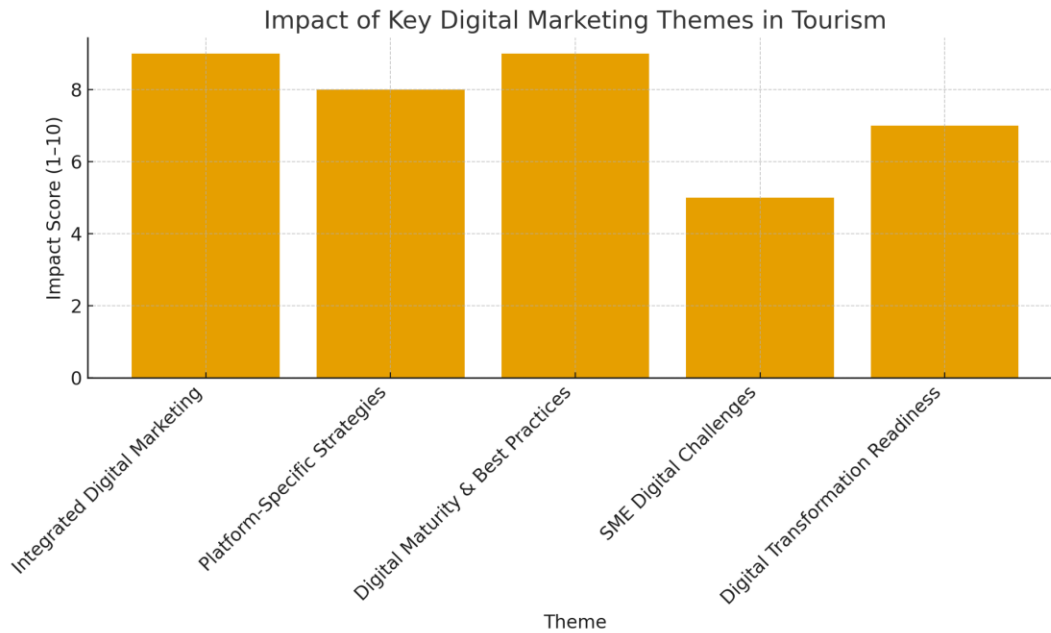


Figure 1. Impact of Key Digital Marketing Themes in Tourism

Figure 1 illustrates five major digital marketing themes identified in the literature and evaluates their relative impact on tourism business performance. The “impact score” reflects how strongly each theme contributes to customer engagement, online visibility, and booking conversions.

1. Integrated Digital Marketing

This theme refers to the combined use of multiple digital platforms (e.g., social media, SEO, content, influencers) to create a cohesive and consistent marketing approach. Integrated strategies strengthen every stage of the customer journey—from awareness to booking—resulting in significantly higher engagement and conversion rates.

2. Platform Specific Strategies

This theme involves tailoring marketing efforts to the strengths of each platform (e.g., Instagram for visual storytelling, SEO for search visibility, YouTube for long-form video). Each platform contributes uniquely to visibility, trust building, or interaction. When businesses adapt their content to the characteristics of each channel, marketing effectiveness increases.

3. Digital Maturity & Best Practices

This theme captures a business’s ability to use digital tools professionally and strategically—analytics, consistent content, optimized websites, automation, etc. Companies which are focused on digital marketing strategies perform better overall because they maintain strategic coherence, and continuously optimize their digital presence.

4. SME Digital Challenges

This theme represents the barriers faced by small and medium-sized tourism enterprises: limited digital skills, low budgets, outdated websites, and lack of strategic direction. The lower score does *not* mean that the theme is less important. It reflects its negative impact on

performance. These challenges reduce engagement, visibility, and booking potential, restricting SMEs' competitiveness.

5. Digital Transformation Readiness

This includes a business's ability to adopt and integrate new technologies, staff training, investment, analytics tools and CRM systems. Companies that are digitally advanced respond more effectively to technological changes, implement modern strategies, and deliver better customer experiences, which contributes to improved performance.

Overall, Figure 1 shows that successful tourism businesses are those that adopt integrated, multi-platform strategies, build strong digital capabilities, and invest in digital transformation, while SMEs continue to face digital barriers that limit their marketing effectiveness.

Studies show that tourism businesses using multi channel digital strategies experience higher customer interaction, stronger brand visibility, and improved booking conversion rates. These findings align with the shift toward experience-driven marketing, where engagement is built through storytelling, visual content, peer recommendations, and tailored communication.

The review emphasize that each digital platform contributes differently to tourism marketing outcomes:

- **Social media** - (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook) enables visual storytelling and emotional engagement, influencing travel intentions.
- **Content marketing**—blogs, videos, builds trust, and strengthens destination image.
- **SEO** improves discoverability and search ranking, which is essential for smaller destinations and small tourism enterprises.
- **Influencers** offer authenticity and credibility, creating perceptions through personal experiences and targeted appeal to niche audiences.
- **Personalization technologies**, including algorithmic recommendations and AI-based chatbots, allow tourism businesses to deliver customized information and offers, increasing satisfaction and booking interest.

The findings indicate that platform complementarity, as opposed to platform substitution, produces the most effective marketing outcomes.

High performing tourism businesses demonstrate several best practices that are mentioned repeatedly across the literature (See figure 2):

- Consistent content creation with strong narrative coherence. Brands that maintain a unified narrative across platforms build stronger emotional engagement.
- Use of data-driven decision-making. Analytics inform content performance, customer preferences, and segmentation strategies.
- Investment in SEO and website optimization. Faster, mobile-friendly, and keyword-optimized sites significantly improve customer retention.
- Strategic collaboration with influencers. Partnering with niche influencers increases credibility and expands reach.
- Personalized customer journey design. Tailored messaging and contextual recommendations increase booking likelihood.

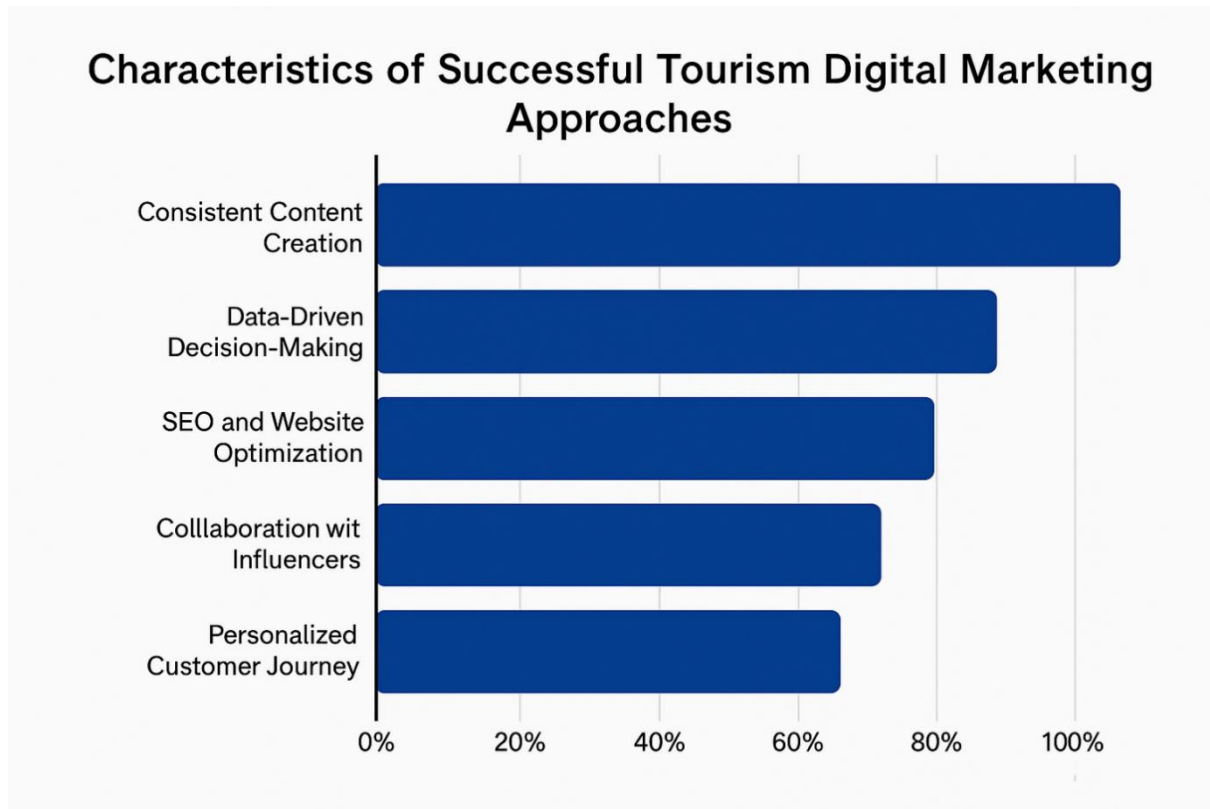


Figure 2: Characteristics of successful tourism digital marketing approaches

Although digital marketing adoption is increasing, the literature identifies persistent weaknesses, especially among small and medium-sized tourism businesses (SMEs). Key challenges include low levels of digital literacy and expertise where many SMEs lack staff with the technical skills to implement advanced digital marketing strategies, limited financial and technological resources because smaller businesses often cannot invest in analytics platforms, SEO tools, or professional content creation with fragmented or inconsistent online presence (SMEs frequently rely on a single platform or outdated website, reducing digital visibility).

The findings indicate that improving digital transformation readiness within tourism businesses requires:

- Continuous digital training and capacity building, especially for SMEs;
- Government and institutional support for digital literacy, platform adoption, and innovation;
- Digital infrastructure upgrades that support analytics, automation, and multi-channel integration;
- Further research on SME-specific challenges, tools, and digital solutions.

The literature suggests that increasing digital readiness is essential for ensuring competitive resilience and equitable growth across the tourism sector.

Finally, figure 3 presents a conceptual model which integrates the main digital marketing components identified in the literature review and illustrates how they collectively influence customer engagement and conversion in the tourism sector.

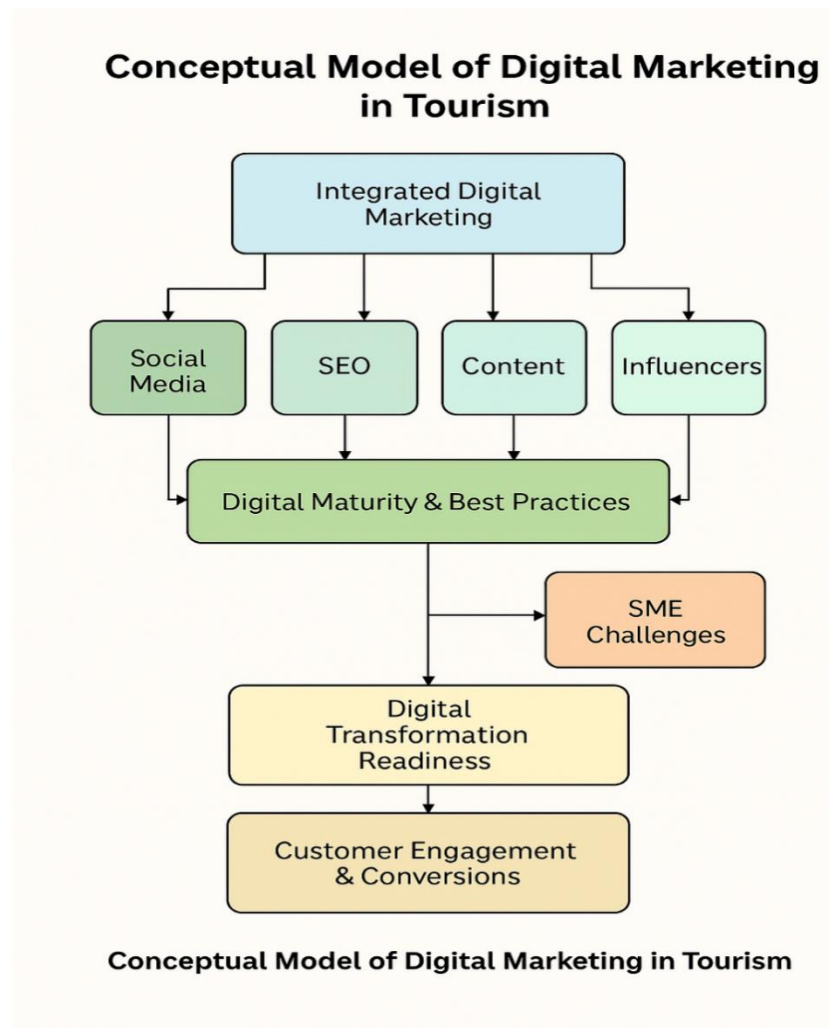


Figure 3. Conceptual model of digital marketing in tourism

The findings of this study show that digital marketing has become essential to the competitiveness and visibility of tourism enterprises. A central theme introduced from the results is that integrated, multi-platform digital strategies, combining social media, content marketing, SEO, influencer partnerships, and data-driven personalization lead to significantly stronger customer engagement and booking conversions. Consistent with prior research, tourism enterprises are increasingly operating within “smart” digital systems where the integration of multiple channels and technologies enables the creation of value for tourists. (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015). The trends from isolated promotional activities to coordinated digital strategies reflects broader transformations in consumer behavior, where travelers rely on interactive media, peer-generated content, and personalized messaging at every stage of the decision-making process.

The review also highlights the differentiated contribution of platform specific tools. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook remain the most important ones to destination image formation and emotional effects (Leung et al., 2013), while content marketing continues to foster credibility and trust through rich experiential storytelling . Despite its lower visual prominence, SEO remains a critical mechanism for enhancing online discoverability, with empirical evidence indicating that well-optimized websites generate higher-quality traffic and improve destination. (Hassan & Soliman, 2021). Influencer marketing further reinforces authenticity and user trust, as influencers act as credible intermediaries whose experiential interpretations create tourist attitudes.(Casaló et al., 2018).

A major contribution of the findings concerns the role of digital maturity and organizational readiness. Tourism enterprises that adopt data-driven practices and commit to continuous digital capability

development demonstrate superior marketing performance. Such performance allows firms to adapt to technological innovations more quickly.

However, the review also reveals persistent digitalization gaps among SMEs, which lack the resources, skills, and strategic orientation necessary for effective digital marketing. This is consistent with research showing that fragmented digital presence and limited digital literacy hinder the ability of small tourism businesses to compete in increasingly digital markets (Navío-Marco et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This literature review examined the evolving role of digital marketing in the tourism sector, highlighting the strategic significance of multi-platform digital approaches and the increasing reliance on data driven practices. The synthesis of peer-reviewed studies published over the past decade reveals that digital marketing is no longer an optional promotional tool but a foundational component of tourism competitiveness.

Tourism enterprises that integrate social media, content marketing, SEO, influencer strategies, and personalization technologies demonstrate substantially higher levels of customer engagement, brand visibility, and booking conversion.

These findings confirm that comprehensive digital strategies create more coherent customer journeys and contribute directly to improved marketing effectiveness.

The conceptual model developed from this review offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the interaction between digital marketing components, digital maturity, SME challenges, and digital transformation readiness. This model can guide future empirical research aimed at identifying the most effective combinations of digital marketing tools and assessing their impact across different tourism contexts. Additionally, the findings show the need for more research exploring SMEs' digital transformation pathways, cost effective marketing solutions, and the long term influence of innovative technologies such as artificial intelligence, automation, and immersive media on tourism promotion.

Overall, this review contributes to a clearer understanding of the strategic role digital marketing plays in enhancing tourism business performance and offers direction for future studies. As the tourism sector continues to be developed in response to technological advances and affecting consumer behaviors, strengthening digital capabilities will be essential for ensuring sustainable growth, competitive advantage, and meaningful engagement with increasingly digital oriented travelers.

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THE NEED FOR RELATIONSHIP MARKETING IN NURSE EDUCATION WITHIN HEALTHCARE MARKETS

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Abstract: Maternity Hospital of Tirana “Queen Geraldina”

Nurse education providers are under strategic pressure as healthcare markets increase competitiveness for clinical placements, funding, students, and employer engagement. A framework for improving healthcare relationships, student results, employer connections, and continuing professional development (CPD) markets is provided by relationship marketing (RM), an approach that places a high priority on long-term, trust-based stakeholder involvement, co-creation of value, and reciprocal benefits. In order to (a) define RM in nursing education, (b) outline operational techniques, (c) pinpoint advantages and disadvantages, and (d) suggest areas for evaluation and policy support, this work synthesizes theory and empirical data from 20 sources. The results show that RM can secure placement capacity, improve employability alignment, increase student retention, and create sustainable CPD pipelines; nevertheless, formal governance, communication systems, recognition mechanisms, and evaluation metrics are needed for implementation.

Keywords: relationship marketing; nurse education; clinical placements; university–healthcare partnerships; employer engagement; customer relationship management (CRM); continuing professional development (CPD); graduate employability; value co-creation; stakeholder engagement; workforce development; health education markets

JEL classification: L1, L11, L14, L25, L24, L84, M31

Introduction

Nurse education sits at the intersection of higher education and healthcare delivery, reliant on durable partnerships with clinical sites, employers, regulators, students, and alumni. Market pressures—workforce shortages, constrained placement capacity, and heightened accountability—demand strategic approaches that move beyond transactional interactions (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Relationship marketing (RM) emphasizes trust, commitment, communication, and value co-creation (Grönroos, 1994; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and its constructs translate directly to the challenges facing nurse education (Ballantyne, Varey, & Payne, 2011). This manuscript converts RM principles into actionable strategies for nurse education and outlines an agenda for implementation and evaluation.

¹ PhD

Methods

Theoretical RM research and practical studies about employer engagement, clinical education, university-healthcare partnerships, CPD, and CRM technology were combined in a targeted literature synthesis. Twenty theoretical, empirical, and applied sources were chosen for their applicability to the application of RM in nursing education; these sources influenced the thematic synthesis and useful suggestions.

Conceptualizing: RM for Nurse Education

Instead of viewing stakeholders as one-time clients, RM reframes them as long-term relationship partners, including employers, students, alumni, and clinical partners. Long-term cooperation and service performance are predicted by the core RM processes of trust, commitment, communication, and mutual value creation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Eisingerich & Bell, 2008). RM promotes continual employer feedback loops, reciprocal resource exchange, and co-created curricula in education–practice ecosystems (Spohrer & Maglio, 2008; Hjalager, 2010).

Why RM Matters: Key Outcomes Securing clinical placements

Clinical placements are a valuable but limited resource. Strong, trustworthy relationships foster creativity in practice-based learning and lessen conflict in placement distribution (Clarke & Lunt, 2018). Joint committees and formalized governance aid in managing capacity and institutionalizing agreements (Pang & Byrne, 2017). Sustained involvement is encouraged by acknowledging and supporting clinical educators (Hussein & Hirst, 2016).

Improving student recruitment, retention, and satisfaction

According to Larkin and Callaghan (2019), students choose programs based on their perceived quality and future employability; individualized communication, mentorship, and alumni networks encourage loyalty and retention. Relevant to student experiences in academic and clinical contexts, service encounter literature emphasizes the significance of pleasant interactions and service design in influencing satisfaction (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990).

Enhancing graduate employability and employer alignment

In order to improve graduate preparedness and fortify recruiting pipelines, RM encourages employer participation in competency definition, assessment design, and placement evaluation (Lloyd & Mitchell, 2018; Parry & Dowling, 2016). Working together with companies to co-create courses guarantees their relevance and facilitates worker migrations (Drouin & Landry, 2010).

Developing CPD and lifelong-learning markets

In addition to addressing the demand for worker upskilling, consistent employer and alumni engagement through customized CPD courses generates sustainable revenue streams. CPD design and commercialization are directly impacted by RM tactics, such as segmentation, tailored offerings, and long-term service partnerships (Parry & Dowling, 2016; Lee & Kotler, 2014).

RM Operationalization: Useful Techniques Mapping and segmenting stakeholders To customize engagement strategies and resource allocation, identify and rank partners (e.g., strategic employers, high-volume healthcare locations, alumni cohorts) (Ballantyne et al., 2011).

Formalized partnership frameworks

Memoranda of understanding, joint steering groups, and shared evaluation metrics institutionalize relationships, clarify expectations, and support accountability (Pang & Byrne, 2017).

Communication systems and CRM technology

CRM platforms enable tracking of interactions, personalization of outreach, scheduling of joint activities, and systematic feedback collection—enhancing responsiveness and continuity (Williams & Cole, 2020; Lee & Kotler, 2014).

Value co-creation and mutual benefit

Involve partners in curriculum design, simulation development, research projects, and CPD co-delivery to align incentives and generate shared value (Spohrer & Maglio, 2008; Hjalager, 2010).

Recognition and reciprocity for clinical educators

Formal recognition (career pathways, CPD access, academic titles) and reciprocal benefits sustain preceptorship and clinical teaching (Hussein & Hirst, 2016).

Alumni and employer engagement pipelines

Sustained touchpoints—mentoring programs, recruitment events, and feedback loops—convert alumni and employers into ongoing partners (Larkin & Callaghan, 2019).

Challenges and Barriers

Resource constraints and misaligned incentives

Clinical workloads, limited institutional funding, and differing priorities between healthcare organizations and universities impede relationship-building (Fitzgerald & Yelder, 2011). Large–small organization power asymmetries complicate negotiations and equitable value sharing (Clarke & Lunt, 2018).

Cultural and organizational silos

Siloed governance and lack of joint accountability structures hinder co-creation and sustained collaboration (Pang & Byrne, 2017).

Data and evaluation limitations

Absence of integrated data systems and rigorous outcome metrics makes it difficult to demonstrate RM return on investment (Williams & Cole, 2020; Eisingerich & Bell, 2008).

Research and Evaluation

Agenda Empirical gaps include limited quantitative trials assessing RM interventions' impact on placement stability, graduate employment rates, student retention, and CPD revenue. Future research should employ quasi-experimental designs, cost-effectiveness analyses, and multi-site comparative studies to quantify benefits and identify context moderators (Eisingerich & Bell, 2008; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Policy and Practice Implications

Institutional leaders and policymakers should treat RM as strategic infrastructure. Investments in partnership personnel, CRM systems, incentives for clinical educators, and shared governance structures are recommended. Accreditation and funders could require demonstrable partnership outcomes and stakeholder engagement metrics to incentivize RM adoption (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006).

Conclusion

Relationship marketing offers a coherent, evidence-informed framework for addressing contemporary challenges in nurse education within healthcare markets. By prioritizing trust, commitment, co-creation, and long-term engagement, nurse education providers can secure placement capacity, align curricula with employer needs, enhance student outcomes, and develop sustainable CPD markets. Successful adoption requires institutional commitment, formal governance, data systems, and evaluation—an investment likely to strengthen education–practice integration and workforce readiness.

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ECONOMIC CONVERGENCE AND REGIONAL DISPARITIES IN BULGARIA: CATCHING UP AS A MYTH

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Abstract: *Bulgaria's path toward economic convergence with the average EU income levels, measured in purchasing power parity, is analyzed through several alternative forecasting scenarios. These scenarios make it possible to identify potential timeframes for reaching the European average. Drawing on core-periphery theory, the study demonstrates that even successful macroeconomic convergence is accompanied by persistent internal regional disparities. Structural constraints to full convergence are identified, supporting the thesis of permanent market segmentation. Based on these findings, the paper formulates guidelines for differentiated marketing strategies that reflect the economic realities of individual regions.*

Keywords: Economic convergence, integration, regional disparities, market segmentation, purchasing power parity

JEL: R11, O47, F15

Introduction

The narrative of the “rapid catching-up” of Central and Eastern European countries following their accession to the European Union has gained wide popularity. This optimism, however, constitutes a fundamental misconception, sustained by aggregated statistics that conceal two distinct economic realities.

The first reality is the law of diminishing convergence, according to which the rate of economic growth slows as a country approaches its long-term equilibrium level or the income levels of more advanced economies (Barro & Sala-i-Martin, 1992). The second is the core-periphery mechanism, whereby economic integration leads to the concentration of economic activity and prosperity in core regions, while peripheral areas lag behind or decline (Krugman, 1991).

Bulgaria represents a textbook example of this dual dynamic. While the national indicator reached 66% of the EU average in purchasing power parity terms in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024), Sofia already exceeds 130%, in stark contrast to several regions within the country (Institute for Market Economics, 2024). This is not a picture of uniform convergence, but rather one of internal division, confirming theoretical predictions of persistent inequality in integrated markets.

The objective of this study is to demonstrate that the notion of rapid catching-up is an illusion. Slowing convergence at higher income levels, combined with the mechanisms described by core-periphery theory, indicates that Bulgaria is not converging evenly toward the European average but is instead restructuring into an economy characterized by enduring and deep regional disparities.

This insight is of critical importance for strategic planning within the country, from investors to marketing professionals. The pronounced divide between a dynamic core and a lagging

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periphery necessitates a fundamental rethinking of prevailing approaches. Acknowledging this reality represents the only realistic path toward effective marketing decisions.

Theoretical Framework

The core–periphery theoretical framework, rooted in the work of economists such as Paul Krugman, provides a foundational basis for understanding persistent economic disparities within integrated economic areas. Campos and Macchiarelli (2020) develop a method for measuring the peripheral status of countries within economic unions through dynamic analysis. Their research shows that the reduction of core–periphery gaps in the European Union following the establishment of the Economic and Monetary Union was largely driven by the introduction of the euro and increased competition. This suggests that monetary integration may facilitate convergence, but only under specific conditions and within a supportive institutional context.

The European experience, however, reveals a far more complex reality. As argued by Weissenbacher (2019), the uneven spatial distribution of economic activities generates economic, social, and territorial imbalances that are characteristic of the European economy, with these disparities intensifying in the context of the European Union’s eastward enlargement. These inequalities do not merely reflect temporary adjustment costs but rather constitute structural features inherent to the process of economic integration.

Persistence of Regional Inequalities

The persistence of divisions between the core and the periphery challenges optimistic assumptions about automatic convergence. Missos, Domenikos, and Pontis (2024) demonstrate that peripheral economies face structural constraints that go beyond their capacity to conduct economic policy in their own social interest.

Institutions also play a crucial role in the convergence process. Börzel and Langbein (2019) show that weak institutions, such as high levels of corruption, can transform economic backwardness into a persistent political problem. This implies that genuine convergence in Europe depends not solely on GDP growth, but on more complex and demanding institutional conditions.

Methodology

This study uses data from the Eurostat database, from which information on gross domestic product per capita in purchasing power standards (PPS) is extracted for all European Union member states for the period from 2013 to 2024. The PPS index is based on purchasing power parity (PPP) and uses the EU-27 average as the reference benchmark, set at 104.

Analytical Approach

In order to determine when Bulgaria may reach the European average income level, the analysis is based on two main components. First, the historical growth rate is calculated using Bulgaria’s GDP per capita index in PPS (based on PPP), which stood at 46 in 2013 and increased to 66 in 2024. This yields an average annual growth rate of approximately 3.33 percent. Second, this rate is projected forward in time, using the current Eurozone benchmark of 104 points in 2024 as the target level.

The calculation of the average annual growth rate indicates that Bulgaria’s GDP per capita in PPS increased by approximately 3.334 percent per year over the past eleven years. This implies

that, given an index value of 46 in 2013 and 66 in 2024, the average pace of improvement is obtained by comparing the final and initial values and calculating a uniform rate of increase over the entire period.

The results show that approximately fourteen years are required, including fractional months, suggesting that the projected date for reaching the target level would be toward the end of 2037.

Based on historical data expressed in current euros, a baseline dynamic forecasting model is constructed. This model accounts for the fact that the Eurozone benchmark is not static but increases over time. Analysis of the 2013–2024 period shows that Bulgaria recorded an average annual growth rate of 9.62 percent, while the corresponding rate for the Eurozone was 3.49 percent.

When these historical growth rates are applied to future projections, the dynamic model indicates that convergence of GDP per capita between Bulgaria and the Eurozone would occur after approximately 17.10 years from 2024, implying a convergence date around 2041.

This baseline, mechanical model serves as a reference point for discussion but does not account for a number of real-world factors that are likely to slow the process further. The most important of these is the declining growth rate that inevitably emerges as an economy approaches a higher level of development. Moreover, projections based on data in current euros are statistically misleading. Bulgaria’s high nominal growth rate of 9.62 percent reflects not only real economic advancement but also the strong effect of price and cost convergence—the process through which domestic prices, wages, and costs align with those in the European Union, manifested in higher inflation and exchange rate effects. A substantial share of this growth therefore does not represent genuine improvements in living standards but rather mirrors nominal convergence.

For this reason, analysis based on purchasing power parity (PPP) and its corresponding PPS indices constitutes the only meaningful and accurate approach for assessing real convergence in living standards. By eliminating differences in price levels, this method reveals how long and difficult the path toward true economic convergence actually is.

Results and discussion

Convergence Forecasts - Analysis of Convergence at the National Level

A comparative analysis of convergence in the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) index reveals distinct trajectories for the economies of Southeastern Europe. Using Eurostat data for the period 2013-2024, the following annual growth rates are observed. Bulgaria shows an annual index growth of 3.33%, moving from 46 to 66 points. Romania demonstrates an annual growth of 3.27%, progressing from 54 to 77 points. Croatia exhibits a lower annual growth of 2.25%, developing from 61 to 78 points.

Figure 1: GDP per capita in PPS

GDP per capita in PPS	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
GEO (Labels)												
Euro area – 20 countries	108	107	107	107	106	106	105	104	104	105	105	104
Bulgaria	46	48	49	51	52	53	55	57	60	62	63	66
Germany	126	128	126	126	126	125	122	123	120	120	118	116

France	109	108	106	105	103	103	105	104	101	97	99	98
Croatia	61	60	61	62	63	64	67	66	70	72	78	78
Luxembourg	277	280	279	276	266	258	249	256	263	250	248	245
Romania	54	55	56	58	62	65	69	72	72	72	75	77

Source: Convergence of the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) Index in Southeast Europe (2013-2024)

According to the data used, Bulgaria lags behind. Its faster growth rate partially compensates for its lower starting position, but a persistent gap with Romania remains, with convergence projected around 2041. Croatia faces an extended time horizon. Despite a higher starting index level of 78 points, its significantly slower growth rate of 2.25% is noteworthy.

Convergence of GDP per capita in Current Euros

An alternative analysis, using Eurostat data for GDP per capita in current euros, provides an additional perspective. For Bulgaria, GDP per capita increased from €5,870 in 2013 to €16,260 in 2024, yielding an average annual growth rate of 9.62%. With a target level for the Eurozone of €43,400 in 2024, the projection indicates a requirement of 17.2 years, leading to the end of 2041. Based on the reported historical data, a clear trend is observed: as the level of GDP per capita rises, the average annual growth rate declines. This confirms the theoretical principle of slowing convergence.

Figure 2: GDP and main components per capita

GDP and main components per capita, EUR	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
GEO (Labels)												
Euro area – 20 countries	29,510	30,170	31,160	31,920	33,080	34,110	35,160	33,610	36,500	39,610	41,950	43,400
Bulgaria	5,870	6,080	6,560	7,070	7,720	8,340	9,250	9,440	10,960	13,310	14,660	16,260
Germany	35,600	36,960	37,950	39,030	40,630	41,800	43,030	42,020	44,910	48,340	50,660	51,830
France	32,280	32,620	33,200	33,530	34,290	35,080	36,090	34,280	36,920	38,920	41,340	42,590
Croatia	10,590	10,560	10,960	11,610	12,430	13,310	14,130	12,980	15,070	17,540	20,530	22,200
Luxembourg	90,030	92,760	95,090	96,230	97,440	98,870	100,420	102,190	113,920	117,100	122,970	127,030
Romania	7,150	7,560	8,090	8,500	9,510	10,510	11,520	11,390	12,590	14,740	16,870	18,560

Source: Convergence of GDP per capita in current euros in Southeast Europe and selected EU economies (2013-2024)

Romania, starting the period at €7,150 (2013), developed at a rate of 9.01%. Croatia, starting from a significantly higher level of €10,590, recorded a lower average growth of 6.93%. Bulgaria, with the lowest starting position of €5,870, achieved the highest rate of 9.62%. This inverse relationship between the initial level and the growth rate leads to a fundamental conclusion for the future: the growth of these economies will inevitably slow with each passing year.

Regional Disparities: The Hidden Reality

The Dominance of Sofia and the Decline of the Periphery

While national statistics suggest stable convergence, Bulgaria's internal geography reveals a fundamentally different picture. According to the National Statistical Institute (2023), the Sofia-Capital region contributed 41% of Bulgaria's GDP in 2022. Cash flows, skilled labor, and foreign direct investment are drawn towards established centers, creating self-reinforcing cycles of development. The internal regional disparities in Bulgaria have not diminished in the period following EU accession; on the contrary, they have generally increased (Hadzhinikolov, 2021), partly due to the concentration of EU funds in the more developed southern part of the country, and particularly in Sofia.

Demographic Crisis and Geographic Fragmentation

Regional disparities are intensified by dramatic demographic processes. The young and working-age population concentrates in and around major cities and along main transport corridors, while peripheral regions, especially in Northwestern Bulgaria, suffer from severe depopulation (Institute for Market Economics, 2024). This outflow of people leads to a deepening of economic differences. Consequently, while the country as a whole approaches the EU average, the income gap between the richest and poorest regions has widened (International Monetary Fund, 2020). This means that national convergence goes hand in hand with regional divergence.

Structural Constraints on Full Convergence

The persistence of the divide between the core and the periphery suggests structural limits to convergence, not merely temporal delays. Iammarino, Rodriguez-Pose, and Storper (2019) argue that integration into global and European capitalist systems creates a hierarchy that proves remarkably resilient. The economic geography literature describes this phenomenon as a "ladder without upper rungs," where peripheral economies can improve their relative position but face fundamental barriers to achieving core status.

Several mechanisms perpetuate this structure. Agglomeration economies manifest as capital centers offer productivity advantages through specialized labor markets, supplier networks, and knowledge spillovers, which cannot be easily replicated in peripheral regions (Egri and Lengyel, 2023). Asymmetries in capital mobility are evident as financial flows are predominantly directed towards established centers with better infrastructure, institutions, and market access, while peripheral regions struggle to attract sustainable investment (Weisenbacher, 2019). Skilled labor migration sees educated workers moving to dynamic urban centers, draining the periphery of the qualified workforce necessary for economic advancement. Furthermore, historical development patterns have created institutional frameworks that favor certain regions while constraining others (Börzel & Langbein, 2019).

European integration leads to a paradox wherein, aiming to bring regions closer, it often inadvertently deepens inequalities. This mechanism operates both within individual countries, where capitals draw resources from the provinces, and across the entire Union, where wealthier member states attract capital, talent, and influence from poorer ones. Thus, the very act of "catching up" may prove impossible because the system reproduces, rather than overcomes, existing hierarchies.

Recommendations for Marketing Strategies

Rejecting the Myth of a Unified National Market

The analysis clearly demonstrates that Bulgaria is not a unified, homogeneous market. It is deeply divided between a dynamic core, represented by Sofia and secondary centers like Plovdiv and Varna, and a periphery encompassing the remaining regions, especially the northwestern ones, with vast economic, income, and demographic disparities. The first and fundamental recommendation is to stop viewing Bulgaria as a single entity. Every marketing strategy must begin with mandatory regional segmentation. This entails a differentiated approach for Sofia, where income is above the EU average; for secondary cities; and for peripheral areas.

Adapting Product Portfolios to Regional Reality

Profound differences in purchasing power exist between regions, necessitating a differentiation of product offerings. Sofia and secondary centers can absorb premium products and services comparable to those in developed European markets, while peripheral regions require modified, price-accessible options. Business models must account for the fact that uniform offerings across the entire country are inefficient. Companies should develop parallel product lines or adapt their existing products to meet the specific economic conditions in different regions. Attempts to sell identical products at identical prices in Sofia and peripheral areas are doomed to fail in one of the two zones.

Focusing on Demographic Reality

The analysis highlights the demographic crisis in the periphery and the concentration of the young, educated, and solvent population in the core. Marketing investments and efforts must follow demographic flows. This means a proportionally greater focus on digital marketing and urbanized centers, where consumers are actually concentrated. Attempts to develop a market in depopulated peripheral areas may be ineffective. The implication for marketers is fundamental. Planning for the "Bulgarian market" is an anachronism. Effective strategy requires the recognition of this specificity.

Conclusion

The formal date for catching up to the EU average is a statistical illusion with little practical significance. When the national Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) index reaches a value of 104, it will not mean that Bulgaria is "like Europe." It will mean that we have created a hybrid economy with a European core and a periphery with significantly lower values. The core, represented by Sofia and key cities, will continue to show higher indicators in the same way that countries like Germany, France, and Luxembourg have higher indicators than peripheral countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia. The periphery will remain with incomes below the EU average, regardless of national statistics. Consequently, catching up to European levels is only possible on a regional scale. While one-third of Bulgaria approaches European standards, the remaining two-thirds will remain in a state of persistent economic periphery.

The right question is no longer "When will Bulgaria catch up with Europe?" but rather "Which part of Bulgaria can catch up with Europe, and which part remains outside the scope of this process?" The analysis provides a categorical answer: the core is already on a trajectory of convergence, while the periphery is not merely lagging behind but is turning into a permanently underdeveloped, demographically and economically aging space.

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THE ROLE OF THOUGHT LEADERS AND TECH INFLUENCERS IN THE EMERGING AND FUTURE TECHNOLOGY INDUSTRIES

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Abstract: The scientific report on the topic "The Role of Thought Leaders and Tech Influencers in the Emerging and Future Technology Industries" aims to determine what the characteristics of Influencer Marketing in the industry of Emerging and Future Technologies are, what the current state of the industry landscape is, and what the role of Thought Leaders and Technology Influencers is.

The topic unites several practical spheres and theoretical areas. The reviewed problem is new and the subject of the study is current and relevant, as it relates to an emerging field that is still forming on a global scale. In this emerging field, the rules, frameworks of activity, interrelations and dependencies are not yet regulated. The limitations in the research and development of the topic are rooted in its degree of novelty and lack of previous academic works in this area. The subject matter is new, for both the academic and the business environment. The practical area to which it refers is at the intersection between technology, marketing, and business.

The main thesis to be explored, as part of a major future research, is that the role of Thought Leaders and Technological Influencers in the Emerging and Future Technology industries is significant and should be considered in several aspects – on the one hand to provide guidance, criticism, suggestions, and predictions for the global development of technologies, and on the other hand – to work with businesses in support of certain technological developments, brands, and products. There is no unified interpretation of the matter in the academic circles and a position on the problem has not yet been formed.

Keywords: Thought Leadership, Tech Influencers, Emerging Technologies, Influencer Marketing, B2B.

JEL: M300, M310, M370, M380, M390

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Introduction

The Influencer Marketing industry has gained significant momentum over the past decade. There are numerous studies on the subject, as well as practical knowledge, rules, and guidelines. A new niche under the Influencer Marketing field that only emerged a few years ago and is still in the process of shaping and growing, is Thought Leadership and Technology Influencing in the Emerging and Future Technology Industries. This new type of Influencer Marketing is fundamentally different from the well-known traditional Influencer Marketing, as it is about B2B ("business-to-business") activities in one of the fastest-growing, risky and difficult industries – the industry of Emerging and Future Technologies. In order to be called a "Thought Leader and Technology Influencer", a specialist must meet extremely niche and rarely met criteria – the specialist must be recognized by the industry and its participants as a global expert, must be proven both in the field of Emerging and Future Technologies and in the field of marketing, as well must have outstanding theoretical and practical knowledge and skills in both fields. Globally, the number of recognized "Thought Leaders and Technology Influencers" is extremely small, with the most influential being only 100. The participants and stakeholders in Thought Leadership and Technology Influencing in the field of Emerging and Future Technologies are: global experts, proven both in the field of technology and in the field of marketing; the largest global corporations; the most innovative businesses and companies; international companies with significant market share; governmental organisations and regulatory bodies; industry associations; investors and independent organisations.

The topic is new, both for the scientific community and for the business community. The research question, which is the focus of the study, is to determine the specific role of Thought Leaders and Technology Influencers in the Emerging and Future Technology industries. The subject matter is current, trending, novel, and of present interest in the B2B world, as it refers to a newly emerging field. The logical implications, deriving from the extend of novelty of the topic of this study and the deficiency of previous scientific works in this area, are causing significant limitations in examining and developing this topic. The subject presents fresh opportunity for the scientific community to explore an entirely new niche topic and to dwell on a new perspective in an unexplored area, given that Thought Leadership and Influencer Marketing in the technology industry is a modern phenomenon emerged at the intersection of marketing, technology, and business.

According to Thinkers360, "while B2C influencers are typically social media influencers and celebrities, the fact is that B2B influencers and thought leaders typically wear many hats in terms of their persona: they're academics, advisors, analysts, authors, consultants, entrepreneurs, executives, social media influencers, and speakers – and any combination thereof. These various roles all represent avenues for these thought leaders to reach their target audience and positively impact the world through their ideas." (www.thinkers360.com)

Literature review

The subject of this research is new in scientific and business terms. The development and organisation of this new field is currently being led by a small number of recognized industry experts. These experts are practitioners in the business field and are not involved in scientific work. This leads to the lack of scientific discussion on the topic. Until now, discussions remain only in business context. Since the topic is not yet explored in academic context, similar theories from related fields will be used for the purposes of scientific research.

Overview of theoretical literary sources

Neuhaus, Tina & Millemann, Jan & Nijssen, Ed. (2022) clearly highlight the absence of research, studies and existing scientific literature on Influencer Marketing in the business-to-business (B2B) context: “While there is a growing body of research on influencer marketing, it focuses almost exclusively on the consumer marketing context, and offers limited insights for business-to-business (B2B) organizations.” Moreover, these authors indicate that there is a notable gap in the exploration of the use of Influencer Marketing in B2B markets. This statement refers to the limitedness and narrowness of previous scientific research about the role of Influencer Marketing in B2B context in general, however, in the field of B2B Influencer Marketing in the Emerging and Future Technology Industries, a total absence of scientific research is present, with no previous research and works on the topic.

According to the authors themselves, the study of Neuhaus, Tina & Millemann, Jan & Nijssen, Ed. (2022) “contributes to theory by providing the first empirical conceptualization of the B2B influencer marketing phenomenon”. The present study aims to provide the first empirical scientific research on B2B Influencer Marketing the Emerging and Future Technology Industries.

Influencer Marketing

The increasing importance of Influencer Marketing in the B2B landscape creates a high need for more detailed and in-depth research into its characteristics and peculiarities in diverse business contexts. According to Appel, Grewal, Hadi & Stephen, 2020; Li, Larimo, & Leonidou (2020) “Influencer marketing is gaining popularity as a key component of firms' digital marketing strategy”. As Neuhaus, Tina & Millemann, Jan & Nijssen, Ed. (2022) point out, “while influencer marketing is often associated with consumer brands, multiple industry reports indicate that it is gaining momentum in the business-to-business (B2B) industries, too (e.g., Morgan, 2020; Hyder, 2019; Shea, 2018; TopRank Marketing, 2020)”. Influencer Marketing is not only gaining momentum in the business-to-business (B2B) industries, but it is becoming a substantial part of companies' marketing strategy. More and more B2B companies in the US and Western Europe are considering dedicating the major part of their marketing budgets for the purposes of B2B Influencer Marketing.

Qiu Z., Han H., Chen Y. & Wang T. (2025) provide the following definition of Influencer Marketing: “Influencer marketing is a new commercial model wherein brands promote their products or services through influencers, transforming the followers of these influencers into customers. The core of influencer marketing lies in converting the influence of influencers into commercial value. Once influencers have amassed a sufficient number of followers, they can generate economic benefits through advertising, endorsements, live-streaming sales, and paid content.” (p. 2).

According to numerous authors (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Steward, Narus, Roehm, & Ritz, 2019; Terho, Mero, Siutla, & Jaakkola, 2022), the shift in the well-known marketing models and the raising trend of adoption of B2B Influencer Marketing and Thought Leadership as a substantial part of companies' strategy is due to notable changes and alterations in B2B corporate buying behaviours – “The increasing interest in B2B influencer marketing is being driven by contemporary B2B buying behavior, where buyers have become more self-directed in their purchasing processes, and complete a significant number of purchase-related tasks before contacting potential vendors”. Shea (2018) points out that the trust in 3rd party renowned industry experts is a leading factor for B2B buyers, as they have trustworthiness in the authority of such experts. Shea (2018) also highlights the importance of digital content produced by such recognized experts – “In turn, the independent online research relies heavily on digital content, and B2B buyers trust in content produced by third-party experts and peers”.

The evident increase and steadily growing popularity of the implementation of B2B Influencer Marketing and Thought Leadership from globally recognized industry professionals in business strategies in the corporate landscape is due to a variety of factors over the last few years, among which are the need for authoritative and legitimate sources and the urge for more transparent and punctual industry discussions regarding the latest Emerging Technologies and their effect and application in the business world. As Neuhaus, Tina & Millemann, Jan & Nijssen, Ed. (2022) indicate, “Given the significant role of trust in forming B2B relationships, influencer marketing provides a credible means to influence the self-directed B2B buying processes”. Thus, currently B2B relationships are not only focused on the buying process and success rate, but companies are significantly intensifying their efforts to build long-term and meaningful relationships with the world’s most authoritative and respected Thought Leaders and B2B Tech Influencers. Neuhaus, Tina & Millemann, Jan & Nijssen, Ed. (2022) point out that Influencer Marketing is seen to provide substantial benefits to B2B companies, as industry case studies have proven. However, according to TopRank Marketing (2020), “60% of B2B firms report they do not have the skills or knowledge to implement influencer marketing programs, and one of the key reasons is that the current knowledge and best practices in influencer marketing come from consumer marketing contexts, which are not directly transferable to B2B contexts”. This statement designates the main reason behind the corporate need for external experts.

Given the newness of the phenomenon of B2B Influencer Marketing and the limited number of globally recognized industry experts in the field, this topic is still not being widely discussed in the scientific world. Neuhaus, Tina & Millemann, Jan & Nijssen, Ed. (2022) highlight that, “Despite the rapidly growing body of academic literature on influencer marketing, scholars have to date done relatively little to unveil the unique characteristics of the B2B influencer marketing phenomenon.”. What is more, these authors refer to a literature review by Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman (2021), who “identified 154 studies on influencer marketing, only one of which was conducted in the B2B context. In addition to the lack of B2B-specific insights, the scope of existing influencer marketing research has been relatively narrow.”.

Neuhaus, Tina & Millemann, Jan & Nijssen, Ed. (2022) refer to existing literature reviews (Hudders et al., 2021; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019; Vrontis, Makrides, Christofi, & Thrassou, 2021) which prove that the present research on Influencer Marketing is exclusively focused on “i) social media rather than other media channels, ii) product endorsements rather than broader collaborations with influencers, and iii) the effects on consumer attitudes, intentions and behaviours rather than organizational perspectives of using influencer marketing”. This is the reason why the present research will aim to provide not only definitions and specifications of the characteristics of B2B Influencer Marketing in the Emerging and Future Technologies Industries, but also to reveal important insider insights into the industry from an insider perspective from the point of view of one of the globally recognized B2B Thought Leaders and Technology Influencers. Due to the lack of previous substantial literature and research of the topic, a deep-dive into the industry-specific trends and characteristics will be aimed. As Neuhaus, Tina & Millemann, Jan & Nijssen, Ed. (2022) confirm, “the research on the concept of influencer marketing in the B2B context is limited”, which is why the present research will provide valuable insider view-points and opinions on the matter. Still, while there is no substantial effort in exploring, examining and explaining the phenomenon of B2B Influencer Marketing in different industries, the present reality is that companies are increasingly considering implementing B2B Influencer Marketing as part of their marketing mix, and many of the Big Tech corporations have already adopted such strategy. Neuhaus, Tina & Millemann, Jan & Nijssen, Ed. (2022) also highlight that “While B2B literature on influencer marketing is scant, the roles of expert and social opinion leader are central to the context of B2B marketing.”.

Influencers

For the purposes of the research, first, it is substantial to define the term “influencer”. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2022), “An influencer is a person who generates interest in something and inspires or guides the actions of others”. According to Neuhaus, Tina & Millemann, Jan & Nijssen, Ed. (2022), “influencer marketing can be defined as the process of leveraging individuals as marketing messengers who can induce attitudinal or behavioural change in others”. Other authors point out the main differences between Influencer Marketing and the rest of the forms of marketing communications in the traditional marketing mix. Sundermann & Raabe (2019) and Vrontis et al. (2021) claim that “the fundamental difference between influencer marketing and several other forms of marketing communications (e.g., advertising, content marketing, social media marketing) is that it is always conducted via a specific individual or group of individuals, rather than a faceless organization or brand”.

Mero et al. (2023) present a comprehensive table of existing definitions of the term “influencer” and “influencer marketing”:

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Table 1 Extant definitions for influencer and influencer marketing.	
Influencer definitions	Influencer marketing definitions
“Online influencers are individuals, groups of individuals, or even virtual avatars who have built a network of followers on social media and are regarded as digital opinion leaders with significant social influence on their network of followers.” (Leung et al., 2022, p. 228)	“Online influencer marketing (OIM) is a strategy in which a firm selects and incentivizes online influencers to engage their followers on social media in an attempt to leverage these influencers' unique resources to promote the firm's offerings, with the ultimate goal of enhancing firm performance.” (Leung et al., 2022, p. 228)
“Social media influencers are online personalities with large numbers of followers, across one or more social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, or personal blogs), who have an influence on their followers.” (Lou & Yuan, 2019, p. 58)	“Influencer marketing refers to a form of marketing where marketers and brands invest in selected influencers to create and/or promote their branded content to both the influencers' own followers and to the brands' target consumers.” (Lou & Yuan, 2019, p. 58)
“[Social media influencers] have built a sizable social media network of followers and thereby have acquired the potential to exert their influence over their followers are commonly described as SMIs.” (Ki, Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, 2020, p. 1)	“A form of social media marketing through which retail brands collaborate with an SMI and ask him/her to create branded content that includes endorsements or product mentions that increase consumers' brand awareness and product acquisition.” (Ki et al., 2020, p.1)
“A person who passes certain social influence thresholds, evaluated based on social media metrics (e.g. followers and/or engagement rate) beyond those of an average person.” (Rohde & Mau, 2021, p. 2701)	“A tactic in which companies pay people (influencers), financially or in-kind, to produce social media content on behalf of the brands and influence consumers' preferences and purchase decisions.” (Karagür, Becker, Klein, & Edeling, 2022, p. 1)
“Individuals who post to their social media accounts in exchange for compensation.” (Campbell & Grimm, 2019, p. 110)	“Marketing communications in which influencers promote a brand's offerings on their own social media pages.” (Belanche, Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021, p. 86)
“A person with a large and engaged follower base on social media platforms, which one would not know unless one follows them.” (Haenlein et al., 2020, p. 17)	“Influencer marketing is the practice of compensating individuals for posting about a product or service on social media.” (Campbell & Farrell, 2020, p. 469)

Table 1: Extant definitions for influencer and influencer marketing, Mero et al. (2023)

Differentiation between B2B and B2C Marketing

To clearly differentiate the terms B2B Marketing and B2C Marketing, both in scientific and practical aspect, it is important to formulate the specifics of B2C Marketing. Regarding the concept of B2B influencer marketing Mero et al. (2023) indicate that “the existing academic definitions and their implications have not been confirmed in B2B settings”.

According to many authors (De Veirman et al., 2017; Leung, Gu, & Palmatier, 2022; Lou & Yuan, 2019), in B2C context Influencer Marketing can be defined as “the process of selecting and rewarding influencers to promote the firm's offerings to their followers on social media”. The above definition explains the main differences between B2C and B2B Influencer Marketing, as B2B Influencer Marketing is focused on working with renowned industry experts from different industries with the purpose of demonstrating the company's industry value and expertise. The nature of B2B Influencer Marketing relations between corporate stakeholders (companies, SMEs, corporations, etc.) and B2B Influencers and Thought Leaders are increasingly seen to transform

into much deeper, long-lasting and meaningful relations, which are seen to be beneficial for both sides involved. This statement is also acknowledged by Neuhaus, Tina & Millemann, Jan & Nijssen, Ed. (2022) who affirm that “there is emerging evidence of B2B influencer marketing practices that include much deeper collaborations with influencers than social media product endorsements alone”. Moreover, Mero et al. (2023, p.80) specify that “other definitions exist, but the predominant views delimit influencer marketing activities to product or service endorsements that occur in social media via third-party individuals, in exchange for a monetary or tangible compensation”.

The below table from the article “B2B influencer marketing: Conceptualization and four managerial strategies” by Mero, Joel & Vanninen, Heini & Keränen, Joona (2023) summarizes the key differences between B2B and B2C influencer marketing:

	B2C	B2B
Influencer's professionalism	Influencer marketing is a profession or important source of revenue	Primary profession is not an influencer
Type of influencer's opinion leadership	Social opinion leader	Expert opinion leader
Relationship of influencer to the commissioner firm	External actor	External or internal actor
Influencer's key asset	Sizeable and engaged group of social media followers	Perceived expertise by the target audience
Influencer's power base	Referent power base: Influence is based on the identification potential of others who desire to be connected with the influencer	Expert power base: Influence is based on recognition as a particularly knowledgeable or skilled actor in a given area
Influencer's primary motivation	Tangible or monetary reward	Mutual interest or benefit with the commissioner firm
Focus of influencer marketing content	Product and service endorsements	Topical themes in the industry
Content creation process	Influencer creates the content	Influencer and commissioner firm/ marketing agency co-create the content
Target audience of influencer marketing	Influencer's audience	Firm's own audience
Distribution channels	Mainly social media influencer's channels	Mainly firm's own channels (e.g., social media, website, email, offline)

Table 2: Key differences between B2B and B2C influencer marketing by Mero, Joel & Vanninen, Heini & Keränen, Joona (2023)

The terms “Thought Leadership” and “Thought Leaders”

In B2B marketing the value of expert opinion is key. The power of KOLs, thought leaders and niche influencers in the field is unparalleled, since in B2B context what drives progress and innovation is the authority and in-depth knowledge of such renowned individuals.

For the purposes of the current research, the terms “Thought Leadership” and “Thought Leader” should be clearly defined. Even though both terms are gaining wide popularity in the B2B landscape, these are still vaguely discussed academically. According to Alhaddi (2015) “The lack of empirical research on thought leadership brought some ambiguity to the term, which made it

challenging to differentiate it from innovation.”. Thus, the need to formulate the exact definition and characteristics of both terms is prevalent. The origin of the term can be tracked back to its emergence in Kurtzman’s book “Thought leaders: insights on the future of business” (1997), where the author employs the term to define a group of individuals who are addressing “the big questions with which today’s most senior executives are wrestling”, (1997, p.2).

McCrimmon (2005, p. 1064) suggests that “Thought leadership is the championing of new ideas rather than anything to do with managing people or helping a group achieve a goal.”. Additionally, the author details the key characteristics of thought leadership. The work of McCrimmon (2005) reviews thought leadership as an advancement of new ideas and as an initiative, not as a fixed work position or role within an organization. Moreover, the author claims that thought leadership is transient, democratic, and not subjected to control and hierarchy. McCrimmon (2005) clearly differentiates traditional leadership from thought leadership, indicating that the first type of leadership is vital for an organization, while the second type is triggered by the emergence of a new idea and is concluded with the keenness of the execution of the idea. In this context, a thought leader keeps advocating for other new ideas up until each idea is acknowledged and applied.

Gibbins-Klein (2011) formulate four main characteristics of thought leaders and proposes standards for thought leadership based on these vital traits. According to the authors, the first main attribute is the capability of successfully targeting and influencing entities in particular industries and organizations. The second attribute of thought leaders is elaborated by Gibbins-Klein (2011) as having the aptitude to initiate and mediate interactions between other parties and their audience via personal communication. The third attribute is described as the ability of thought leaders to be perceived as authoritative individuals, closely linked to their expertise, persuasion and influence skills. The fourth characteristics detailed by Gibbins-Klein (2011) is that thought leaders tend to interlace endurance and permanence in their ideas, which is the reason why thought leaders leave a long-lasting impact, even after the idea is already realized.

In his research on the topic, Alhaddi (2015) claims that “While innovators create new ideas, thought leaders champion those ideas until implementation. Thought leaders continue the work of innovators; the success of the organizations requires both.”. Butler (2012, p. 1) defines thought leaders as individuals who “inspire leadership; they ignite imaginations, explode old myths, and illuminate paths to the future that others can follow”.

According to Magno and Cassia (2020) the strategy of publicizing insightful and meaningful content on digital channels has become one of the most effective and prioritized tactics in B2B marketing. The authors also accentuate on the limited research and understanding on the role of thought leaders in the B2B sphere, adding that studies on the topic in the academic field have just been initiated recently and that academics have not studied so far whether thought leadership has positive influence on businesses, their positioning in the respective industry and their relations and ties with relevant stakeholders. Magno and Cassia (2020) state that “Thought leadership on social media positively influences brand performance and, in turn, customer relationship performance in B2B settings.”. Recent industry reports also indicate that this phenomenon is valid and even suggest that the role of thought leaders and tech influencers in B2B marketing is even more crucial. What is more, Magno and Cassia (2020) point out that “Moreover, establishing thought leadership on social media results from specific thought leadership capabilities and is supported by social media capabilities.”. This statement is a clear indication that thought leadership has more aspects to it and that is comprised by various specific niche capabilities.

Barry and Gironda (2019) have developed a social capital theory to theorize and rationalize the principles and mechanics of thought leadership in B2B marketing. Their theory also accentuates on thought leadership’s authenticity, authority, high-level competence, novel ideas and innovative

expert insights. Barry and Girona (2019) findings support the deduction that thought leadership content is highly valued and effective in B2B marketing online.

Furthermore, Magno and Cassia (2020) also elaborated on this notion and concluded that for B2B organizations the brand performance is tightly linked in positive progression to the overall thought leadership aptitude and a clear acknowledgement of recognition, authority, and trust.

Another useful research is a case study of Infosys (consulting company offering digital services), carried by Heath, Singh, Ganesh, and Taube (2013). The authors developed a framework for establishing thought leadership through the use of social media in B2B markets. Traditionally, B2B markets tend to be more complex and niche than B2C markets. Even though the limitations of this framework are rooted in the fact that it is limited and intended for building company-wide thought leadership only, there is a growing demand for formulation of strict rules, frameworks and guidance on crafting thought leadership globally across industries and organizations.

An intriguing study by Mero, Joel & Vanninen, Heini & Keränen, Joonas. (2023) presents the reasoning behind their identification of four alternate tactics for the usage of influencer marketing in B2B markets. The table presented below is developed by Mero, Joel & Vanninen, Heini & Keränen, Joonas. (2023) in their article “B2B influencer marketing: Conceptualization and four managerial strategies”:

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Table 4 Comparison of B2B influencer marketing strategies.				
	Reference-based influencer marketing strategy	Content-based influencer marketing strategy	Interaction-based influencer marketing strategy	Purpose-based influencer marketing strategy
Logic	Influencer recommends a firm's offering or customer experience	Influencer co-creates content on business-relevant topics	Influencer interacts and creates social bonds with target audiences	Influencer communicates the firm's contribution to society and/or environment
Primary goal	Increasing brand and product awareness	Fostering thought leadership brand image	Building new relationships	Evoking positive emotions towards the firm
Type of influencer(s) involved	External influencer	Internal and/or external influencer(s)	Internal influencer	External influencer
Typical influencer profile	Distinguished customer	Industry expert	Knowledgeable employee	Credible spokesperson
Source of influence	Influencer authority	Influencer expertise	Interpersonal trust	Influencer authenticity
Motivational basis of influencer	Monetary compensation	Mutual interest	Internal motivation	Societal concerns
Exemplary influencer marketing tactics	Customer references, testimonials and case studies	Podcasts, webinars, white papers, research reports, e-books	Social media listening and active participation in discussions	Beneficiary testimonials, videos and case studies
Associated firms (* hybrid strategy)	Theta Mu Epsilon Zeta	Beta Delta Alpha* Iota* Kappa* Lambda* Eta*	Gamma Kappa* Eta*	Alpha* Iota* Lambda*

Table 3: Comparison of B2B influencer marketing strategies by Mero, Joel & Vanninen, Heini & Keränen, Joonas. (2023)

It can be concluded that B2B thought leadership is the process of ideation and creation of business concepts, insights, visions and perceptions in B2B context, whereas B2B thought leaders can be defined as influential authoritative individuals who are being widely given high levels of recognition, acceptance and respect in particular industries or business spheres, usually across organizations and with global scope.

The above findings evidently support the apparent linkage and shared common traits between thought leadership and influencer marketing in B2B context. It is important to correctly identify B2B influencers based on the specific scenario and setting. B2B influencers among different

industries share common characteristics, but also differ in others, given the definite industry vertical or sector where they operate and influence.

B2B Tech Influencers

For the present research, it is vital to determine and analyze the role and impact of B2B Tech Influencers in the context of B2B marketing and influencer marketing. B2B Tech Influencers can be logically categorized on the basis of various characteristics, such as industry role, type of content and professional background. These experts are recognized in their respective sector and have recognized influence in certain technological niche domain within the Emerging and Future Technology industry. Their renowned influence is acknowledged based upon their proven expert niche knowledge and prominent authority.

B2B Tech Influencers, Influencer Marketing and Digital Marketing

Even though currently there is still no mention of the term “Tech Influencers” in academic context, along with a clear absence of research on the topic, a B2B Tech Influencer can be defined as an individual who is widely recognized, authoritative and reputable within an expert community or industry and who is considered trustworthy and insightful expert voice in the B2B sphere, covering a broad range of technology topics. Such areas of technological expertise are for example, AI, IoT, Industry 4.0, Future of Work, Digital Transformation, Cybersecurity, Robotics, Automation, Augmented Reality, 5G, Cloud Computing, Data Science, Machine Learning, etc.

B2B Tech Influencers are able to translate academic research into practical expert B2B insights, given that they are perceived as reliable and credible sources, by elaborating in-depth on the foundations of academic research and data analysis, in combination with their own high-level expertise and real-world professional experience, and by consecutively applying these in actual business context. It can be assumed that B2B Tech Influencers close the gap between composite academic work (theory) and actionable business strategies and tactics (practice).

Cartwright, Liu & Davies (2022) clearly state that “Whilst B2B scholars have been broadcasting that influencer marketing may be the ‘next big thing’ (Backaler, 2018), limited research has explicitly investigated the scope of influencer marketing in B2B.” (2022, p. 338). The authors indicate that influencers are able to connect organizations within business networks and that “B2B marketing scholars and practitioners see an emerging need to investigate how B2B organisations can best build reciprocal relationships through influencer marketing (Murphy & Sashi, 2018; Pardo, Pagani, & Savinien, 2022)”. Additionally, these academics accentuate on the fact that the existing research on influencer marketing in B2B context is still “extremely limited” (Cartwright, Liu & Davies (2022, p. 338); Magno & Cassia, 2020).

Furthermore, the authors indicate that there is an evident gap in the research on the topic of discussion, including a knowledge gap in scientific and academic terms, therefore further research and examination of the topic is needed (2022, p. 338). While there has been limited basic review related to B2B influencer marketing, in-depth gradual research on the topic still doesn’t exist to date. This claim is supported by the constation of Cartwright, Liu & Davies (2022) who point out that few academics are involved in a brief overview and discussion of B2B influencer marketing (for example, Haenlein et al., (2020) and Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, & Mäläskä (2015)), but methodical examination of the subject is seen as “slow to emerge” (Cartwright, Liu, & Raddats, 2021; Salo, 2017).

The future broader study aims to examine further not only the role of thought leaders and B2B tech influencers, but also the dynamics, characteristics and different aspects of B2B Tech Influencers and their role in influencer marketing and digital marketing in the B2B sphere.

An interesting study that can serve in understanding the specific dynamics of modern digital marketing, is that of Cooper, T., Stavros, C. and Dobeles, A.R. (2023). In the study, the authors examine the tensions in brand management created by the rapid transformation of social media, marked by maintaining increasingly complex dynamics of B2B relationships with key intermediaries. Thought Leadership and Tech Influencing are also affected by the fast transformation of digital marketing and social media. It can also be claimed that Thought Leadership and Tech Influencing are a direct result of the fast alterations and the revolutionizing of the marketing and digital industries. B2B marketing, which is the focus of Thought Leadership and Tech Influencing, is also radically transformed and businesses are often incapable of adapting their strategies, methods and tools to these newly emerged alterations in the highly-technologized marketing field. Brands are seen to struggle with keeping up with the trends and are in most cases unable to adapt to the shifted landscape. Many companies still try to keep marketing and branding related work and efforts in-house, which leads to poor results and inability to reach the target stakeholders in the correct manner. The rapidly shifting digital world requires brands to be actively involved in a multi-way communication at all times, ensuring that customers are able and willing to interact with the brand. The inability to comply with these new requirements and changes in marketing, leads to failure of the brands to keep up with the market and the expectations of customers. Thought Leadership and Tech Influencing are the tools to be used in B2B context for technological companies, as these will empower brands to maintain their positions and will facilitate marketing and branding efforts to allow collaborations outside the companies, which will lead to better credibility and higher authority in the technology field. Companies, relying on active and regular partnerships with Thought Leaders and Tech Influencers, are seen to gain more momentum and attention and are able to position themselves higher in the respective industry.

Emerging and Future Technology Industry

The Emerging and Future Technology Industry can be defined as an industry sector which is targeted at the commercialization and further development of innovations in early adoption stages with a high potential for economic, societal, lifestyle and workplace impact. The Emerging and Future Technologies are such technologies which are considered to have the powerful capacity to disrupt current trends, ways of working and living, and even entire markets. Such innovative technologies are even capable of creating entirely new markets and industry verticals.

The Emerging and Future Technologies encompass a wide range of technological fields and are usually tightly interconnected with other disciplines, as for example are biotech, spacetechnology and sustainable technologies. These disruptive technologies are considered as fundamental novelties and are characterized by swift evolution, hasty progress, fast growth, quick advancement, along with a significant level of unpredictability and volatility. Another key attribute of these technologies is the substantial investment they require for their adoption and implementation within industries, organizations, etc. The strongest aspect of Emerging and Future Technologies is their unlimited potential to redefine industries, the way we live and work, the organization of our society and the way how businesses operate.

The Emerging and Future Technology Industry is comprised of various key fields and areas, comprised of a convergence of vanguard novel technologies, such as: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Robotics, Robotic Process Automation (RPA), Advanced Robotics, Autonomous Systems, Digital Twins, Machine Learning (ML), Deep Learning (DL), Internet of Things (IoT), Industrial IoT (IIoT), Internet of Everything (IoE), Internet of Bodies (IoB), Blockchain, Distributed Ledger Technology (DLT), Quantum Computing, Cloud Computing, Next-Gen Cybersecurity (Next Generation Cybersecurity), SpaceTech (Space Technologies), 5G, 6G, 3D Printing, Autonomous vehicles, Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), Extended Reality (XR), Biotechnology, Genomics (including Gene Editing, Gene Therapy, Cancer Vaccines, Stem-cell Therapy), MedTech

(Medical Technology), HealthTech (Health Technology), Telemedicine, Bioprinting, Internet of Medical Things (IoMT), Biometrics, Bionics, Wearable Technology, DNA Digital Data Storage, Nanotechnology, GovTech (Government Technology), Green and Sustainable Technologies, Renewable Energy Technologies, etc.

The convergence of these Emerging and Future Technologies is seen to create radical new paradigms, novel possibilities and opportunities in almost every aspect of life and society, emergence of innovative technological grounds and numerous benefits for society and economy. Thus, the Emerging and Future Technology Industry poses major challenges for governance, regulation, management of ethical and legal concerns. As the most dynamic, disruptive, prominently impacting, transformative, rapidly evolving and most promising industry at present, it can be considered a prime mover and powerful driving force with unmatched potential, catalyst of groundbreaking innovations and tribalizing ideas. The Emerging and Future Technologies are a significant focus of organizations and governments globally, given their potential to solve global challenges and pain-points, accelerate economic growth, advance quality of life and work, and also to entirely redesign, reform and restructure business models and processes, the future of work and the future of life.

According to Rotolo, Hicks & Martin (2015) Emerging Technologies “are defined by five attributes: radical novelty, fast growth, coherence, prominent impact, and uncertainty and ambiguity.”. These academics underline the lack of sufficient research on Emerging Technologies and claim that “as an area of study, emerging technologies lack key foundational elements, namely a consensus on what classifies a technology as ‘emergent’ and strong research designs that operationalise central theoretical concepts”. This statement underlines the intricate niche where Thought Leadership, B2B Influencer marketing in technology and Emerging Technologies meet and interlace. Further, Rotolo, Hicks & Martin (2015) indicate that “Often no definition of the central concept of an emerging technology is provided”. The authors develop a framework to define what can be considered an Emerging Technology and suggest the following definition:

“Specifically, we conceive of an emerging technology as a radically novel and relatively fast growing technology characterised by a certain degree of coherence persisting over time and with the potential to exert a considerable impact on the socio-economic domain(s) which is observed in terms of the composition of actors, institutions and patterns of interactions among those, along with the associated knowledge production processes. Its most prominent impact, however, lies in the future and so in the emergence phase is still somewhat uncertain and ambiguous.”

Daniele Rotolo, Diana Hicks, Ben R. Martin, (2015) What is an emerging technology?, Research Policy, Volume 44, Issue 10, 2015, Pages 1827-1843, ISSN 0048-7333.

Breitzman & Thomas (2015) also indicate that “Emerging technologies are of great interest to a wide range of stakeholders, but identifying such technologies is often problematic, especially given the overwhelming amount of information available to analysts and researchers on many subjects.”. The researchers suggest an Emerging Clusters Model which is “designed to locate emerging, high-impact technologies in close to real time, rather than retrospectively”. Regarding the characteristics of Emerging technologies, Breitzman & Thomas (2015) specify that “Such technologies have the potential to be highly generative, and may open up whole new areas of technology and science”.

Zhou, Y., Dong, F., Liu, Y. et al (2020) develop a “novel approach for forecasting emerging technologies using data augmentation and deep learning”, while Bildosola, Río-Bélver, Garechana & Cilleruelo (2017) present a “novel approach, known as TeknoRoadmap (TKRM), with which a complete depiction of emerging technologies can be obtained”. Srinivasan, R. (2008) argues that from an academic perspective, “emerging technologies have important distinctive features that have not been examined in current theory in marketing, and specifically, in organizational innovation”.

The author bases his formulation of definition of “Emerging Technologies” on the characterization by Day and Schoemaker (2000, p. 2), defining Emerging Technologies as “science-based innovations with the potential to create a new industry or transform an existing one”.

Sadiku, M., Ajayi, A. & Sadiku, J. (2025) formulate another definition of Emerging Technologies: “Emerging technologies are technologies whose development, practical applications, or both are still largely unrealized. They share characteristics like radical novelty, fast growth, prominent impact, uncertainty, with future influence on various industries.” (p. Page 930). Other definitions of Emerging Technologies are formulated by Gunther and Day (2000) and Srinivasan (2008), who share the understanding that Emerging Technologies are innovations which are based on science and have the potential to create new industries or to transmute existing industries.

Yeganeh (2021) accentuates that “Emerging technologies are still in their infancy and for the same reason, are supposed to involve huge influences across the world (Boon & Moors, 2008).” Moreover, Yeganeh (2021) claims that “There is no agreement on the definition of the concept of emerging technologies as they represent a wide variety of technologies in different domains.”. The author presents a useful table of Emerging Technologies, including a structured review of their categories, descriptions, applications, and implications:

Themes	Emerging Technology	Description	Applications & Implications
Automation and Robotics	1) Augmented Intelligence	Use of intelligent tools in conjunction with human intelligence	- Extend human cognitive abilities - Collaboration between machines and humans - Informed and faster decisions in finance, investment, healthcare, manufacturing, retail, travel and tourism, energy, and agriculture
	2) Autonomous Vehicles	Vehicle automation and connectivity	- Increase the utilization of travel time - Restructure transportation models, roads, urban centers - Transportation, jobs, urban planning and infrastructure, economic models
	3) Drones and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles	Unmanned aerial vehicles	- Replace the present aircraft, railways, buses, and taxis - Perform tasks in the energy sector, public safety, security, military, e-commerce, transport, precision agriculture
Data and Connectivity	4) 5G Mobile	A heterogeneous network	- Increased resilience, continuity, and much higher resource efficiency - The fully connected and interactive world, Internet of Things (IoT)
	5) Blockchain	A distributed digital ledger	- Create a system based on trust - Eliminate trusted third parties like banks, financial institutions - Abolishing the tripartite relationship liberates users and transactions
	6) Bluetooth 5.0	Data transmission through radio waves	- Doubling the speed and quadrupling the range - 800% increase in data broadcasting capacity - Industrial automation, Internet of Things (IoT)
	7) Li-Fi	Visible light communication	- Local wireless communications at very high speeds - No limitations on capacity, high security - IoT, retail, construction, aviation, transportation, traffic management
	8) Quantum Computing	Using subatomic particles to store data	- Superior processing power, suitable for solving sophisticated problems - Applications in civilian, business, trade, environmental, and national security - Applications in product optimization, advertising scheduling, and revenue maximization systems
	9) Smart Dust	Networks of micro-electro-mechanical devices	- Continuous real-time monitoring of industrial and urban projects - Tracking the movements of birds, small animals, and insects, monitoring environmental conditions, managing inventory, and monitoring production - Can be used for illegal or unethical purposes and cause environmental pollution

Interfaces and Visualization	10) Deep Mapping	A map incorporating various types of data	- Facilitates planning and decision-making - Applications in construction, traffic control, agriculture, and business
	11) Mixed Reality	Integration of the physical and digital worlds	- Changes the relationships between humans, computers, and the physical environment - Applications in design, architecture, and construction
	12) Multi-Sensory Interfaces	Communication between humans and machines through senses	- Replacing conventional computer control systems such as keyboard and mouse
Materials	13) Nanomaterials	Manipulation of small particles (Nano-particles)	- Creating new materials with special properties - Applications in agriculture and food, energy production and efficiency, automotive industry, cosmetics, medical appliances and drugs, household appliances, computers
	14) Programmable Materials	Materials with changeable physical properties	- Applications in architecture, infrastructure, production lines, construction, and operation - Shape-changing robots and tools, rapid prototyping, and sculpture-based haptic interfaces
	15) Bio-Based Materials	Substances made from living organisms	- Reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, toxicity, and waste reduction - Applications in construction, furniture, packaging, and manufacturing industries are likely to adopt bio-based materials - Sustainable development, environmental protection, the circular economy
Energy and Resources	16) Foam Batteries	Batteries with higher power densities	- Energy storage solutions for grid-scale applications - Applications in wearables and tablets, military and industrial, and transport
	17) Fusion Reactors	Energy production through a combination of lighter atomic nuclei	- Provides clean energy with no long-lasting radioactive waste - Changes the transport and energy-intensive industries and replace fossil fuels
	18) Transparent Solar Panels	Transparent solar panels to absorb light wavelengths	- Increases solar energy production - Application in car windows, cell phones, or other devices - Transforms any surface into an energy-producing one
	19) Pollution Digesters	Removing the filter, and transforming pollutants	- Solutions to deteriorating air and water quality and environmental pollution

Table 4: *Emerging Technologies, their Categories, Descriptions, Applications, and Implications by Yeganeh (2021)*

Rani & Bhardwaj (2025) explore the transformational capabilities of pioneering technologies and indicate that these revolutionary technologies are “addressing some of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century, including climate change and global connectivity”.

The driving force of Emerging and Future Technologies and the corresponding industry is innovation. Crossan & Apaydin’s (2010) provide definition of innovation as “the production or adoption, assimilation, and exploitation of a value-added novelty in economic and social spheres; renewal and enlargement of products, services, markets, industries and societies; development of new methods of production; and establishment of new capabilities and management systems” (p. 1155). When combined with digitalization, innovation is able to usher radical new transformations and alterations in all aspects of society and economy. Hullova et al., 2016 state that “digital innovation can be both a process and an outcome”.

Jiao H., Wang T., Libaers D., Yang J., Hu L. (2025) indicate that “integrating emerging technologies with products reconfigures and revitalizes the architecture or functionality of products and services, including their modularity, interoperability, resiliency, and iterability properties” (p. 6). These researchers suggest a Meta-framework of Digital Technologies (DTs) and innovation:

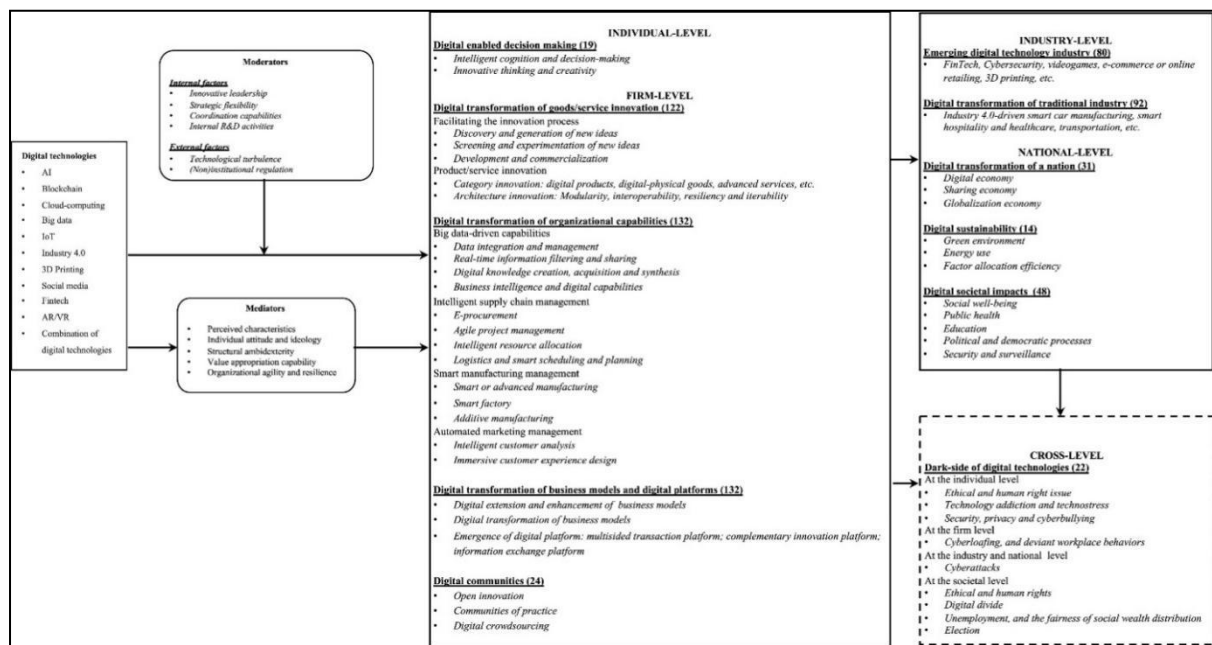


Figure 1: Meta-framework of Digital Technologies (DTs) and innovation by Hao Jiao, Tang Wang, Dirk Libaers, Jifeng Yang, Lingshu Hu (2025)

This framework aims to study and inspect how Digital Technologies influence and transform the results, developments and processes of innovation. The Meta-framework proposes an extensive assessment of Digital Technologies innovation research and aims to organize the existing academic works on the topic. Additionally, H. Jiao et al. (2025) demonstrate that the interest in DTs and innovation is growing immensely at a high rate over the last decade. The researchers compile a timeline of the number of publications on the topic since 1997 till 2023:

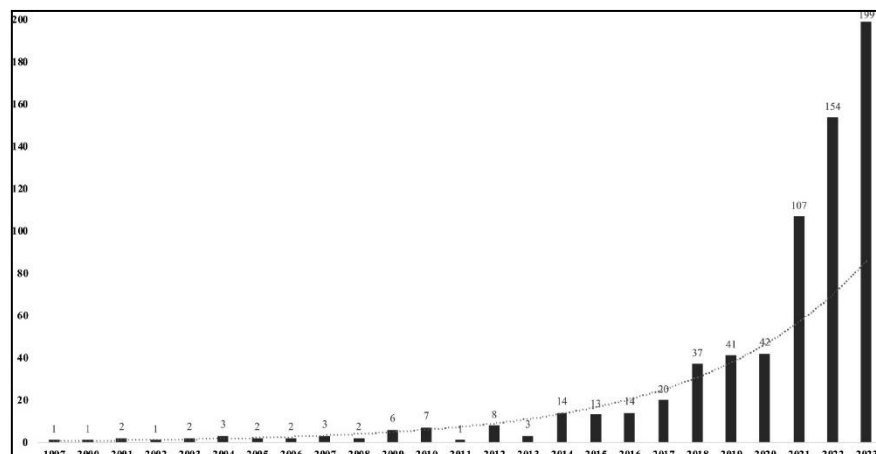


Figure 2: Growth of publications on DTs and innovation by Hao Jiao, Tang Wang, Dirk Libaers, Jifeng Yang, Lingshu Hu (2025)

To summarize, the Emerging and Future Technology Industry relates to the sector covering innovations that are considered presently developing or that are projected to prove substantial in a near-future time-frame of five to ten years.

A study by Hardey, M. (2019) provides interesting results. In his article, the author explores the various obstacles that women continue to face in tech culture, and why terms like "women in tech"

are problematic. This research correlates directly with the role of Thought Leaders and Tech Influencers, as women in the field of Thought Leadership and Tech Influencing are few and they are constantly facing practices of inequality in the tech sphere. Thought Leaders and Tech Influencers, who are female, are seen to gain less projects and collaborations, with lower frequency, as compared to male Thought Leaders and Tech Influencers. More, female Thought Leaders and Tech Influencers are also paid less when collaborating with brands. Further research is needed in this direction, however, first initial terms and solid frameworks of principles for Thought Leadership and Tech Influencing in the B2B field in the Emerging and Future Technology industries must be established.

The article by Lindgreen, A., Antioco, M., Palmer, R. and van Heesch, T. (2009) discusses some avenues for future research in the marketing of high-tech products. High-tech products are usually the subject of partnerships between companies and Thought Leaders and Tech Influencers. Thought Leaders and Tech Influencers must be highly skilled in niche marketing for high-tech products. Such niche marketing is based on the unique practical and theoretical experience, as well as reputation and industry expertise each Thought Leader and Tech Influencer has. Thus, the most valuable characteristic of efficient Thought Leadership and Tech Influencing is that there is no single working strategy, each strategy is unique and is crafted specifically by a Thought Leader and Tech Influencer for the actual need of a particular technological brand.

Methodology

Due to the limitations in volume and given the novelty of the chosen topic, the current study is empirical. Broader and more in-depth future study will further develop the findings of this report. Such future study will provide broader quantitative and qualitative research, as well as empirical and conceptual research, given the novelty of the matter and the lack of previous scientific research.

The main thesis of the current scientific report and the upcoming extensive scientific work is, namely, that the role of Thought Leaders and Technology Influencers in Emerging and Future Technology Industries is significant and should be considered in regards to several aspects – respectively, on the one hand – to provide guidance, criticism, insights, proposals and predictions about the global development of technologies, and, on the other hand – to promote the development of certain technologies, to indicate and justify the weaknesses of others, to work with businesses and governments to support certain technological developments, brands and products.

For the methodology, the scientific methods that will be applied as part of the broader upcoming research are: analysis, synthesis, induction, and deduction. In the preparation of the methodological part, an empirical study is conducted. The development of the methodology of the empirical research is based on theoretical literary sources and previous empirical studies in the most closely related fields. Further research will be carried out on known empirical data from the practice – annual benchmarking reports, with a focus on quantitative metrics, statistics and surveys.

Results and discussion

The current analysis indicates that the role of Thought Leaders and Technology Influencers in the Emerging and Future Technology industries in the business world is still not explored, and that there is an imperative need of extensive academic research in the field of Thought Leadership and Influencer Marketing in the technology industry.

The topic of this scientific report has not yet been a subject of academic discussion. The subject matter of the role of Thought Leaders and Technology Influencers in the Emerging and Future Technology industries is exceptionally niche, given the limited number of experts and industry

practitioners globally, even though Thought Leadership and Technology Influencer Marketing in the Emerging and Future Technology industries already exists for several years. Moreover, the field of practice to which the topic relates is emerging and is still developing and shaping globally. This new niche field is at the border between marketing, technology, and business.

Conclusion

More extensive research, and in-depth exploration of the chosen topic will be carried out in an upcoming broader scientific study.

The main conclusions that the upcoming scientific work will aim to draw, are what exactly the role of Thought Leaders and Technology Influencers in the Emerging and Future Technology industries is, and in how many aspects can it be considered. The thesis will seek to prove that this role is significant and should be analysed in two separate aspects. The limitations of the study will be rooted in factors stemming from the novelty of the topic for the scientific community, as well as the fact that this practical area is newly formed and still emerging and developing.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Dr. Galina Mladenova from University of National and World Economy (Sofia, Bulgaria).

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ПОЛИТИКО-ИКОНОМИЧЕСКИ АНАЛИЗ ЗА ТРЕТИРАНЕ НА ПРОБЛЕМА ЗА ПРАВАТА НА ЧОВЕКА В ДИГИТАЛНИЯ СВЯТ

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Резюме: *Дигиталната епоха създава нови предизвикателства в областта на защитата на правата на човека. Затова в дигиталният свят тя изисква нов подход от гледна точка на етични стандарти и регулация. Разглежда се въпроса за балансирането между иновация и защита на правата в контекста на съвременната демокрация. Разискват се икономически аспекти на анализа на състоянието на човешките права в условия на глобални трансформации вследствие на съвременната криза на модела на стопанско развитие. Правят се съответни изводи и заключения за адаптиране на проблема за човешките права в съвременните дигитални реалности.*

Ключови думи: дигитализация; права на човека; платформена икономика; алгоритмично управление; демократична публична сфера.

JEL: P1

Abstract: *The digital age creates new challenges in the field of human rights protection. Therefore, in the digital world, this protection requires a new approach in terms of ethical standards and regulation. The issue of balancing innovation and the protection of rights within the context of modern democracy is examined. Furthermore, the text discusses the economic aspects of analyzing the state of human rights under the conditions of global transformations resulting from the contemporary crisis of the economic development model. Relevant findings and conclusions are drawn regarding the adaptation of human rights issues to modern digital realities.*

Keywords: digitalization, human rights, platform economy, algorithmic management, democratic public sphere

JEL: P1

Въведение

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В своето многовековно развитие човешката цивилизация, в нейните различни регионални проявления, е вървяла към постъпателно развитие, което често е било следвано от отстъпления и крачки назад. Все пак, общата тенденция е към едно нарастване на технологичната база, с чиято помощ природните блага се извличат и обработват от земните недра, за да се превърнат в краен продукт за потребление.

Тази тенденция се създава и подхранва благодарение на растящата степен за разделение на труда в установилите се производствени единици в рамките на развиващите се обществени организации. Едно е технологичното равнище в малките първобитни общини включващи няколко човека, то (технологичното равнище) нараства, когато се създават първите родово-общинни организации, последвани от племенни структури и териториални империи. За да се стигне до индустриалната революция в северозападна Европа, която поставя нови хоризонти пред научно-техническата въоръженост на производството и която изстрелва човешката цивилизация на немислими в предишните векове обеми и качество на създаваната продукция.

Според икономическите закономерности описани в пълен вид най-напред от френския икономист Ришар Кантильон³, съответните икономически системи могат да растат, да се разширяват и да се развиват само дотогава, докато не се достигне предела на оптимума на производство определян от мащабите на съответните икономически системи. Така например в първобитните общини е невъзможно развитието на атомна енергетика, докато последната става постижима в системи за разделение на труда включващи няколко стотин милиона потребители⁴.

След края на Третата световна война⁵ (Студената война) световната икономика почти три десетилетия функционира в рамките на американската система за разделение на труда, което дава възможност икономическото развитие да се осъществява в рамките на единна стопанска общност достигаща няколко милиарда потребители. Подобна мащабна глобализация на икономическата дейност се реализира за пръв път в историята на човешката цивилизация, тя е достатъчно крехка и има сериозни основания да се смята,

³ За повече подробности виж труда на Кантильон 1755,

https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Essai_sur_la_nature_du_commerce_en_g%C3%A9n%C3%A9ral

⁴ За подробности по механиката на процеса виж Хитов, 2017.

⁵ Виж Дуранкев, 1999, <https://chitanka.info/text/8190-nachaloto-i-krajat-na-tretata-svetovna-v>

че при определени условия тя може да спре своето развитие, ако вече не е достигнала до този етап с последващите я тенденции и процеси⁶.

Все пак, в нашето изследване ние изхождаме от първоначалното изходно условие за продължаващо съществуване и последващо по-нататъшно развитие (опирайки се на основополагащите принципи на теоретичното наследство на акад. Евгени Матеев и на неоекономика⁷) на глобалната система за разделение на труда разполагаща с поне пет-шест милиарда потребители.

В противен случай, ако светът се върне до състоянието си от първата половина и средата на XX век, с наличните в този период пет сравнително независими (автаркични) технологични зони, то всякакви разсъждения и анализи по проблематиката на дигиталния преход и свързаните с него нови проблеми и предизвикателства биха били безпредметни, по същия начин, по който те биха били такива за този елемент (дигиталната икономика) от предметно-технологичното множество на съвременната система за разделение на труда, приложено за всеки един от предишните исторически етапи от развитието на човешката цивилизация (мащаб на системите за разделение на труда по Кантильон).

И така, къде е дигитализацията в структурата на днешната глобална икономика?

Основен текст

Като сравнително нов масов обществен феномен дигитализацията създаде нови хоризонти пред бизнеса, но от друга страна доведе до въпроси, които винаги се задават при появата на индустриални технологии от различен тип съобразно нарастващата в производствените процеси степен за разделение на труда. Тя не просто въвежда нови индустрии, а реорганизира координацията, обмена и вземането на решения в цялата световна икономика⁸. Дигиталните платформи функционират като инфраструктури за

⁶ Тези процеси са подробно анализирани от един от съавторите на настоящото изследване в цикъла статии под заглавие „Концепция за ново бъдеще“, тук:

<https://krizata.blog.bg/recepti/2022/02/12/koncepciiia-novogo-budushtego.1803180> и тук:

<https://krizata.blog.bg/technology/2024/09/30/koncepciiia-za-novoto-bydeshte.1924655>

⁷ Основател на неоекономика е Олег Григориев. Виж книгата: Григориев, 2016.

⁸ Castells, 2010.

посредничество⁹, структуриране на достъпа до пазари, информация, труд и социално взаимодействие. Като такива те все повече определят не само икономическата ефективност, но и условията, при които индивидите участват в социалния, политическия и културния живот¹⁰. В този смисъл дигиталната революция оказва дълбоко влияние върху обществото, като променя традиционните представи за свобода, конфиденциалност и демокрация.

Дигиталната ера открива нови възможности за знание, творчество и икономическа активност. Но тя също така разкрива дълбоки уязвимости в системите, които трябва да защитават човешките права. Тези уязвимости не произтичат от „лоша употреба“ на технологии, нито от отделни грешки на потребители или институции. Те се извеждат от структурата на самата дигитална икономика — от начина, по който тя генерира стойност, моделира вниманието и оформя публичната сфера¹¹.

В тази ситуация резонно възниква въпросът за правата на човека в новата дигитална епоха и засяга множество направления на основните права.

Един от най-значимите проблеми се отнася до конфиденциалността и защитата на личните данни. В съвременната икономика личните данни са се превърнали в един от най-ценните ресурси¹². Компаниите събират огромни количества информация за потребителите, която впоследствие се използва за маркетингови цели, поведенчески анализ и прогнозно моделиране. В резултат на това правото на личен живот е подложено на все по-голям структурен натиск.

Второто релевантно измерение се отнася до свободата на изразяване. Изглежда естествено да се предположи, че дигиталната среда е разширила възможностите за изразяване на мнения и за разпространение на информация, като по този начин е създавала условия за по-приобщаваща и по-достъпна публична сфера. В същото време обаче трябва да се признае, че именно същите технологични механизми правят възможни нови форми на контрол върху комуникативните процеси.

⁹ Smicek, 2017.

¹⁰ Van Dijck et al., 2018.

¹¹ Zuboff, 2019.

¹² Ibid.

Друга подобна област заслужаваща нашето внимание е достъпът до информация и знания. Въпреки че дигиталните технологии разширяват достъпа до информация и образователни ресурси в значителна степен, те едновременно с това пораждат риск от задълбочаване на „информационното разделение“¹³. Някои социални групи придобиват значително по-голям достъп, умения и възможности от други, като по този начин засилват съществуващите неравенства, вместо да ги намаляват.

Правото на труд и защитата на заетостта също са засегнати. Въвеждането на автоматизирани производствени системи и разширяването на роботиката водят до замяна на работни места в традиционните сектори. Хората все по-често се сблъскват с необходимостта да се адаптират към новите условия на труд или да преминават през непрекъсната преквалификация, за да останат икономически жизнеспособни.

Накрая въпросът за дигиталното гражданство и неговото значение за демократичните процеси също трябва да бъде по-подробно разгледан. Изглежда разумно да се предположи, че онлайн платформите предлагат нови възможности за гражданско участие, включително чрез електронно гласуване и цифрови форми на политически дебат. В този смисъл тези инструменти могат да улеснят по-широкото участие на гражданите в обществения живот. В същото време следва да се признае, че тези механизми пораждат и уязвимости в обществото. Понякога, те функционират по начин, който поставя под въпрос доверието в изборните процеси и устойчивостта на публичния дискурс, включително чрез координирани дезинформационни практики и систематично разпространение на невярна информация.

Това изисква от нас да поставим един основен въпрос:

Как да защитим човешките права в среда, в която икономическите и социалните условия на човешката ангажираност са структурно променени?

Както беше посочено във въведението, историческото развитие на икономическите системи е свързано с мащаба и структурата на разделението на труда, в рамките на които те функционират. От тази гледна точка дигиталната икономика трябва да бъде разбрана

¹³ Van Dijk, 2005.

не просто като технологична новост, а като специфичен начин на организация на икономическата и социалната координация в глобален мащаб. Приемайки това разбиране следва да се отчете, че проблемите за човешките права възникващи в резултат на дигитализацията не могат да бъдат обяснени единствено чрез неправилно използване на технологиите или чрез липси в регулаторните рамки. По-скоро те могат да бъдат проследени до икономическата логика, в рамките на която дигиталната среда функционира. Настоящият анализ има за цел да изясни тази логика, при които човешките права съществуват и от които те зависят.

Доминиращи платформи като Google, Meta, Amazon и TikTok не генерират печалба чрез продажба на услуги, а чрез постоянното събиране и обработване на поведенчески данни¹⁴. Заявки за търсене, данни за местоположение, кликания, паузи, харесвания, скорост на превъртане и история на покупки се използват, за да се предвижда и влияе върху бъдещото поведение. Тези прогнози след това се монетизират чрез реклама и координация на пазарите. При тези условия защитата на поверителността се намесва директно в самия механизъм за печалба. Резултатът е структурно напрежение: колкото по-ефективно се защитават права като поверителността, толкова по-неточни стават прогнозите на платформите и толкова по-ограничена е способността им да управляват поведението. Това води до по-ниска икономическа стойност.

Това има последици за автономията на избора в дигиталния свят. Потребителите продължават да избират видеоклипове, продукти или мнения, но условията, в които се осъществява този избор, все по-често са предварително проектирани. Системите за препоръки в YouTube и TikTok не просто отразяват предпочитанията, а активно ги оформят чрез усилване на ангажиращо съдържание. Алгоритмите на Amazon стесняват полето на видимост и насочват потреблението, докато рекламната инфраструктура на Meta таргетира потребителите въз основа на предполагаеми психологически състояния, а не на изрични намерения. Следователно проблемът не е принуда в традиционния смисъл, а систематична модулация на вниманието, афекта и възприятието.

Конфликтът между права и печалба не се проявява като морален провал на индивидите, а като структурен проблем вграден в дизайна на съвременните дигитални институции.

¹⁴ Zuboff, 2019.

Основната заплаха за правата вече не произтича единствено от държавата или от изрични законови ограничения, а от условията, при които индивидите са поставени да мислят, решават и участват в социалния живот. Демократичният ред предполага като минимално изискване споделен информационен хоризонт и граждани, способни да формират преценки по въпроси от общ интерес¹⁵. Това не изисква единство на мненията, а обща отправна точка: публичен свят, в който фактите, причините и разногласията са взаимно разбираеми. Икономическият модел на дигиталните платформи все по-систематично подкопава тези условия. Алгоритмичната персонализация фрагментира информационната среда в индивидуализирани потоци, калибрирани спрямо минало поведение, предполагаеми предпочитания и прогнозирані реакции. В резултат гражданите все по-рядко се сблъскват със споделени набори от факти, източници и интерпретативни рамки. Това, което изглежда релевантно, достоверно или дори видимо, се различава систематично от един потребител до друг. В този смисъл публичната сфера не просто се плурализира, а се разпада на паралелни и слабо свързани информационни светове.

Тази фрагментация също така задълбочава структурни явления като поляризацията. Постовете, които циркулират най-ефективно в рамките на дигиталните платформи, са тези, които предизвикват силни афективни реакции като гняв, страх или възмущение. Такива реакции задържат вниманието и повишават ангажираността. Рационалният аргумент, контекстуалното обяснение и умереното несъгласие не са изключени по принцип, но на практика са поставени в неблагоприятна позиция. Те трудно се конкурират с емоционално зареденото съдържание в среди оптимизирани за бързина, вирусност и незабавна реакция. С течение на времето това измества публичния дискурс от обсъждане към афективно съгласуване и води до отслабване на способността на гражданите да се разпознават един друг като участници в споделен политически проект. Демократичната преценка става трудно устойчива, защото нито обектите на преценка, нито условията, при които тя се формира, са споделени.

Заклучение

¹⁵ Habermas, 1989.

Развитието на човешката цивилизация е тясно свързано с мащаба и структурата на разделението на труда. В историческите етапи увеличаването на производствения капацитет е зависело не само от технологичните иновации, но и от размера, интеграцията и координацията на икономическите системи, в които функционират тези технологии. От тази гледна точка технологичните възможности не са независими променливи; те са ограничени от организационната форма и мащаба на основния икономически ред.

От това следва, че съвременната дигитализация трябва да се разбира като феномен, който предполага силно интегрирана глобална система за разделение на труда. Технологии като мащабна обработка на данни, алгоритмична координация и дигитални платформи са осъществими само при условия на глобална икономическа интеграция включваща милиарди участници. Ако тези условия престанат да съществуват, аналитичната релевантност на дигиталната икономика в сегашния ѝ вид до голяма степен би изчезнала. За целите на този анализ следователно се приема, че глобалната система за икономическа координация се запазва и задълбочава.

Дигиталната ера не променя ценността на човешките права, но променя условията, в които хората трябва да ги упражняват. Тя трансформира икономиката, вниманието, обществените отношения и демократичната сфера. Те все повече оформят не само икономическите резултати, но и условията, при които индивидите участват в социалния, културния и политическия живот.

След като дигиталната икономика бъде дефинирана по този начин, нейните последици за правата на човека могат да бъдат по-ясно идентифицирани. Права като неприкосновеност на личния живот, свобода на изразяване, достъп до информация и автономия на избора традиционно са били защитавани от пряка държавна намеса. В дигиталната среда обаче натискът върху тези права произтича от икономическата логика на самите платформено-базирани системи. Генерирането на стойност зависи от непрекъснатото събиране на поведенчески данни, прогнозирането на бъдещи действия и модулирането на вниманието. При тези условия ограниченията върху извличането на данни или поведенческото влияние не просто регулират периферните практики; те се намесват в основните механизми, чрез които се произвежда икономическа стойност.

Затова защитата на правата не може да се свежда само до приемане на отделни закони. Тя изисква по-дълбока структурна промяна – такава, която ще преобразува икономическите стимули, условията за формиране на обществена преценка и самата архитектура на публичното пространство. Това има допълнителни последици за демократичния живот. Демократичната преценка предполага споделена информационна среда, в която гражданите могат да формират и преразглеждат мнения по въпроси от общ интерес. Алгоритмичната персонализация оптимизирана за ангажираност фрагментира тази среда на индивидуализирани информационни потоци. С течение на времето това подкопава условията необходими за взаимна разбираемост, обществено мислене и стабилно демократично обсъждане. Проблемът отново не е убеждаването или цензурата в традиционния смисъл, а систематичното оформяне на видимостта, релевантността и вниманието.

Само чрез комплексен подход, който да включва регулации и инвестиции в образованието и инфраструктурата може да се осигури спазване на основните права и свободи на гражданите в условията на бързо развиващите се технологии. Изхождайки от тези съображения твърдим че държавата трябва да има активна роля при защита на човешките права в следните най-важни направления:

Първо, регулирането на дигиталните платформи предполага наличието на ясни и предвидими правила определящи условията на работа на големите технологични компании. В този контекст са необходими и от механизми за осигуряване на прозрачност и отчетност при събирането, обработката и използването на данни, тъй като тези процеси засягат широк спектър от социални отношения.

Второ, следва да се осигури подкрепа за образователни програми насочени към повишаване на дигиталната грамотност и към подготовка на специалисти, способни да функционират в условията на дигиталната икономика.

Трето, необходимо е разработването и прилагането на законодателство насочено към защита на личните данни, както и на правни инструменти предназначени за противодействие на специфични форми на киберпрестъпност и други дигитални заплахи възникващи в рамките на новата технологична среда.

Благодарности

Благодарности от името на Таня Хитова отправени към всички преподаватели от Амстердамския Университет, Свободния Университет на Амстердам и Лайденския Университет в Нидерландия за неограничаваната им помощ по време на следване и завършване на бакалавърски и магистърски програми по „Политически теории“ и по „Международно бизнес право“, а по специално на проф. д-р Марсел Мауссен от катедра „Политически Науки“ на Амстердамски университет, на проф. д-р Дейвид Россати от Свободен университет на Амстердам и на доц. д-р Йессе Доорненбал от Лайденски университет.

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OPEN ELECTORAL LISTS AND DIASPORA VOTING IN ALBANIA: A LEGAL AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION IN RELATION TO EU COUNTRIES

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Abstract: *In recent years, Albania has witnessed growing debates regarding the democratization and transparency of its electoral system, particularly concerning the introduction of open electoral lists and the voting rights of citizens living abroad. These two dimensions – openness and inclusiveness – represent essential pillars of modern democratic governance and are directly linked to the legitimacy of political representation. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the legal, institutional, and comparative aspects of implementing open lists and diaspora voting within the Albanian context, highlighting both the progress achieved and the challenges that remain.*

The research applies a comparative approach by examining the legal frameworks and best practices of selected European Union member states that have successfully integrated open-list systems and ensured participation for their diasporas through technological and procedural innovations. The study discusses the potential socio-political implications of adopting such models in Albania, with emphasis on strengthening accountability, reducing clientelism, and promoting citizen empowerment in electoral processes.

Moreover, the paper addresses the intersection between legal reform and digital transformation, considering how electronic voting platforms, transparency mechanisms, and civic education initiatives can contribute to fairer and more inclusive elections. The findings suggest that Albania's alignment with European standards requires a strategic balance between modernization of legislation, institutional readiness, and cultural adaptation of democratic values.

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Keywords: Open electoral lists, diaspora voting, electoral reform, democratic representation, legal framework, European integration, Albania.

JEL: D72, K16, H11, H77, F22

1. Introduction

Elections are the fundamental instrument through which the principle of popular sovereignty is exercised in democratic constitutional systems. However, the existence of elections alone does not automatically guarantee democracy. Democratic legitimacy depends on the degree to which citizens can meaningfully influence political decision-making and hold representatives accountable.³

In recent decades, electoral reform debates have increasingly focused on improving the quality of representation rather than merely organizing elections. Two reforms have become particularly significant: the introduction of open electoral lists and the extension of voting rights to citizens residing abroad. These reforms address two core democratic dimensions: representation and participation.

In Albania, the electoral system has historically been characterized by strong party control over candidate selection. This has contributed to public perceptions of limited accountability and weak connections between representatives and voters. At the same time, a large number of Albanian citizens living abroad have been excluded from direct participation in elections. Legislative initiatives addressing these issues aim to increase transparency and strengthen democratic legitimacy.⁴

The objective of this study is to evaluate how open lists and diaspora voting affect democratic representation and whether these reforms contribute to Albania's approximation with European democratic standards.

2. Open electoral lists and democratic representation

2.1 Electoral systems and the nature of representation

³ Pippa Norris, *Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behavior* (Cambridge University Press 2004).

⁴ OSCE/ODIHR, *Republic of Albania: Parliamentary Elections 25 April 2021 – Final Report* (OSCE 2021).

Electoral systems shape the relationship between voters and representatives. In proportional representation systems with closed lists, voters primarily choose political parties. The ranking of candidates is predetermined by party leadership, meaning that the electoral mandate depends largely on internal party decisions rather than voter preference.

This structure weakens the representative character of the mandate. Although deputies formally represent the people, in practice they depend politically on party leadership. Consequently, accountability becomes internal to the party rather than external toward citizens.

Open electoral lists seek to correct this imbalance by allowing voters to select individual candidates within party lists. This mechanism transforms the electoral mandate into a dual source of legitimacy: party nomination and voter preference.⁵

2.2 Accountability and political competition

When candidates depend on personal votes, they must interact directly with citizens and address concrete public concerns. Political competition therefore shifts from intra-party negotiation to public electoral competition. Representatives are incentivized to maintain communication with voters during and after elections.

Such systems also reduce excessive centralization within parties. Party leadership retains an important role but cannot fully determine parliamentary mandates. Party-centered electoral systems otherwise concentrate decision-making power and reduce individual responsibility of representatives.⁶

2.3 Effects on democratic governance

Open lists contribute to democratic governance in several ways:

- they increase transparency in candidate selection,
- they strengthen vertical accountability,
- they reduce clientelistic dependency,
- they improve voter engagement.

⁵ John M Carey and Matthew S Shugart, 'Incentives to Cultivate a Personal Vote' (1995) 14 *Electoral Studies* 417.

⁶ Richard S Katz, *A Theory of Parties and Electoral Systems* (Johns Hopkins University Press 1980).

However, these effects depend on voter awareness and the accessibility of electoral information. Without proper civic education, voters may continue to vote solely for parties, limiting the impact of the reform.

3. Diaspora voting and political inclusion

3.1 Citizenship and the Right to Vote

The right to vote is a fundamental political right derived from citizenship. Traditionally, political participation was linked to territorial residence. Contemporary democracies increasingly recognize that citizenship extends beyond borders, particularly in conditions of large-scale migration.⁵

External voting therefore reflects an evolution of democratic theory. Citizens abroad remain subject to national legislation and maintain economic, cultural and social ties with the state. Excluding them from elections creates inequality among citizens.

3.2 Importance for Albania

Albania has a substantial diaspora population relative to its resident population. Migrants contribute significantly through remittances, investment and social networks. Nevertheless, their political participation has been limited.

Allowing diaspora voting would:

- strengthen political equality,
- increase electoral legitimacy,
- reinforce national cohesion.

From a constitutional perspective, participation of citizens abroad enhances the representative nature of democratic institutions.⁷

3.3 Administrative and legal challenges

Implementing diaspora voting requires complex administrative structures. Authorities must create reliable voter registries, verify identity and guarantee secrecy of the vote. Coordination with embassies and consulates is essential.

⁷ Jean-Michel Lafleur, *Transnational Politics and the State: The External Voting Rights of Diasporas* (Routledge 2013).

If these mechanisms are weak, electoral integrity may be questioned. Consequently, diaspora voting is not merely a legal reform but also an administrative and institutional reform.

4. Comparative European Experience

European states have adopted diverse models for combining electoral openness and diaspora participation.

Italy provides dedicated parliamentary seats for citizens abroad and allows postal voting. Germany permits external voting under strict registration conditions. Croatia has established a special electoral district for diaspora voters, while Slovenia allows voting in diplomatic missions and by mail.

Despite different institutional arrangements, common principles can be identified:

- equal suffrage,
- transparency,
- legal certainty,
- administrative reliability.

International electoral standards emphasize that electoral procedures must be clear and predictable.⁸ Comparative experience shows that gradual implementation is preferable to rapid reform.⁹

For Albania, the comparative approach indicates that institutional readiness is more important than formal legal change.

5. Digital transformation and electoral processes

5.1 Technology and accessibility

Digital technologies increasingly affect electoral administration. Electronic registration systems allow citizens abroad to register more easily and obtain electoral information. Online communication improves transparency and reduces bureaucratic barriers.

5.2 Risks and electoral integrity

⁸ Michael Collyer, 'A Geography of Extra-territorial Citizenship' (2014) 2 *Migration Studies* 55.

⁹ Council of Europe, *E-Voting Handbook: Key Steps in the Implementation of E-enabled Elections* (2020).

However, digitalization also creates new risks. Electronic voting systems face cybersecurity threats, potential manipulation and data protection concerns. Public trust is essential for electoral legitimacy.¹⁰

For this reason, many European states apply a gradual model:

1. digital voter registration,
2. postal voting,
3. pilot technological voting systems.

Such an approach balances accessibility with security and protects electoral integrity.

6. Conclusion

The introduction of open electoral lists and diaspora voting represents a fundamental transformation of democratic representation in Albania. These reforms address two key democratic challenges: strengthening accountability and expanding participation.

Open lists increase the responsiveness of representatives to citizens by allowing voters to influence candidate selection. Diaspora voting enhances political equality by including citizens living abroad in the democratic process. Together, these mechanisms have the potential to improve the legitimacy of elections and public trust in institutions.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these reforms depends on implementation. Legislative change alone cannot ensure democratic consolidation. Institutional capacity, administrative transparency and civic education are necessary conditions for success.

Albania's alignment with European democratic standards therefore requires a balanced approach combining legal reform, institutional development and cultural adaptation of democratic practices. Only through this comprehensive process can electoral reform produce genuine democratic representation.

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ДИГИТАЛИЗАЦИЯ НА БАНКОВАТА ДЕЙНОСТ В ЕВРОЗОНАТА

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Резюме: *В доклада се представят тенденциите при обема на плащанията с банкови карти в еврозоната. Анализира се изменението на броя на банковите карти. Проследява се динамиката при плащанията с ПОС терминал и извършване на операции на банкомат. Изследва се използването на онлайн банкиране.*

Ключови думи: банки, дигитализация, банкови карти.

JEL: G210.

DIGITALISATION OF BANKING IN THE EURO AREA

Aglika Kaneva

Abstract: *In this paper, the trends in the volume of bank card payments in the euro area have been presented. The change in the number of bank cards has been analyzed. The dynamics of POS terminal payments and ATM transactions have been examined. The use of online banking has been studied.*

Keywords: banks, digitalisation, bank cards.

JEL: G210.

Въведение

Дигитализацията оказва влияние върху извършваните от банките операции във фронт офиса и бек офиса, тъй като те предлагат нови дигитални продукти и услуги, като същевременно автоматизират вътрешните си процеси (ECB, 2024). Клиентите предпочитат да използват дигиталните канали за извършване на транзакции и спестяване

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(Deloitte, 2020). Пазарът на платежни услуги се променя бързо с нарастващата дигитализация на платежните услуги (Meyer, Terra, 2024).

Основната цел на доклада е да се изследват тенденциите в областта на дигитализацията в банковия сектор на еврозоната.

За да се реализира целта, в доклада се очертават следните конкретни задачи:

1. Анализ на показатели за дигитализацията на банковите услуги в еврозоната.
2. Изследване на тенденциите при изменението на анализираните показатели за дигитализация на банковите операции в еврозоната.
2. Извеждане на изводи от извършения анализ на показателите за дигитализация на дейността на банките в еврозоната.

Обект на изследването е дигитализацията банковия сектор на еврозоната. Предмет на изследването е влиянието на дигитализацията върху предоставяните от банките услуги на техните клиенти.

Основната теза на изследването е, че дигитализацията на дейността на банките в еврозоната се увеличава.

1. Анализ на някои показатели, характеризиращи дигитализацията на банковите операции в еврозоната

Таблица 1: Показатели за плащанията с банкови карти за еврозоната през периода 2020 – 2024 г.

Показатели	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Картови плащания, изпратени от еврозоната (млн. евро)	1970795,75	2253715,67	2731665,138	3023287,656	3270978,798
Картови плащания, изпратени от еврозоната (млн. броя)	47971,051	56256,347	67551,938	76111,67	84315,508
Годишен темп на растеж на общата стойност на картовите плащания, изпратени от еврозоната	-0,53	14,36	21,37	10,68	8,19

Годишен темп на растеж на общия брой на картовите плащания, изпратени от еврозоната	2,69	17,27	20,25	12,67	10,78
Средна стойност на картовите плащания, изпратени от еврозоната, на едно картово плащане (съотношение към броя на транзакциите)	41,08	40,06	40,44	39,72	38,79
Обща стойност на глава от населението на плащанията с карти, изпратени от еврозоната (евро на глава от населението)	5747,61	6565,87	7900,53	8600,84	9274,36
Общ брой плащания с карти на глава от населението, изпратени от еврозоната (брой на глава от населението)	139,9	163,89	195,37	216,53	239,06

Източник: <https://data.ecb.europa.eu>

Както се вижда от данните представени в таблица 1 през всяка година от анализирания период се наблюдава увеличение на стойността и броя на картовите плащания, наредени в еврозоната, и общата стойност и броя на плащанията с карти на глава от населението. Нарастването на стойността на картовите плащания към края на 2024 г. спрямо 2020 г. е с повече от 65%, а на техния брой съответно с над 75%. Това може да се обясни с факта, че се отчита леко намаление на средната стойност на плащанията с карти, изпратени от еврозоната, на едно картово плащане. През 2020 г. стойността на картовите плащания, извършени в еврозоната, се понижава в малка стойност, а увеличението на броя на тези плащания е много по-ниско в сравнение с останалите години от разглеждания период. Това вероятно се дължи на свиването на икономическата активност в резултат на пандемията от Covid-19.

Таблица 2: Показатели за банковите карти за еврозоната през периода 2020 – 2024 г.

Показатели	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Общ брой карти (независимо от броя на функциите), издадени от местни доставчици на платежни услуги в еврозоната (брой)	686382622	740460912	819668488	875916761	937826589

Годишен темп на растеж на дебитните карти, издадени от местни доставчици на платежни услуги в еврозоната (%)	7,43	8,99	8,4	8,29	9,79
Годишен темп на растеж на кредитните карти, издадени от местни доставчици на платежни услуги в еврозоната (%)	5,14	5,42	43,1	1,5	5
Платежни карти в обращение на глава от населението, издадени от местни доставчици на платежни услуги в еврозоната (брой на глава от населението)	1,78	1,86	1,89	1,97	2,13
Кредитни карти на глава от населението, издадени от местни доставчици на платежни услуги в еврозоната (брой на глава от населението)	0,21	0,22	0,31	0,31	0,33

Източник: <https://data.ecb.europa.eu>

Броят на банковите карти, издадени от местни доставчици на платежни услуги в еврозоната, се увеличава през всяка година. Нарастването му към края на разглеждания период в сравнение с неговото начало е с 37%. Повишение се наблюдава и на броя на платежните карти в обращение на глава от населението, както и на кредитните карти на глава от населението. Годишният темп на растеж на дебитните карти, издадени от местни доставчици на платежни услуги в еврозоната леко се повишава през периода, като превишава годишния темп на растеж на кредитните карти.

Таблица 3: Показатели за банкомати и ПОС терминали за еврозоната през периода 2020 – 2024 г.

Показатели	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Банкомати, предоставени от местни доставчици на платежни услуги от еврозоната, разположени по целия свят (брой)	288609	275766	267574	261880	253740
ПОС терминали, предоставени от местни доставчици на платежни услуги от еврозоната, разположени по целия свят (брой)	13397844	14487970	17000798	19209933	20730305
Банкомати, предоставени от местни доставчици на платежни услуги от еврозоната, разположени по целия свят, на един милион жители (брой на един милион жители)	841,7	803,4	773,88	745,01	719,44

Източник: <https://data.ecb.europa.eu>

През разглеждания период се наблюдава тенденция на намаление на банкоматите и значително увеличение с повече от 50% на ПОС терминалите, предоставени от местни доставчици на платежни услуги от еврозоната, разположени по целия свят.

Таблица 4: Показатели за операции на банкомати и ПОС терминали за еврозоната през периода 2020 – 2024 г.

Показатели	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Обща стойност на тегленията на пари в брой от банкомати с карти, издадени от доставчици на платежни услуги, установени в еврозоната, на терминали, придобити от доставчици на платежни услуги, установени в еврозоната (млн. евро)	974406,856	980372,034	1025934,807	1068828,419	1057041,515
Общ брой тегления на пари в брой от банкомати с карти, издадени от доставчици на платежни услуги, установени в еврозоната, на терминали, придобити от доставчици на платежни услуги, установени в еврозоната (млн. броя)	5484,997	5233,47	5459,65	5503,675	5269,156
Обща стойност на депозитите в брой на банкомати с карти, издадени от доставчици на платежни услуги, установени в еврозоната, на терминали, придобити от доставчици на платежни услуги, установени в еврозоната (млн. евро)	329914,028	354370,806	481647,902	513968,746	541380,654
Общ брой на депозитите в брой на банкомати с карти, издадени от доставчици на платежни услуги, установени в еврозоната, на терминали, придобити от доставчици на платежни услуги, установени в еврозоната (млн. броя)	497,955	499,578	576,316	609,881	653,375
Обща стойност на ПОС транзакциите с карти, издадени от доставчици на платежни услуги, установени в еврозоната, на терминали, придобити от доставчици на платежни	1420465,92	1540802,23	1886563,287	2017880,184	2081929,123

услуги, установени в еврозоната (млн. евро)					
Общ брой ПОС транзакции с карти, издадени от доставчици на платежни услуги, установени в еврозоната, на терминали, придобити от доставчици на платежни услуги, установени в еврозоната (млн. броя)	36035,042	40518,429	52469,45	56913,949	59156,011

Източник: <https://data.ecb.europa.eu>

ПОС транзакциите с карти значително се увеличават като брой с 64% и като стойност с 46% към 2024 г. в сравнение с 2020 г. ПОС транзакциите превишават операциите на банкомат както по стойност, така и по брой операции. Т.е. банковите карти се използват повече за плащане на ПОС терминал, отколкото за теглене на пари от банкомат. Същевременно се наблюдава съществено нарастване с 64% на общата стойност на депозитите в брой на банкомати с карти, издадени от доставчици на платежни услуги, установени в еврозоната, на терминали, придобити от доставчици на платежни услуги, установени в еврозоната, както и на броя на депозитите в брой на банкомати. Общата стойност и броят на тегленията на пари в брой от банкомати се запазват на сравнително близки стойности през периода 2020 – 2024 г.

Таблица 5: Показатели за кредитни преводи за еврозоната през периода 2020 – 2024 г.

Показатели	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Кредитни преводи, инициирани по електронен път с еднократно плащане, изпратени от еврозоната (млн. евро)	92953039,746	117493720,795	96829352,98	84651458,094	88674825,155
Кредитни преводи, инициирани по електронен път с еднократно плащане, изпратени от еврозоната (млн. броя)	11887,811	13733,648	15288,426	17376,673	19176,025

Кредитни преводи, инициирани чрез онлайн банкиране на базата на еднократно плащане, изпратени от еврозоната (млн. евро)	13492837,07	15553766,412	92457892,388	80099756,803	84226326,809
Кредитни преводи, инициирани чрез онлайн банкиране на базата на еднократно плащане, изпратени от еврозоната (млн. броя)	2639,475	3782,67	11844,355	13302,537	14235,033
Кредитни преводи, инициирани с хартиен формуляр, изпратени от еврозоната (млн. броя)	1463,751	1442,631	1950,81	1878,389	1815,366

Източник: <https://data.ecb.europa.eu>

През периода 2020 – 2024 г. при кредитните преводи, инициирани чрез онлайн банкиране на базата на еднократно плащане, изпратени от еврозоната, се отчита много голямо увеличение към края на разглеждания период в сравнение с неговото начало от 524% при стойността им и съответно 439% на техния брой. Данните показват, че броят на кредитните преводи, инициирани по електронен път, и броят на кредитните преводи, инициирани чрез онлайн банкиране, няколко пъти превишава броя на кредитните преводи, инициирани на хартия.

От анализа на показателите може да се направи извода, че дигитализацията на банковата дейност в еврозоната се засилва. Процесът на дигитализацията на дейността на банките прави ползването на техните услуги по-удобно за потребителите. Клиентите им предпочитат да използват онлайн банкиране за извършване на банкови операции, да плащат с банкови карти на ПОС терминал, както и да използват тези карти на банкомати за други операции.

Заклучение

Изводите, които могат да се направят от анализа на някои показатели за дигитализацията при дейността на банките в еврозоната през периода 2020 – 2024 г., са:

- наблюдава се тенденция на увеличение на плащанията с банкови карти в еврозоната през целия анализиран период;
- броят на картите, издадени от местни доставчици на платежни услуги в еврозоната, нараства;
- броят на банкоматите, предоставени от местни доставчици на платежни услуги от еврозоната, намалява. Съществено е повишението на броя на ПОС терминалите през периода;
- откроява се тенденция на развитие на плащанията на ПОС терминал през анализирания период. Броят на тези операции е няколко пъти по-голям от този на операцията с банкови карти на банкомат. Общата стойност на депозитите в брой на банкомати се увеличава, като вероятно този начин на депозиране на средства се предпочита от потребителите като по-удобен от посещението на банков клон;
- кредитните преводи, инициирани чрез онлайн банкиране съществено нарастват. Кредитните преводи, инициирани на хартиен формуляр, са много по-малко на брой в сравнение с кредитните преводи, инициирани по електронен път, и кредитните преводи, инициирани чрез онлайн банкиране;
- дигитализацията на банковите услуги в еврозоната се разширява.

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL SOCIAL CLIMATE AND TRADITIONAL BULLYING AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN THE PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION SYSTEM IN ALBANIA

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Abstract: *This study aims to explore the relationship between school social climate and traditional bullying among adolescents in Albania's lower and upper secondary education. Drawing on a social–ecological perspective, it investigates how the quality of social interactions within schools' influences adolescents' involvement in bullying, both as victims and as perpetrators.*

A cross-sectional correlational survey design was used to examine associations between variables such as school social climate, traditional bullying, and its forms. Data were collected through a standardized instrument and statistical analyses tested the strength and direction of correlations among the variables.

Findings indicate a significant negative correlation between a positive school social climate and the prevalence of traditional bullying. A supportive and inclusive climate is associated with lower involvement of adolescents both as victims and perpetrators. The most prevalent forms of bullying included spreading rumors and attempting to harm peer relationships, while physical violence and threats of harm or retaliation were the least common behaviors.

The study scope focuses on the importance of promoting a positive school climate to prevent bullying and enhance students' well-being. Its findings offer practical implications for policy makers, school leaders, psychosocial services, and teachers to design effective, evidence-based strategies for reducing traditional bullying in Albanian schools.

Keywords: school social climate; adolescent; traditional bullying; bullying forms; victimization; school safety

JEL: I21; I24; I31

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1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional bullying finds a particularly conducive setting within the school social environment. The prevalence and manifestation of traditional bullying vary across educational systems worldwide. Bullying within the school social context has a substantial impact on adolescents' emotional development as well as on their academic outcomes. Traditional bullying in schools may take multiple forms, including physical aggression, verbal aggression, relational bullying, and other related behaviors. Adolescents who experience prolonged exposure to traditional bullying in the school environment are at increased risk of developing psychological difficulties such as depression, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem (Kowalski et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2020).

The school social climate plays a decisive role in determining the quality of interpersonal relationships and the level of emotional safety within the educational setting. It significantly influences the formation of adolescents' behavioral norms in school and their capacity to adapt to these norms (Thapa et al., 2013). A positive school social climate is associated with lower levels of traditional bullying, as it contributes to the reduction of aggressive behaviors and the enhancement of adolescents' self-esteem. Adolescents who benefit from strong social support and a positive school climate demonstrate greater resilience and resistance to traditional bullying (Arslan, 2021).

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the school social climate and traditional bullying, emphasizing that a positive school social climate constitutes a protective factor in reducing adolescents' involvement in bullying behaviors. Exploring this relationship provides valuable insights for educational policymakers and school administrators, supporting the promotion of safe and supportive school social environments. Such environments foster adolescents' well-being not only in physical terms, but also in their social and psychological development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between school social climate and traditional bullying has been the focus of numerous studies worldwide over recent decades. A positive school social climate, built upon clear rules, fairness, and respect for students, is considered a key factor in reducing levels of bullying among adolescents in the school environment (Wayne N. Welsh, 1999).

Conversely, when the school social climate is characterized by low levels of family support and inadequate monitoring of school activities by school staff, this tends to contribute to an increase in traditional bullying behaviors within schools (Christine M. Wienke Totura et al., 2009).

Supporting these findings, Bender emphasizes that when the functioning of the school social environment is based on unclear or inconsistent rules, it results in lower levels of adolescents' awareness regarding the forms and consequences of traditional bullying (Bender, 2012). In contrast, a school social environment characterized by strong teacher engagement and the implementation of anti-bullying awareness policies represents an effective strategy for reducing bullying levels (Sameer Hinduja & Justin W. Patchin, 2015).

School social climate is therefore considered one of the principal determinants influencing the prevalence of bullying in educational settings. Görzig and colleagues (2021) highlight that the prevalence of traditional bullying varies significantly across pre-university school systems in different countries. Empirical data from several studies indicate substantial cross-national differences in adolescents' involvement in bullying.

For example, the prevalence of traditional bullying victimization among adolescents is reported to be approximately 9% in Sweden, while in Lithuania it reaches around 54%. Similarly, marked differences are observed in adolescents' involvement as perpetrators of bullying. Sweden and Wales report that only about 3% of adolescents engage in bullying behaviors at school, whereas Denmark reports approximately 20% of adolescents as perpetrators (Nansel et al., 2004). Additionally, Due and colleagues (2005) report that 5.1% of adolescent girls in Sweden have experienced bullying-related harassment in the school environment, compared to 38.2% in Lithuania.

Studies conducted in Albania similarly indicate that approximately 19.4% of adolescents in the Albanian school environment are either victims or perpetrators of traditional bullying (Dragoti & Ismaili, 2017). Gender-based differences in adolescents' involvement in bullying are also evident. The study in the Albanian context shows that male adolescents are more frequently involved as perpetrators of traditional bullying compared to female adolescents, while female adolescents report higher levels of victimization than their male counterparts (Dragoti & Ismaili, 2017).

These findings are consistent with international studies, which demonstrates that boys are more likely to assume the role of bully, whereas girls are more likely to be victims of bullying (Zsila et al., 2018). Similarly, Stubbs-Richardson and colleagues (2018) report higher rates of

involvement among male adolescents as perpetrators of traditional bullying compared to females. Yang and colleagues (2022) further confirm these gender differences in the Chinese context, where male adolescents exhibit higher levels of involvement as perpetrators of bullying compared to female adolescents.

Among American adolescents, the most common forms of involvement in traditional bullying at school are verbal aggression and relational bullying. Approximately 36.5% of adolescents report victimization through verbal aggression, while around 40.1% report victimization through relational forms of bullying (Wang et al., 2009). Similar patterns are observed among Albanian adolescents, where verbal aggression represents the most prevalent form of traditional bullying in the school environment, followed by relational bullying and physical aggression.

In Albanian schools, traditional bullying primarily occurs among peer groups of students, although it also involves interactions between adolescents and teaching staff. Approximately 87% of bullying behaviors in Albanian schools occur among groups of adolescents, while only 13% involve interactions between adolescents and teachers (Kallciu et al., 2020).

Verbal aggression exhibits gender-based differences within the Albanian school context. Male adolescents are more exposed to verbal aggression than female adolescents, experiencing higher levels of this form of traditional bullying. Verbal aggression in Albanian schools has been shown to generate significant emotional effects among adolescent victims, which in some cases may escalate into physical violence within the school environment (Papa-Gusho, 2015).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Aims of the Study

The aim of this study is to analyze the relationship between school social climate and traditional bullying within the Albanian pre-university education system. The specific objectives of the study are to identify the level of manifestation of traditional bullying in the Albanian school social environment, the predominant forms of traditional bullying, and gender differences in adolescents' involvement in traditional bullying.

These objectives are addressed through the following study questions:

- the level of school social climate in Albanian upper secondary schools;
- the prevalence of traditional bullying in Albanian upper secondary schools;
- the main forms of traditional bullying experienced or perpetrated by adolescents in Albanian schools;

- gender differences in the level of involvement of Albanian adolescents in traditional bullying within the school environment.

3.2. General Characteristics of the Study

The study was conducted using a cross-sectional correlational survey design. Several variables were examined and correlated, including school social climate, traditional bullying, depression, self-esteem, mental well-being, and life satisfaction among Albanian adolescents. The relationship between school social climate and bullying was also analyzed in relation to gender differences and to different forms of bullying manifested in Albanian upper secondary schools. Statistical and graphical analyses of these variables were used to identify and demonstrate the association between school social climate and the level of traditional bullying in Albanian secondary education.

3.3. Sample of the Study

The target population of the study consisted of adolescent students enrolled in lower secondary education (AMU) and upper secondary education (AML) in Albania. According to national statistics, this population includes approximately 216,000 students aged between 12 and 18 years.

The study sample comprised 1,150 adolescents drawn from 10 districts across Albania and included students from 42 schools (lower and upper secondary). Of these, 24 were lower secondary schools (AMU) and 18 were upper secondary schools (AML).

The demographic distribution of the sample covered the entire territory of the Republic of Albania, from north to south and from east to west. Participants were selected using a stratified random sampling technique, applying probability-based selection through quota sampling and stratification according to gender, age, and geographic distribution. Each adolescent completed the questionnaire individually and was given sufficient time to do so. The collected data were processed and analyzed using SPSS version 19.

3.4. Instruments and Procedure

The first section of the instrument included items related to the demographic characteristics of participants, such as age and gender. The second section consisted of an integrated questionnaire combining items from two validated instruments: “Examining the Relationship

Among Bullying, School Climate and Adolescent Well-Being in Chile and South Africa: A Cross-Cultural Comparison” by Varela et al. (2019) and “The Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire” by Olweus (1996).

The instrument was pilot-tested with a sample of 100 adolescents who were not included in the main study sample. The reliability and validity coefficients obtained from the pilot study were satisfactory. Following this pilot phase, the instrument was administered to the selected study sample.

3.5. Data Collection

Data were collected in 42 selected schools across Albania, involving adolescents enrolled in lower secondary education (AMU, ages 12–15) and upper secondary education (AML, ages 16–18). The questionnaire was completed individually and anonymously by each participant in the presence of a trained interviewer. A total of 1,056 adolescents completed the instrument, resulting in a response rate of 92%.

3.6. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to examine the relationship between school social climate and traditional bullying in Albanian schools, as well as to identify the prevalence of different forms of traditional bullying and gender differences among adolescents. Regression analysis was employed to determine the statistical significance of the association between school social climate and the level of traditional bullying.

4. RESULTS

Data on the level of social climate in Albanian upper secondary schools are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Overall level of the social climate at school

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Social climate at school	1056	1.00	3.00	2.89	.315

The measurement of the overall level of social climate in Albanian schools is conducted using a three-point scale ranging from 1 to 3. A score of 1 indicates a low level of social climate at school, whereas a score of 2 reflects a moderate level, and a score of 3 denotes a high level of social climate at school. The results indicate a satisfactory level of social climate in Albanian schools. The mean score ($M = 2.89$) and the standard deviation ($SD = 0.315$) further substantiate the satisfactory level of the social climate within the Albanian school context.

Data concerning the levels of the constituent dimensions of the school social climate are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean levels of the dimensions of the school social climate

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
School attachment	1056	1.00	3.00	2.8979	.34681
Teacher attachment	1056	1.00	3.00	2.8720	.34560
Peer attachment	1056	1.00	3.00	2.8190	.39526

The data demonstrate the overall level of the social climate in Albanian schools. The dimensions of adolescents' attachment to school, attachment to teachers, and attachment to peers are consistent with the overall level of school social climate presented in Table 1. Each dimension reflects a satisfactory positive level. Specifically, the dimension of school attachment has a mean score (M) of 2.89 and a standard deviation (SD) of 0.34. The dimension of attachment to teachers shows a mean score (M) of 2.87 with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.34. The third dimension, peer attachment, has a mean score (M) of 2.81 and a standard deviation (SD) of 0.39.

Furthermore, *data regarding whether adolescents have observed or have been witnesses to their peers experiencing traditional bullying by teachers or by other students within the school environment are presented in Table 3.*

Table 3. Percentage of students who have observed peers experiencing traditional bullying by other adolescents or by teachers at school during the past 12 months (in %)

Frequency of traditional bullying	I have observed my peers being bullied by other students.	I have observed my peers being bullied by teachers.
Never	21.5	53.9

Rarely (only once or twice)	44.2	30.9
From time to time	23.2	10.5
Frequently	11.0	4.7

The data indicate that one in five adolescents reports having never observed their peers experiencing bullying at school. By contrast, approximately one in two adolescents reports having observed signs of bullying among their peers once or twice. Meanwhile, the level of observed bullying perpetrated by teachers against students is markedly lower compared to bullying among peer groups. Despite these lower values, it should be emphasized that bullying by teaching staff still occurs within the school environment.

Data concerning adolescents' own experiences of being victims or perpetrators of traditional bullying are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Adolescents' self-reported experiences of victimization by peers or teachers and perpetration of traditional bullying during the past 12 months at school

Frequency of traditional bullying	I have been bullied by other students.	I have been bullied by teachers	I have engaged in bullying against other students.
Never	77.8	81.4	79.5
Rarely (only once or twice)	17.0	13.4	14.0
From time to time	4.0	3.7	3.7
Frequently	1.1	1.5	2.8

The level of adolescents' experiences of being victims of traditional bullying by peers or teachers is considerably lower compared to the level of reported observations of peers being victimized by other students or by teaching staff. With regard to perpetration, the findings indicate that approximately 80% of adolescents (four out of five) do not engage in traditional bullying at school. Only 2.8% of adolescents report that they frequently engage in traditional bullying against their peers at school. Although reported at relatively low levels, experiences of victimization by teaching staff remain present within the school environment.

Table 5 presents those data concerning the forms of traditional bullying experienced by adolescents.

Table 5. Percentage distribution of forms of traditional bullying experienced by adolescents during the past 12 months

Types of traditional bullying	Never	Rarely (only once or twice)	From time to time	Frequently
I have been verbally harassed	68.6	22.2	6.2	3.0
I have been threatened with physical violence or retaliation	88.6	8.2	1.7	1.5
They have used physical violence against me.	88.1	8.8	1.4	1.7
They have spread rumors about me.	52.9	31.5	9.7	5.9
I have been excluded from peer groups or from activities organized within the school environment.	77.0	17.5	3.4	2.1
They have attempted to damage my relationships with others.	58.9	26.4	9.0	5.7

The findings indicate that the highest levels of bullying experienced by adolescents are associated with forms of relational bullying. Specifically, 15.6% of adolescents (approximately one in seven) report having experienced bullying through the spread of rumors or false information about them as individuals. Another form of relational bullying experienced at relatively high levels involves peers' attempts to undermine or damage adolescents' relationships within the school environment. In addition, a high level of exposure within the school context is also reported for verbal aggression: 9.2% of adolescents state that they have experienced this form of bullying occasionally or frequently by other adolescents at school. In contrast, forms of physical aggression or physical threats are reported at lower levels.

With regard to gender differences, data on adolescents' experiences of being victims of traditional bullying at school are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Percentage distribution of traditional bullying experiences among male and female adolescents during the past 12 months

Types of traditional bullying	Boys				Girls			
	Never	Rarely (only once or twice)	From time to time	Frequently	Never	Rarely (only once or twice)	From time to time	Frequently
Verbally harassed	73.9	17.9	5.0	3.1	64.7	26.2	6.8	2.3
Threatened with physical violence or retaliation	87.4	9.1	1.7	1.5	90.0	7.4	2.1	0.4
Subjected to physical violence	86.4	9.8	2.2	1.6	90.0	8.1	0.8	1.1
Rumors spread about me	64.8	24.8	4.7	5.6	44.0	36.2	14.0	5.7
Excluded from peer groups or activities	81.4	13.6	3.5	1.6	74.5	20.2	4.0	1.3
Attempts made to damage my relationships with others	68.5	22.1	6.0	3.5	50.1	30.8	11.7	7.4

The highest levels of victimization from traditional bullying among male adolescents are associated with forms of relational bullying. One in three male adolescents has experienced victimization through the spread of rumors about them within the school environment or through peers' attempts to undermine their relationships with others. Relatively high levels are also reported among male adolescents for verbal harassment. Approximately 8.1% of male adolescents (one in twelve) report having experienced verbal bullying occasionally or frequently by their peers at school. A moderate level of victimization is observed for the

relational bullying form related to exclusion from peer groups or school activities. In contrast, experiences of victimization related to physical aggression or threats of physical violence are reported at low levels within the Albanian school context.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The effects of reforms in pre-university education, which were implemented through school legislation with a focus on promoting a positive school social climate, strengthening psychosocial services, increasing the engagement of the parent community and teaching staff, and reforming teacher education, among other measures, appear to have contributed to a positive level of school social climate in Albanian schools.

This finding (Table 1) aligns with Welsh's conclusions that schools characterized by clear rules and respect for adolescent students foster a more positive school climate and, in turn, reduce adolescents' problematic behaviors within the school social environment (Wayne N. Welsh, 1999). Similarly, Totura and colleagues found that increased engagement of parents and teaching staff helps create a supportive school social environment that mitigates bullying behaviors (Totura et al., 2009). This positive level of school social climate in Albanian schools is also reflected in the values of its constituent dimensions (Table 2).

Adolescents' connectedness to school, their relationships with teachers, and peer-to-peer relations all demonstrate positive levels. Their combined score follows the same trend as the overall school social climate observed in Albania. Comparisons between these dimensions and findings from international studies show a similar pattern to the results reported by Hinduja and Patchin (2015). Their studies suggests that a high level of positive school climate is shaped primarily by strong teacher commitment to the school and by adolescents' awareness and adherence to school rules in their interactions with one another. The positive levels of these two elements in Albanian schools contribute to the development and maintenance of a positive school climate.

The findings further indicate that the level of traditional bullying in Albanian secondary schools varies depending on whether adolescents report bullying as something they have observed or something they have personally experienced or perpetrated. This analysis therefore focuses on two perspectives.

The first concerns adolescents' reports of bullying incidents they have observed their peers experiencing in the school environment, that are, incidents perpetrated either by other students

or by teachers (Table 3). The results show that three out of four adolescents report that they have not seen bullying, or have seen it only once or twice, occurring among peers in the school setting. This suggests a relatively low level of bullying in Albanian schools and is consistent with the positive school climate reported (Table 1). Only about one in ten adolescents reported that they had frequently witnessed peers being bullied by other adolescents. This comparatively low result is broadly consistent with levels reported in many European school contexts.

An additional finding of particular concern relates to bullying perpetrated by teaching staff. Although reported at low levels, adolescents indicated that they had witnessed teachers engaging in bullying behaviors toward their peers. Irony, shouting, insults, and threats were the most frequently observed forms of teacher-perpetrated bullying. The second perspective examines whether adolescents themselves have personally experienced bullying by peers or teachers, as well as whether they themselves have engaged in bullying behaviors at school.

The indicators in Table 4 are notably lower when adolescents report their own personal experiences of bullying, compared to reports of bullying they have observed happening to others (Table 3). This declining trend in reported bullying levels continues with respect to experiences involving teachers.

Regarding adolescents' perpetration of bullying toward peers, only 20.5% reported that they had bullied classmates at least sometimes (i.e., occasionally or frequently). Levels of involvement as victims or perpetrators of traditional bullying in Albanian schools are comparable to those reported in several European contexts. Nansel et al. (2004) report that the proportion of adolescents engaging in bullying in Denmark is approximately 20%, which is similar to the level observed in Albanian schools (20.5%) (Nansel et al., 2004).

Fleming and Jacobsen (2009) further report that the prevalence of victimization in middle-income countries, within which Albania is often categorized, ranges between 20% and 40%, a range consistent with the Albanian rate of 21.1% (Fleming & Jacobsen, 2009). Elgar and colleagues (2015), analyzing data from 79 countries, estimate that approximately 30% of adolescents are involved in traditional bullying, which is also broadly comparable to the Albanian school context (Elgar et al., 2015). More recently, Wilson-Lemoine et al. (2024) reported that approximately 22.3% of adolescents had been victims of bullying during the previous six months at school, again indicating a level broadly aligned with the Albanian findings (Wilson-Lemoine et al., 2024). Overall, these comparisons suggest that the level of traditional bullying in Albanian secondary schools is relatively similar to that reported in many

European and North American contexts. The observed levels of bullying victimization and perpetration in Albanian schools further support the association between school social climate and traditional bullying: a positive school climate appears to contribute to lower levels of traditional bullying among adolescents.

A school environment characterized by rumors, misinformation, intrigue, gossip, and fabricated stories may facilitate the rapid dissemination of relational bullying behaviors. Such an environment makes it difficult for adolescents to identify the source of bullying behaviors, contributing to the finding that approximately one in two adolescents experiences this form of relational bullying to varying degrees. Similar levels were found for another relational bullying form involving attempts to damage adolescents' relationships with peers. The results indicate that two out of five adolescents experience this form of bullying within the school environment. Because relational bullying can be carried out relatively easily and often without immediate confrontation, it tends to show higher prevalence within schools.

Among the various forms of traditional bullying, verbal harassment appears to be the most prevalent. Approximately one in three adolescents reported experiencing this form of bullying in the school environment. Verbal harassment, frequently present in classroom interactions, combined with the tendency to form "leader" groups among students, creates a social environment conducive to verbal bullying. This form may be used to pressure insecure adolescents into joining peer groups and conforming to group norms. Verbal bullying thus becomes a practical and accessible strategy for perpetrators targeting peers in classrooms or across the school. By contrast, exclusion from peer groups was reported at lower levels. The development of strong friendships during adolescence, which often lasts for decades, can make it more difficult for groups to exclude peers, thereby reducing the prevalence of this form of bullying. More severe forms of traditional bullying, such as physical violence and threats of violence or retaliation, were reported at very low levels. Only about 3% of adolescents reported experiencing these behaviors occasionally or frequently. A positive school social climate, by facilitating the implementation of effective strategies by school administration structures, appears to have reduced adolescents' exposure to more aggressive forms of bullying in Albanian schools.

The analysis of bullying involvement by gender (Table 6) indicates that, for both genders, the most frequently reported experiences involve relational bullying, particularly the spreading of rumors and attempts to undermine adolescents' relationships with peers. Comparison of these

two relational forms by gender shows that adolescent girls report higher levels of victimization than boys. Approximately one in two girls reported experiencing these relational bullying forms, which is markedly higher than the rates reported by boys. The experience of verbal harassment was also higher among girls than boys. Because these forms do not typically involve explicit threats of physical violence, they may be more easily directed toward female adolescents in the school environment. Adolescents' efforts to stand out through physical development, emerging sexual orientation and behavior, and the formation of early romantic relationships may contribute to an environment in which rumors, verbal harassment, and relationship disruption spread more easily. This dynamic appears to affect girls more strongly, as reflected in their higher reported victimization rates.

In contrast, more severe forms of traditional bullying, such as physical violence and threats of violence or retaliation, were reported at higher levels among boys than among girls. This gender difference suggests that harsher forms of bullying are more frequently directed toward male adolescents, who may still view threats or physical aggression as potential means of resolving conflicts in the school environment. These findings are consistent with both Albanian and international study indicating gender differences in the manifestation and involvement in bullying behaviors. Papa-Gusho (2015) identified gender differences in verbal aggression in Albanian schools, noting that boys are more inclined to engage in verbal aggression compared to girls (Papa-Gusho, 2015). These findings are also supported by recent international study. Stubbs-Richardson (2018) reports gender differences in involvement in bullying, showing that boys demonstrate higher levels of perpetration than girls (Stubbs-Richardson, 2018). Moreover, Cosma et al. (2022), analyzing data from 46 countries, confirm gender-based differences in traditional bullying involvement, with boys reporting higher perpetration rates than girls (Cosma et al., 2022).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Key findings of this study on the relationship between a positive school social climate and traditional bullying in Albanian schools include:

- Educational reforms in Albania have contributed to the strengthening of a positive school social climate in Albanian secondary schools through the promotion of psychosocial services, more effective engagement of the parent community, improved teacher-school connectedness, and reform of teacher training programs.

- The prevalence of traditional bullying victimization in Albanian pre-university education is relatively low and comparable to levels reported in European school contexts.
- Albanian adolescents report low levels of perpetration of traditional bullying, which are comparable to perpetration levels reported in various European schools.
- Bullying perpetrated by teaching staff remains present at low levels, primarily through behaviors such as insults, shouting, irony, and threats.
- The highest levels of adolescents' involvement in bullying behaviors in Albanian secondary schools are associated with relational forms of bullying.
- Male adolescents report higher levels of perpetration of traditional bullying compared to female adolescents.
- Female adolescents report higher levels of victimization in relational bullying forms compared to male adolescents.
- More severe forms of traditional bullying, such as physical violence and threats of retaliation or physical harm, are experienced at higher levels by male adolescents than by female adolescents.

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РОЛЯ НА ДИГИТАЛНИЯ МАРКЕТИНГ В ХОТЕЛСКАТА ИНДУСТРИЯ

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Резюме: *Научният доклад има за цел да анализира каква е ролята на дигиталния маркетинг в хотелския бизнес. Изследвани са основните области на приложение на неговите канали и функции в хотелите. Открито е връзката между инструментите на дигиталния маркетинг и нагласите на потребителите. Фокусът е поставен върху ефектите от взаимодействието между клиентите и бизнеса в онлайн среда. Вниманието е фокусирано върху основните позитивни страни и недостатъците, които са риск за компаниите. Изведени са няколко примера за влиянието на тази стратегия върху хотелския бизнес. Авторът защитава тезата, че дигиталният маркетинг е едно от ключовите средства за успех на хотелите. Ролята му е по-скоро положителна, но не бива да се пренебрегват рисковете, които крие онлайн средата.*

Ключови думи: дигитален маркетинг, роля, хотелиерство, хотелска индустрия.

JEL: Z31, Z33

ROLE OF DIGITAL MARKETING IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY

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Abstract: *The scientific report aims to analyze the role of digital marketing in the hotel business. The main areas of application of its channels and functions in hotels are investigated. The relationship between digital marketing tools and consumer attitudes is highlighted. The focus is on the effects of interaction between customers and businesses in an online environment. Attention is focused on the main advantages and disadvantages that are a risk for companies. Several examples of the impact of this strategy on the hotel business are presented. The author defends the thesis that digital marketing is one of the key means of hotel success. Its role is rather positive, but the risks of the online environment should not be overlooked.*

Keywords: digital marketing, role, hospitality, hotel industry

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Въведение

Дигиталният маркетинг трансформира начина, по който хотелите привличат гости, комуникират с тях и управляват своите резервации. Нарастващото влияние на социалните мрежи и възможностите, които предлага технологичния свят превръщат дигиталните инструменти във важна тема за хотелиерите. Актуалността на темата се откроява във все по-засиленото развитие на дигиталните технологии като средство за привличане на клиенти. Обект на настоящото изследване в доклада е хотелската индустрия. Предмет на анализ е ролята на дигиталния маркетинг в хотелиерството. За изследването са избрани методи на анализ и синтез. Основно ограничение на настоящия доклад се явява недостатъчният брой на задълбочени разработки в българската литература. Поради това са използвани основно чуждестранни. Научният доклад има за цел да анализира каква е ролята на дигиталния маркетинг в хотелския бизнес. За постигането на тази цел се решават следните изследователски задачи:

- изучаване на теоретичната рамка на понятието дигитален маркетинг;
- изследване на приложението на дигиталните канали в хотелиерството;
- анализиране на ефектите от новия подход върху хотелския бизнес;
- разглеждане на практическите примери за ролята на дигиталния маркетинг.

Теоретична рамка

Маркетингът се развива като динамична концепция, която постепенно разширява своя фокус – от икономическа ефективност към включване на социални, екологични и устойчиви измерения в управлението на пазарните отношения (Katrandjiev, 2016). С развитието на технологиите, той придобива дори още по-голям обхват. През последните десетилетия, дигиталният маркетинг е един от ключовите елементи, заложили в плана за оптимизация на компаниите.

Трудно е да се определи коя е първата дефиниция на понятието. Причината е, че то се променя и еволюира. В по-ранни публикации се откриват термини като „онлайн маркетинг“ и „електронен маркетинг“. Webber, (2013) го описва като еволюция на традиционния подход, съчетан с нови дигитални канали, данни и автоматизация, които позволяват на организациите да персонализират маркетинговите си стратегии.

Tiago and Verissimo (2014) разглеждат понятието като интегрирана система от дейности, които използват интернет-базирани технологии, с цел комуникация и създаване на стойност за потребителите и компаниите. Уебсайтовете, имейлите, и социалните мрежи са част от средствата включени в този модел. Чрез тях компаниите достигат до по-мощни групи от клиенти, без да се увеличават драстично разходите.

Ryan (2016) допълва, че дигиталният маркетинг е изкуството да се ангажира клиентът в правилния момент чрез точното устройство и подходящо съдържание. Kotler, et al (2017) разглеждат понятието в контекста на маркетинга 4.0, в който взаимоотношенията между брандовете и потребителите се изграждат чрез комбинация от онлайн и офлайн взаимодействия. Основен е принципът на многостранната комуникация: потребителите вече са активни участници в създаването на съдържание.

Най-комплексната академична концепция се предлага от Kannan and Li (2017). Те представят дигиталния маркетинг като екосистема. Тя е съставена от различни платформи, данни, алгоритми, устройства и канали за комуникация. Компаниите имат достъп до своите клиенти през целия процес на покупка. По този начин, могат да добавят стойност и да посрещнат потребителските желания много по-лесно.

Концепция на дигиталния маркетинг

Дигиталният маркетинг променя класическия процес на търсене и покупка чрез повишена прозрачност и интерактивност. Традиционният модел AIDA „внимание – желание – решение – действие“ предполага линеен йерархичен път, през който потребителите преминават, за да се превърнат в клиенти. За разлика от него, при новия модел се редуват търсене, сравнение, промяна на желанието и покупката в различни моменти. Това го превръща в динамичен и нелинеен процес (Kannan and Li, 2017). Основните критерии за избор запазват своята същност при прехода от физическа към дигитална среда, като се трансформират чрез технологични решения, лесна навигация, персонализирани оферти и удобство (Големечева, 2025, с. 530).

Таблица № 1: Сравнение между традиционния маркетинг и дигиталния маркетинг

Традиционен маркетинг	Дигитален маркетинг
Линеен процес	Нелинеен процес

Ограничена информация, изцяло контролирана от фирмите	Прозрачност и достъпност на информация
Ограничен подход „от уста на уста“.	Разширен подход „от уста на уста“.
Идентично послание за всички	Персонализация на посланието
Еднопосочна комуникация с потребителите	Двупосочна комуникация с клиентите
Бавен процес на покупка. Само физически контакт	Бърза онлайн покупка. Лесни плащания.

Източник: Адаптация на автора

Онлайн потребителските отзиви значително намаляват информационната асиметрия. Същевременно, при традиционния маркетинг, фирмите разчитат на контролирани послания, чрез реклама по радио, телевизия или билборди. Забелязва се тенденцията потребителите да търсят онлайн мнения в социалните мрежи, дори след като са гледали или чули дадена реклама.

Ключова характеристика на дигиталния маркетинг е електронният подход „от уста на уста“. Той се е превърнал в доминиращ източник на информация, който оформя потребителските възприятия и решенията за покупка (Filieri, 2015). Благодарение на онлайн средата рекламата може да достигне до хиляди хора в целия свят.

Технологиите позволяват персонализирано търсене и предлагане. Докато в миналото, посланията са били идентични за всички, то в съвременния онлайн свят, те са насочени към конкретни таргет групи (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). В социалните мрежи често се пуска информация за продукти, които са сходни като тези, които даден човек е търсил. Това, заедно с мобилните плащания увеличават импулсивните покупки.

Приложение на дигиталния маркетинг в хотелиерството

Дигиталният маркетинг обхваща набор от канали за комуникация с клиентите, с цел увеличаване на заетостта. Те подпомагат продажбите и променят дистрибуционните мрежи (Sharafuddin, Madhavan and Wangtueai, 2024). Хотелите ги използват за:

- представяне на продукти и услуги (уебсайт, виртуални турове);
- управление на онлайн репутацията (отзиви и оценки);
- дистрибуция (резервации през уебсайт или онлайн туристически агенции);
- персонализирана комуникация (имейл, мобилни „подбутващи“ съобщения);
- анализ на клиентското поведение (Sigala and Gretzel (eds.), 2018).

Мета-търсачките и онлайн туристическите агенции реорганизируют процеса на

резервиране. Ключов инструмент, оказващ влияние в хотелиерството са онлайн ревютата в сайтове като TripAdvisor, Booking, Google и др. Те формират очакванията на бъдещите гости и влияят пряко върху решенията им за резервация.

Основни области на приложение (каналы и функции)

За да се разбере по-конкретно как се прилага дигиталния маркетинг в хотелиерството, е необходимо да разгледаме каналите за комуникация и предаване на информация, които хотелите използват. Обръща се внимание на техните функции в бизнеса. Няколко от ключовите области са:

- **Уебсайт, оптимизация и директни резервации.** Интернет страницата на хотелите е най-значимият канал за комуникация, резервация и предаване на информация. Целта на всяка хотелска компания е да увеличи своите директни продажби. Обръща се специално внимание върху оптимизацията на търсачките (на англ. SEO - Search Engine Optimization). Тя представлява процеса на подобрене на структурата, съдържанието и техническите характеристики на уебсайта (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

- **Социални медии и мрежи.** Платформите са мост между гостите и хотелите. Информацията фигурираща в тях, осигурява чувство за сигурност в потребителите. Създаването на съдържание от клиентите (UGC - User-Generated Content), подпомага вземането на решение за резервация. UGC е ключов фактор за влияние върху ценовата премия; оценка на репутацията и развитие на маркетинговата ефективност (Christou, 2012).

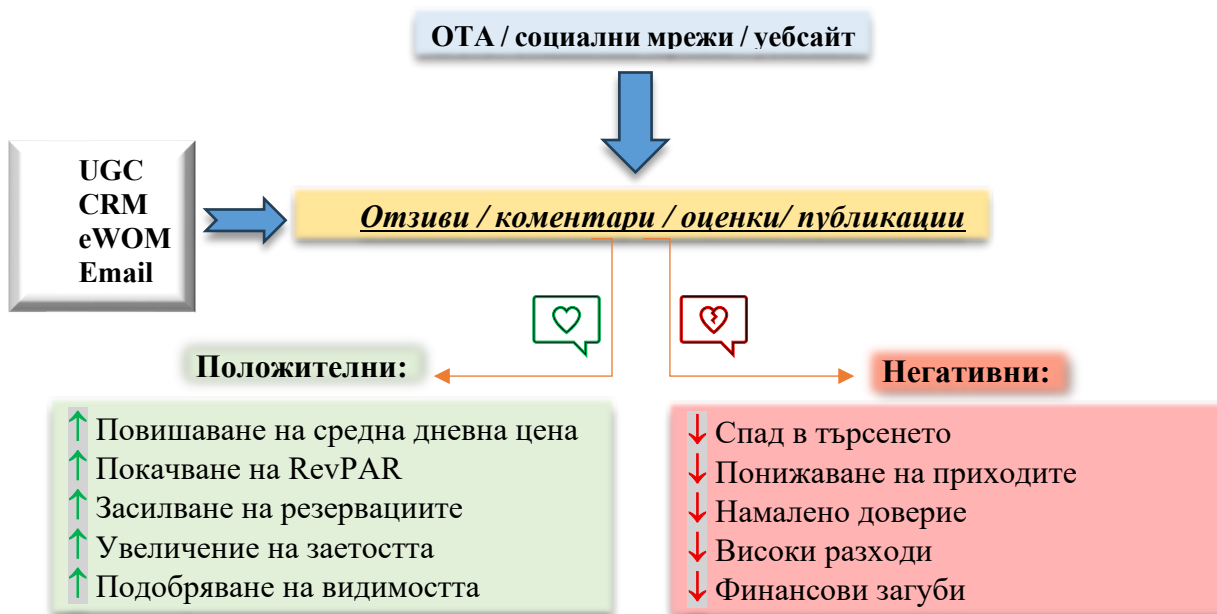
- **Онлайн туристически агенции (OTAs).** Те представляват електронен посредник, който агрегира туристически услуги в онлайн инфраструктура с висока степен на информираност, интерактивност и автоматизация (Xiang, Du and Stienmetz, 2021). ОТА действат двустранно. От една страна, гостите търсят изчерпателна информация без високи разходи за нея. От друга, хотелите целят да достигнат до по-големи пазари. Ползите от използването им са глобален достъп; стабилни конверсии и подобро доверие.

- **Имейл маркетинг.** В хотелиерството той се използва за изпращане на съобщения за добре дошли отново; оферти за рожден ден; изпращане на информация за специални пакети. Често, имейл контактите се използват за следене на директните резервации. По този начин, по-лесно се персонализират услугите.

- **Стратегия за управление на взаимоотношенията с клиентите (CRM - Customer Relationship Management).** Това е подход за регулиране на връзките с потребителите чрез използване на информация и технологии. Стратегията води до придобиването на по-висока стойност за клиента и бизнеса. Чрез нея се събират данни за клиента и се осигурява персонализация и подобро преживяване (Payne and Frow, 2005)

Ефекти от новия дигитален подход върху хотелския бизнес

Дигиталният маркетинг трансформира хотелската индустрия чрез механизми за прозрачност, оптимизация и персонализация. В хотелиерството, клиентите обикновено имат високи изисквания. От своя страна, хотелските компании се стремят да постигнат възможно най-добро качество и да бъдат видими и разпознаваеми сред своите гости. Дигиталният маркетинг работи ефективно едновременно и за двете страни (схема 1).



Източник: Систематизация на автора

Схема 1: Ефекти на дигиталните канали в хотелската индустрия

✓ **Позитивни ефекти.** В практиката съществуват множество доказателства, че дигиталния маркетинг носи не малко положителни резултати за хотелите. Важно е той да бъде стратегически интегриран и подкрепен с правилно управление на каналите. По-долу са представени, някои ключови позитивни страни:

- **Повишаване на приходите.** Изследване на Nicolau, Xiang и Wang (2023) показва, че настроението в онлайн ревютата има положителен ефект върху средната дневна цена (ADR). Според проучване на De Pelsmacker et al. (2018, p.47), обемът на отзивите има

силно влияние върху заетостта (OR), а тонът, с който са написани оказва ефект върху RevPAR (Revenue Per Available Room – приход на налична стая). Един пункт покачване в онлайн удовлетвореността корелира с +0.54% заетост и следователно $RevPar = 1.42\%$ (Pereira and Freitas, 2023, p.9). Формулата, с която се изчислява този индекс е:

$$RevPar = ADR \times OR \quad (1)$$

- **Оптимизиране на производителността чрез електронния модел „от уста на уста“ (eWOM).** Свободното предаване на информация от човек на човек е важен елемент от маркетинговия подход в хотелиерството. Потребителите, които четат позитивни отзиви, са по-склонни да направят резервация. Изследване на Ye et al. (цитирани в Pereira and Freitas, 2023, p.8) показва, че 10% подобрение в средната оценка на онлайн ревютата може да увеличи производителността на хотелите с около 4.4%.

- **Засилване на резервациите, благодарение на мобилните технологии.** Възможността за търсене на информация и лесно взимане на решение за запазване на хотел през мобилните телефони е безгранична. Изследване публикувано от Phocuswright, 2023 отчита, че 47% от резервациите през онлайн туристически агенции за 2022 г. са направени през мобилни устройства.

- **Развитие на дистрибуцията.** Онлайн туристическите агенции държат голям дял (около 40-50%) от глобалните онлайн резервации. Средно приблизително около 80% от хотелите ги използват, като делът зависи от страната (European Commission, 2023, p.63). Booking.com, като една от най-големите хотелски платформи отбелязва дял около 71% от пазара на ОТА в Европа. (Schegg, 2024, p.6).

- **Дългосрочно стратегическо влияние чрез дигитални маркетингови канали.** Изследване от Maroofi and Swara (2025) показва, че имейл маркетингът е от важно значение за местата за настаняване. Той има положителен и статистически значим ефект върху финансовите, клиентските и вътрешните процеси на хотелите. Те могат да изграждат дългосрочни взаимоотношения с гостите, да стимулират повторни резервации и да подобряват вътрешните операции чрез дигитални кампании.

- ✓ **Негативни ефекти.** Освен множеството позитивни страни, технологичния свят крие и значителни рискове за бизнеса. Важно е да се обърне внимание върху тях, за да се вземат навременни мерки при приложението на дигитални маркетингови стратегии, с цел да се избегнат загуби за хотелите. Някои от ключовите негативни ефекти са:

- **Икономическа уязвимост.** Онлайн отзивите, имат както положителна роля, така и негативна. По-голям брой отрицателни оценки, водят до намаляване на търсенето. Sayfuddin and Chen, 2021 намират пряка връзка между клиентските оценки и приходите.

- **Дезинформация. Фалшиви ревюта и новини.** Разпространението на подвеждащи публикации и наличието на манипулирани коментари може да подкопае доверието на гостите към хотелите. Освен това, влияе върху данните, които мениджмънта използва, за да придобие представа къде се намира на бизнес картата. Делът на фалшивите ревюта в онлайн платформите варира между 20-30% (Otero, 2021, p. 6).

- **Зависимост от онлайн туристическите агенции.** Въпреки значителния положителен ефект от тях в хотелиерството, те имат и видимо негативен такъв. Изразява се във високите комисионни, зависимост от външни алгоритми, засилена конкуренция и подчиненост на договорните клаузи и ценовите политики. Основните комисионни средно са в диапазон около между 10-20% (European Commission, 2023, p.69).

- **Киберпрестъпност, рискови плащания.** Проучване, което анализира пазарната реакция, откри статистически значими отрицателни възвръщаемости в краткосрочен период след съобщение за кибератака. Подобно негативно поведение е документирано и в по-широката литература за киберинциденти. Стойностите варират в рамките на под 1-2%. Следователно, можем да твърдим, че кибератаките водят до реални финансови загуби в хотелиерството (Arcuri et al, 2020, pp. 284–287).

Примери за ролята на дигиталния маркетинг в хотелите.

Почти всички места за настаняване използват дигиталния маркетинг под някаква форма. Проучване насочено към анализиране на употребата на подходящите дигитални канали в **Monastery Hotel** доказва, че този подход е лесно приложим, дори с ограничени ресурси. Електронните комуникационни канали не са просто реклама, а изграждане на взаимоотношения с гостите (Mucunska and Nakovski, 2022).

Някои от резултатите от изследването проведено за **Hotel Fafense** показват, че дигиталните стратегии помагат за предлагането на хотела. Въпреки това, резервациите ще са минимални, освен ако той няма добра онлайн репутация в онлайн туристическите агенции. Според проучването, всяка публикация в социалните мрежи повишава резервациите (Mota, et. al, 2024).

Анализа на въздействието на социалните мрежи върху хотел **Arcadia Suits Kampala**, установява положителна корелация между тях и влиянието им върху осведомеността на клиентите. Забелязва се съществена връзка между използването на платформите и продуктивността. Различава се слабо значение на социалните мрежи върху управлението на връзките с клиентите (Nansikombi and Nakimbugwe, 2023)

Проучвания върху **5-звездните хотели в Тайланд**, проверяват връзката между позитивните коментари и публикации във Facebook, и действителните резервации. Разглеждат се отчетните стойности на няколко хотела на седмична база за период от 3 месеца. Резултатът показва, че увеличеното социално ангажиране е свързано с по-висока честота на резервация и настаняване по конкретни промоции/кампании. На практика това подкрепя твърдението, че положителния UGC (user generated content) взаимодействат с реална по-голяма заетост (Chuauchoo and Threeranoot, 2017).

Изследването на **Accor Hotels** разглежда как мащабна верига променя своя бизнес модел чрез дигитални технологии. Вниманието е насочено към укрепване на лоялните програми; разгръщане на функционалността на мобилните услуги и използването на данни за персонализация. При анализа се отбелязва силен растеж на редовните клиенти (около 40%) за кратък период, благодарение на дигиталните инструменти. Освен това, се наблюдава и по-добър cross-selling (кръстосани продажби). Accor демонстрира, че интегрираната дигитална стратегия подобрява директните резервации и ангажираността на клиентите (Damnjanovic et al, 2020).

Заклучение

С навлизането на социалните мрежи, развитието на мобилните технологии и интернет търсачките, компаниите започват да търсят нови начини, с които да достигнат до своите клиенти. Променя се модела на търсене и процеса на покупка от страна на потребителите. Можем да твърдим, че когато дигиталния маркетинг е правилно интегриран, то той оказва положителен ефект върху работата на хотелите. Управлението на каналите и разбирането на техните функции подпомагат оптимизацията в хотелския бизнес.

Резултати:

✓ Дигиталния маркетинг е многопластов инструмент, който трансформира традиционния подход.

✓ Дигиталните инструменти се използват за оптимизиране на работния процес в хотелите и по-доброто им позициониране на пазара.

✓ Влиянието на информацията в интернет може да има както положителни, така и негативни ефекти върху хотелския бизнес.

✓ Практиката показва, че ролята на дигиталния маркетинг е насочена в повишаване на производителността.

Авторът на настоящия доклад извежда няколко ключови **препоръки към хотелите**. За да максимизират ползите и да ограничат вредите, те следва да интегрират дигиталните канали с фокус към оптимизация на търсачките. Инвестирането в персонализация на услугите е от съществено значение. Разработването на политики за директни резервации (напр. лоялни програми), ще намалят зависимостта от онлайн туристическите агенции. Следователно, ще се редуцират разходите. От съществено значение е внедряването на план за управление на репутацията в интернет. Осигуряването на защитни системи при дигитална резервация и плащане, ще ограничи кибератаките.

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ДИГИТАЛЕН МАРКЕТИНГ В ТУРИЗМА ЗА РАЙОНА НА СТАРА ПЛАНИНА И СТРАТЕГИИ ЗА ПОДОБРЯВАНЕ НА ТУРИСТИЧЕСКОТО ПРЕДЛАГАНЕ

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Резюме: Докладът изследва туристическото предлагане в пограничния район на Стара планина от Българската и Сръбската страна. Обяснява какви са предимствата на района за развитието на туризма и намира общи продукти, които са основата на туристическата дейност на Стара планина. Извършен е подбор на природни, исторически и културни ресурси като основен потенциал за развитие на туризма. Извършен е подбор на категории места за настаняване, хранене и напитки на принципа на случаен подбор като необходима инфраструктура за развитието на дадено място в туристическа дестинация Стара планина. Извършено е влиянието на местните туристически информационни центрове върху развитието на населените места и популяризирането на определени обекти. Поставени са основни стратегии за подобряване на туристическото предлагане.

Ключови думи: туризъм на Стара планина, основата на развитието на туризъм в пограничния район, туристическо предлагане

JEL: Z3; M3

DIGITAL MARKETING IN TOURISM FOR THE STARA PLANINA REGION AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE TOURISM OFFER

Militsa Bachevich

Abstract: The paper examines the tourism offering in the border region of the Balkan Mountains on the Bulgarian and Serbian sides. It explains the advantages of the region for the development of tourism and finds common products that are the basis of the tourism activity of the Balkan Mountains. A selection of natural, historical and cultural resources has been made as the main potential for the development of tourism. A selection of categories of places for accommodation, food and drinks has been made on the principle of random selection as necessary infrastructure for the development of a given place in the tourist destination of the Balkan Mountains. The influence of local tourist information centres on the development of settlements and the promotion of certain sites has been carried out. Basic strategies for improving the tourism offering have been set.

Keywords: tourism in the Balkan Mountains, the basis of the development of tourism in the border region, tourist offering

JEL: Z3; M3

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Въведение

Стара планина или Балканите, на които е назван целият Балкански полуостров, е система от планински вериги, която се простира от Връшка Чука в Сърбия до Черно море в България. Стара планина представлява неразривно цяло, което има огромен природен потенциал за развитие на туризма. Въпреки че само малка част от Стара планина се простира в Сърбия, а по-голяма част в България, Стара планина носи в себе си предимствата на двете страни, както и предимствата на целите Балкани, но също така и събития, които са се следвали едно след друго през историята. За целите на тази статия е проведено проучване в граничния район на Стара планина между Сърбия и България. Извършен е подбор на природни ресурси, исторически и културни, като основен потенциал за развитие на туризма. Извършен е подбор на категории места за настаняване, хранене и напитки на принципа на случайния подбор като необходима инфраструктура за развитието на дадено място в туристическа дестинация. Разследвано е влиянието на местните туристически информационни центрове върху развитието на населените места и популяризирането на определени обекти.

Целта на тази статия е да покаже какви са туристическите основи за развитието на този регион, на какво точно трябва да се основава развитието на туризма и какви са предимствата на региона. Също така се идентифицират недостатъците на дестинацията Стара планина и се определят основни стратегии за използване на дигитален маркетинг в популяризирането на Стара планина.

Природните забележителности като туристически потенциал

Стара планина е планинска верига, която принадлежи към Карпато-Балканската планинска дъга и физически се простира в посока северозапад-югоизток от Връшка Чука в Сърбия до връх Емине в България. Само малка част от тази планинска верига се намира в Сърбия, докато по-голямата част е на територията на България. Най-високият връх на Стара планина от сръбска страна е Миджор (2169 м), докато най-високият връх на Стара планина от българска страна, както и най-високият връх на целия планински масив, е връх Ботев (2376 м). Общата площ на Стара планина е около 4000 км². От математическа и географска гледна точка тази планина е разположена между 43°06' и 43°53' северна ширина и между 22°18' и 23° източна дължина.

Административно Стара планина принадлежи към общините Пирот, Княжевац, Димитровград и Зайчар от сръбска страна. Обхваща територията на 79 населени места,

което представлява 39,3% от общия брой на населените места в посочените общини. В българската част Стара планина се простира от границата със Сърбия до Черно море. Обхваща части от териториите на цели 32 общини, а именно: Антоново, Априлци, Берковица, Велико Търново, Враца, Върбица, Вършец, Габрово, Георги Дамяново, Горна Оряховица, Дряново, Елена, Златарица, Котел, Криводол, Ловеч, Луковит, Лясковец, Мездра, Монтана, Омуртаг, Роман, Севлиево, Стражица, Сунгурларе, Тетевен, Троян, Трявна, Угърчин, Чипровци, Чупрене, Ябланица. Целият Старопланински масив в Република България е разделен на три части: Западна, Централна и Източна Стара планина.

За целите на тази статия е проведено проучване в граничния район на Стара планина между Сърбия и България, който включва района на Стара планина от сръбска страна и района на Западна Стара планина от българска страна. Извършен е подбор на природни, исторически и културни ресурси като основен потенциал за развитие на туризма. Извършен е подбор на категории места за настаняване, хранене и напитки на принципа на случайния подбор като необходима инфраструктура за развитието на дадено място в туристическа дестинация. Извършено е влиянието на местните туристически информационни центрове и рецептивните туристически агенции върху развитието на населените места и популяризирането на определени обекти.

Въпреки много благоприятното си географско положение, регионът на Стара планина е слабо развит регион от гледна точка на туризма, както от сръбска, така и от българска страна. Сърбия е фокусирала развитието на планинския туризъм върху планинските курорти Златибор, Копаоник, Дивчибаре и Тара. България е фокусирала развитието на планинския туризъм върху планинските курорти Банско, Боровец и Пампорово. Тези планински курорти достигат своя пик през зимата и фокусът на тяхното развитие е именно ски туризмът. Те са сезонни туристически дестинации, но маркетингът, който е фокусиран върху развитието на тези планински курорти като дестинации за ски спортове и в двете страни, позволява посещения и в извънсезонния период.

Климатичните условия позволяват развитието на планински туризъм в района на Стара планина през всички сезони. Освен зимния и ски туризъм, географското положение на Стара планина позволява и развитието на рекреационен туризъм, който е характерен за планинския туризъм през летния период. Планинският център на Стара планина трябва да използва богатството на своите природни и антропогенни ценности и полегатите си склонове като атракция за изследователи и любители на природата, туристи и планински колоездачи.²

Когато става въпрос за използване на природни ценности за туристическа оферта, обхващаща и четирите сезона, има много изследвания на световно ниво, които определят методи за подобряване на сезонните туристически дестинации. Тези методи въвеждат термина сезонност, който много често се споменава в литературата и представлява проблем за икономическата устойчивост на сезонна дестинация. Въпросът за сезонните тенденции е обяснен от Кьониг-Луис и Бишоф, които твърдят, че сезонните влияния се отразяват в туристическата активност, особено когато става

² Марија Братић, Миха Лесјак, Милан Ђорђевић, Миодраг Ђорђевић, Александар Радивојевић „Сезонска кретања у планинском туризму Србије: преглед метода и литературе“ Српски часопис за геонауке 5, 2019.

въпрос за броя на фиксираните разходи и устойчиви капацитети в много частни и обществени услуги.³ Стара планина, благодарение на местоположението си, освен на природните си характеристики, които са благоприятни за зимния ски сезон, има и предимства за останалите три сезона, където позволява атмосфера за изследователи и любители на природата, туристи и планински колоездачи, разпростираща се на територията на две държави, може да допълни офертата си с антропогенно съдържание.

Антропогенните атракции като туристически потенциал

Когато говорим за антропогенни забележителности, територията на Стара планина се различава по история и традиции от другите планински центрове в Сърбия и България. Освен факта, че тази планинска част е неразделна като природно цяло, историята и културата на тази територия са тясно свързани. Този граничен регион не е свързан само с движението на административната граница на двете държави, но държавността на двете държави като неразривно цяло се установява на територията на целия регион. А именно, първите останки от цивилизация не са разделяли това цяло от административната граница, която е установена днес, а спецификата на района се отразява в изключителното богатство от културни и исторически паметници, датиращи от предхристиянския период до 19 век. Историческите събития на Стара планина са оставили малки, но разпознаваеми и значими следи от праисторическия период. В сравнение с други райони в Сърбия и България, на Стара планина не е имало голямо строителство, което очевидно е следствие от недостатъчни инвестиции в развитието на този планински район, но което може да се счита и за положително, защото не е имало унищожаване на ресурси, а са запазени природно ценни части, площи и перспективни места.

Ако разгледаме геоложкия състав от Ком до Дебели рид, където в тази област са представени почти всички видове скали: кристални шисти и еруптивни и седиментни скали, където разнообразието е значително проявено както по отношение на фациите, така и по отношение на отделните образувания, можем да видим как кристалните шисти се промъкват от едно място на друго и правят този пейзаж неразделен. Петрографски те са представени от филити, амфиболити, гранитоидни гнайси и глинести шисти. Глинестите шисти са много цепящи и делят се на тънки слоеве, така че местните жители на целия район много рано започват да ги използват като материал за покриви на къщи и направа на точилни камъни.⁴ Къщите са били строени от дърво от най-ранните периоди в тази област, чак до 18 век, поради изобилието от гори, защото първоначалните примитивни форми, така да се каже, заслони, са били изградени от

³ Кенинг-Луис, Н. Бишоф, *Сезоналност Репретажа: Найсавременије стање, МЕЂУНАРОДНИ ЧАСОПИС ЗА ТУРИСТИЧКА ИСТРАЖИВАЊА; Int. J. Tourism Res.* 7, 201219. Кенинг-Луис, Н. Бишоф, *ЕЕ* (2010). „Развијање ефикасности ативне стратегије за решавање сезонских проблема у туристичкој индустрији. Планирање и развој туризма и угоститељства“, 395–413 стр.

⁴ Горица Б. Љубенов „Традиционално архитектонско наслеђе у региону Старе планине“, САНУ Београд, 2020.

достъпни материали от природната среда. В гористите местности, богати на дървета, са се строили колиби и бараки, а в низините - колиби или плетени къщи.⁵

Периодът след освобождението от Османската империя донася строителство, използващо система за свързване и хоризонтално подреждане на трупи, слепени с кал отвън и отвътре, а в края на 19 век се строят предимно едноетажни къщи с квадратна основа, със стенни панели от „чатма“ и ниски покриви или каменни къщи. Дворовете са били оградени предимно с каменни стени, а входът към двора е бил ориентиран към улицата със или без порта. Дворът е съдържал къща, плевня, кошара, кокошарник, кочина и др.

Интериорът на оригиналната къща в Стара планина първоначално е бил ижа, стая с огнище. По-късно до нея се оформят стая – собле и килер. Стаята винаги е била обърната на юг и с времето се е разширявала. Таванът на стаята често е бил красиво декориран с дърво, а подът е бил от пръст. Стаята винаги е имала два прозореца, изработени от хартия или стъкло, които винаги са били обърнати на юг или изток. Те са имали вертикални дървени решетки и дървени капаци отвън. Малката стая или килер е била помещение, което е служило главно за съхранение на дрехи и спане на гости. В тази стая се е съхранявала и храна и в нея се е влизало от ижата, рядко от голямата стая.⁶

Освен къщите, един от най-важните показатели за традицията и културата в самия район на Стара планина е килимът. Той е характерен за Чипровци в България и Пирот в Сърбия. Разпознаваем е по специфичните си шарки, ярките цветове, но и по автентичния си начин на изработка, който за разлика от други тъкани от други части на България и Сърбия няма лицева и задна страна, а е еднакъв от двете страни. Сред руините на Тива, втората столица на Египет, има фреска, на която трима мъже тъкат килим на вертикален стан с орнаменти във формата на кръгове и розетки. Записано е, че царица Клеопатра също е била облечена в най-красивото цветно тъкане с орнаменти. От Египет техниката на тъкане, използвана за изработка на килими от Стара планина, е пренесена в Мала Азия и оттам се е разпространила по-нататък. Тъкането, равностойно от двете страни със същите характеристики като килимите "сумак", тъкани в Мала Азия в районите на Караман и Кавказ, Кюрдистан и някои части на Туркестан, е пренесено и в килимите от Чипровци и Пирот. Може да се каже, че техниката на коленичене е била позната още преди пристигането на турците. Археологическите и историческите данни показват, че умението за тъкане е практикувано от праисторически и древни народи: илирийци, траки, келти, гърци и римляни, които са обитавали територията на Балканите в древността.⁷ Иначе най-голямо развитие килимарството е постигнало по време на периода на турската окупация. Предполага се, че с по-дълбокото си проникване на Запад, турците са намирали за все по-трудно да се сдобиват с килими от Изток и това е спомогнало за развитието на килимарството в новозавладените райони. А с пристигането на османските турци са донесени много елементи от ислямската култура, които са съчетани с елементи от местната култура. През 1870 г. в Берковица са

⁵ Зоран Родић „Народно градитељство и становање у Пироту и околини“ ГЕМ 74/2010.

⁶ Горица Б. Љубенов „Традиционално архитектонско наслеђе у региону Старе планине“, САНУ Београд, 2020.

⁷ Јерина Шобић „Пиротско ћилимарство и његове везе са Истоком“, ГЕМ XXI, Београд, 1958.

изработени около 8000 броя молитвени килима, а в Пирот - 10 000 броя молитвени килима за нуждите на турците.⁸

Едно от най-важните условия за развитието на килимарството е развитото животновъдство, където овцете от Стара планина осигуряват висококачествена вълна. Споменава се също, че по време на турския период и по-късно, до Първата световна война, каракачани (Църновунци, Аромунци) са идвали и са отсядали в този район с големи стада овце и са ги пасли там от пролетта до есента. В Стара планина се е извършвало и стригане, а вълната е била частично обработвана на примитивни станове. Излишната и необработена вълна е била продавана чрез търговци, но и на местното население от Стара планина.⁹ Анализът на орнаментацията може да определи сходството на геометричната орнаментация върху килимите с орнаментацията на средновековната живопис. Пример за това е стенописът на сцената на Тайната вечеря в църквата „Бояна“ (1295 г.) под влияние на византийската живопис¹⁰ и изобразяването на „шарка“ върху стенописа в Каленич.¹¹ Работата на килимарката се е свеждала до създаването и комбинирването на определени мотиви, които са били в непосредствената среда. Тя често е възприемала модели, донесени от други страни. Символиката на тези шарки е била въпрос на харесване, усещане и разбиране на това, което тя е тъкала. Предназначението на килима е определяло използването на шарката и комбинацията от елементи. Използването на тези мотиви, подредбата на цветовете и композиционната хармония са част от личните творения на тъкачките. Например, изображението на свещник върху килим е било символ на духовна светлина, зародиш на живота и спасение.¹² Изображението на костенурка има символична роля. То представлява образ на вселената и допринася за нейната трайност. Основната му характеристика е дългият живот.¹³ Това е най-често представяният мотив върху килимите в Стара планина като символ на дълголетие и постоянство. Килимарството днес е занаят, който не е толкова често представян, но е високо ценен и скъп поради ръчната си изработка и качество. Изработва се в Чипровци и Пирот, а историята на самия килим може да се види в музеите в тези два града, както и приликите и разликите. Местната управа на Чипровци е признала голямото значение на килимите сред световното културно наследство и освен че се опитва да съхрани този стар занаят като занаят, е включила в дейността си и засаждането на растения, използвани за естествено боядисване на вълна. Така целият процес от боядисването на вълна до производството на прежда и тъкането на килими се завършва и се продава на клиентите като напълно автентичен продукт от района на Стара планина, изработен на ръка, от естествени материали и багрила. От друга страна, Пирот не разполага с достатъчно ресурси за сериозно производство на килими и основният му недостатък е именно основният ресурс, който е вълната, поради недостатъчното развитие на животновъдството. Производството на килими се извършва от някои тъкачки в домашни условия или от женски сдружения с няколко члена.

⁸ Илија Николић „Пирот и Срез Нишавски“, Грађа 1, Пирот, 637 стр.

⁹ Јован Цвијић „Балканско полуострво и јужнословенске земље“, Београд, 1966. 221 стр.

¹⁰ Димитър Станков, „Черги и килими“, София 1975.

¹¹ М. Ђоровић - Љубинковић, Ђ. Мано – Зиси „Осврт на примењену уметност у Србији кроз векове“ Музеј примењене уметности, Београд 1951, 16 стр.

¹² Радмила Влатковић „Ћилим сликовито писмо“, Пирот, 2022.

¹³ Ален Гербан, Жан Шевалије „Речник симбола, антрополошка едисија, митови, снови, обичаји, поступци, облици, ликови, боје, бројеви“ Нови Сад, 1982.

В допълнение към автентичната архитектура и тъкането на килими, грънчарството също може да се включи в антропогенната привлекателност като един от старите занаяти, характерни за граничния район на Стара планина. Между другото, грънчарството е един от най-старите занаяти както в България, така и в Сърбия. Грънчарството се разделя на три производствени метода: без колело, на ръчно колело и на крачно колело. Съществува и техника за изработване на керамика без колело, като тази техника все още може да се срещне в района на Стара планина днес. Също така, автентичната керамика за тези райони е керамиката без или с много малко декорация, която в Сърбия и България се е наричала селска техника. Може да се каже, че периодът между двете световни войни е бил „златният век“ на грънчарството, а селските техники са позволили развитието на грънчарството дори в слабо развитите райони на Стара планина поради близостта на ресурси за изработване на съдове, глина, която може да се намери в района на Стара планина, но и поради цената, която е била значително по-ниска, отколкото в градовете. Градските техники са изисквали по-богато изрисуване на предметите и следователно цената е била недостъпна за по-бедните семейства.¹⁴ Грънчарството все още е представено и запазено като стар занаят в градовете на територията на граничния район на Стара планина, и в трите форми и начина на производство, а предметите са рисувани на ръка, предимно с минимални декорации, както традиционно се представят, но и с килимарски мотиви, за да се покаже географският им произход. Провеждат се множество събития, свързани с изучаването и популяризирането на грънчарството като един от старите занаяти. Особено забележителни са летните школи по грънчарство в Белоградчик и Княжевац.

Стратегии за развитие на дигитален маркетинг

Чрез наблюдение на всички природни и антропогенни фактори на туристическата дестинация на граничния регион Стара планина, може да се заключи, че този регион има достатъчен потенциал за развитие на различни видове туристически оферти.

В допълнение към рекреационния планински зимен и ски туризъм, съществува и възможност за развитие на рекреационен летен планински туризъм. Този вид отдых в планината през лятото и месеците, когато няма сняг, включва алпинизъм, изкачване на върхове, колоездене и други развлекателни спортове. Планинските поройни води предоставят възможност за развитие на спортове по поройни реки като регати или спускания по водопади, а топлите изворни води позволяват развитието на спа и здравен туризъм. Богатството на биоразнообразието насърчава развитието на изследователски туризъм, който включва: научни изследвания на флората и фауната, събиране на дивни растения и ловен туризъм.

Когато разглеждаме антропогенните атракции на дестинацията Стара планина в граничния регион между Сърбия и България, тя има три ъгъла на наблюдение на развитието си: наблюдение на цялото от гледна точка на историята, културата и традициите на Република България, наблюдение на цялото от гледна точка на

¹⁴ Биљана Ђорђевић „Злакуско лончарство: нематеријално културно наслеђе човечанства“, Етноафрички музеј, Београд 2021.

историята, културата и традициите на Република Сърбия и наблюдение на цялото от гледна точка на историята, културата и традициите в равнопоставеността на неделимата природна цялост на Стара планина. И трите раздела са еднакво важни и допринасят за богатото туристическо предлагане на този регион. Въз основа на автентични атракции като архитектурата на сградите в Стара планина, килимите и керамиката може да се изгради основата за развитие на туризма. За да бъде едно място туристическо обаче, освен привлекателност, е необходима и инфраструктура. Инфраструктурата на туристическата дестинация включва: пътища, места за настаняване, заведения за обществено хранене, сувенирни заведения, магазини, информационни центрове, мрежова и дигитална инфраструктура. Туристическата дестинация е съвкупност от туристически атракции, инфраструктура, съоръжения, доставчици на услуги и други поддържащи сектори, концентрирани в добре дефинирани географски области, чиито интегрирани и координирани дейности допринасят за цялостното туристическо преживяване на посетителите на определена дестинация. За да се развие една туристическа дестинация, са необходими три ключови фактора: привлекателност, инфраструктура и маркетингова промоция.¹⁵

Стара планина, въпреки развитата си привлекателност, има недостатъчно развита инфраструктура. В района на Стара планина няма магистрала, но целият граничен регион е покрит от регионални пътища. Регионалните пътища, които иначе са от голямо значение за целия район на Стара планина и които свързват България и Сърбия, са предимно тесни и в много лошо състояние. Достъпът до природните забележителности не е напълно осигурен, а табелите за атракциите са много малко. Много малко пешеходни и велосипедни пътеки са уредени и маркирани. Много малък брой села, където се намират туристически атракции, нямат магазини, а много малък брой села, където се намират туристически атракции, както и самите места на атракциите, имат места за настаняване и хранене. Често се случва да няма покритие на мрежовите оператори и международните приложения и навигацията да не работят. Именно тази неразвитост на самата инфраструктура влияе върху ниския брой туристи, посещаващи Стара планина като туристическа атракция.

Недостатъчното развитие на туристическата оферта и факторите, които са неразделна част от тази оферта, води до застой в туристическите дейности, а самият маркетинг е насочен към привличане на колкото се може повече туристи, колкото позволява ограниченият капацитет. Докато световният туристически пазар използва сложни маркетингови методи за привличане на туристи от специфични целеви групи и използва изкуствен интелект за целите на дигиталния маркетинг, Стара планина изостава от световните тенденции. Следователно е необходимо да се определят две основни маркетингови стратегии, които са: подобряване на инфраструктурата в Стара планина и включване на всички фактори на туристическата оферта в процеса на дигитализация.

Когато говорим за подобряване на инфраструктурата, това включва преди всичко инвестиции от страна на щатите и местните власти в пътища, туристическа сигнализация и мрежова инфраструктура. Достъпността на самото място е от голямо значение за популяризирането на туристическата дестинация. Необходимо е да се

¹⁵ Слободан Церковић, *Савремени концепти стратегијског управљања туристичком дестинацијом, VIII Међународни научни скуп-Медитерански дани ТРЕБИЊЕ 2012.* “Туризам и рурални развој, Требиње 2012.

осигури достъп до международни приложения и навигация, които да доведат туристите до определено място. Туристическата сигнализация, както на място, така и чрез приложения и онлайн туристически пътеводители, позволява пълноценно преживяване на самото място, предоставяйки информация за него, но и вид сигурност, за да не се изгубят туристите. Мрежовата инфраструктура е почти невъобразима за съвременния турист. Най-популярните и широко разпространени маркетингови промотьори днес са инфлуенсъри, ютубъри и промотьори в инстаграм. В туризма промоцията се осъществява главно чрез записване на дестинацията, атракциите и услугите и по този начин предоставяне на информация на обществеността в директно предаване. Липсата на мрежово покритие представлява основен проблем за развитието на дигиталния маркетинг на територията на Стара планина.

Когато говорим за включване на всички фактори на туристическото предлагане в процеса на дигитализация като една от стратегиите за развитие на маркетинга в Стара планина, можем да го разгледаме през три ключови фактора на туристическото предлагане: туристически информационни центрове (рецептивни или приемащи туристически агенции), места за настаняване и заведения за хранене. Туристическите информационни центрове са държавни туристически организации, които популяризират туризма на територията на цялата държава, в която се намират. Основната им дейност е популяризирането на туристически атракции и инфраструктура за дестинации в своята държава пред чуждестранни туристи. Всяка от държавните туристически организации има и местни туристически организации, които популяризират града или общината, в чийто район се намират. Туристическите организации, в зависимост от статута на своята дейност, се стремят да събират данни за атракциите и инфраструктурата на определена дестинация, да участват в тяхното популяризиране и по-нататъшно развитие. Тези организации следва да базират популяризирането си на дигитален маркетинг, за да подобрят туристическото предлагане на Стара планина. Освен самите туристически организации или информационни центрове, много важна популяризация се осъществява и от рецептивните туристически агенции. Рецептивните туристически агенции са специализирани туристически агенции, които организират и продават туристически пакети в района, в който се намират. Това са агенции, които се занимават с рецептивен туризъм.¹⁶ Като агенции, които имат директен контакт с крайните туристи, е необходимо да базират маркетинговия си бизнес на дигитализацията, защото по този начин ще доближат туристическата дейност на рецептивните агенции до световния пазар. Що се отнася до местата за настаняване, в Стара планина няма луксозни хотели, а туристите са принудени да нощуват в нискокатегорийни обекти. Най-често това са три-, дву- или еднозвездни обекти, некатегоризирани обекти и обекти на селски домакинства. Много е важно да се привлекат инвестиции от големи хотелски вериги, но също така и да се повиши нивото на съществуващите места за настаняване. Трябва обаче да се избягва масово и непланирано строителство, което би унищожило природния, историческия, културния и традиционния потенциал. В случая с обектите за обществено хранене, освен строителството, е необходимо да се извърши традиционизация и модернизация на съществуващите съоръжения. Необходимо е да се използва традиционната кухня от района на Стара планина, чрез която се преплитат както българската, така и сръбската традиционни кухни. Стара планина, поради своето

¹⁶ Асен Георгиев " Туроператорска, агентска и транспортна дейност в туризма " София , 2003.

местоположение и история, има много богата гастрономия и всеки от регионите, общините и градовете може да предложи свой собствен традиционен специалитет.

Заклучение

Стара планина представлява обширна планинска верига, която принадлежи към Карпатско -Балканската планинска верига и се простира в посока северозапад-югоизток от Връшка Чука в Сърбия до връх Емине в България. Само малка част от тази планинска верига се намира в Сърбия, докато по-голямата част е на територията на България.

Въпреки географското си местоположение, Стара планина е неразвита туристическа единица. Въпреки природния, историческия, културния и етнологичния си потенциал, в съвременната дигитална ера, когато в света се използват безброй методи за популяризиране на туристическите дестинации и когато е възможно да се опознаят туристическите дестинации дигитално, Стара планина изостава в тези и подобни тенденции. Туризмът, като най-разнообразната част от икономиката, е първият в света, който възприема иновациите. За да бъде туристическият престой пълноценен, а офертата конкурентна, е необходимо постоянно да се следят иновациите и да се използва техният потенциал за предоставяне на услуги и информация. Стара планина, като съчетание от недокосната природа в сърцето на Европа, съчетание от история, култура и традиции, има предпоставките за огромен маркетингов бум с помощта на дигиталните иновации.

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ТЕЛЕВИЗИЯТА В ЕРАТА НА ДИГИТАЛНИЯ МАРКЕТИНГ: ДОВЕРИЕ И ПОТРЕБИТЕЛСКО ВЛИЯНИЕ

Марина Тодорова¹

Резюме: През последните години бързото развитие на дигиталния маркетинг значително промени начина, по който брандовете достигат до своята аудитория. Именно заради това, все по-често се налага схващането, че онлайн медиите постепенно изместват традиционните комуникационни канали. Статията разглежда ролята на телевизията в този контекст, като изследвания по темата показват, че тя запазва своето силно влияние и високи нива на доверие сред потребителите. Освен това се анализира и разпределението на рекламните бюджети между основните медийни канали, промените в медийните навици и характеристиките на телевизионната аудитория в България. Данните от изследванията показват, че съществен дял от маркетинговите инвестиции в България продължават да се насочват към телевизията, което може да се разглежда като индикатор за нейната възприемана комуникационна ефективност. В изследването се обръща внимание и на начина, по който самата телевизионна аудитория оценява телевизионната комуникация спрямо дигиталните формати. Доказва се, че телевизията в България не представлява „ретро“ медиен канал, а остава ключова част от комуникационния микс, който се интегрира в съвременната дигитална маркетингова среда.

Ключови думи: телевизия, доверие, комуникационни канали

JEL: M31, M37, L82

TELEVISION IN THE ERA OF DIGITAL MARKETING: TRUST AND CONSUMER INFLUENCE

Marina Todorova²

Abstract: The paper examines the role of television as a communication channel in the context of an evolving digital marketing environment. Despite the widespread belief that online media are replacing traditional ones, numerous studies show that television continues to maintain strong influence and high levels of trust among consumers. The analysis focuses on the distribution of advertising budgets across media channels, media consumption habits, and audience characteristics. Data indicate that a significant share of marketing investments is still allocated to television, highlighting its resilience and perceived effectiveness. The paper highlights how audiences perceive television communication compared to digital formats. In

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conclusion, it is argued that television should not be seen as an "outdated media," but rather as a strategic partner to digital channels.

Keywords: television, trust, communication channels

JEL: M31, M37, L82

Въведение

През последното десетилетие дигиталният маркетинг значително промени комуникационната среда и начина, по който брандовете достигат до потребителите. Процесът се ускори значително в периода на пандемията от COVID-19, когато ограничените физически контакти и търговията доведоха до рязко нарастване на онлайн потреблението и рекламната активност в дигитална среда.³

Интернет пространствата и социалните мрежи все по-често се възприемат като основни канали за реклама, което често води до схващането, че традиционните медии постепенно губят своето значение. Подобна тенденция е валидна и за България, където през последните години се засилва процесът на дигитализация в комуникационната индустрия, включително чрез навлизането на нови дигитални агенции и трансформацията на утвърдени телевизионни продуцентски структури към предлагане на дигитални комуникационни услуги.⁴ В този контекст телевизията често се определя като „отживяла“ медия.

Настоящият доклад поставя под съмнение тази теза, като изследва ролята на телевизията в съвременния комуникационен микс и нейната ефективност в условията на дигитализация на маркетинга. Фокусът е върху три аспекта: (1) медийните навици и телевизионното потребление, (2) разпределението на рекламните инвестиции между основните канали и (3) доверието и въздействието върху потребителското поведение в сравнение с дигиталните формати.

Ролята на телевизията в комуникационната политика

В рамките на стратегическото планиране комуникационната политика се разглежда като системен процес на координация между целите на организацията, пазарната среда и използваните комуникационни инструменти. Тя не представлява сбор от отделни тактически действия, а интегрирана система, в която изборът на канали и послания следва логиката на дългосрочното позициониране и устойчивото въздействие върху целевите публики.

Телевизията е един от традиционните комуникационни канали, които заемат централно място в развитието на съвременните маркетингови комуникации. Още с навлизането си като масова медия тя се утвърждава като основен инструмент за достигане до широка аудитория, благодарение на съчетанието между образ, звук и движение. Тези характеристики позволяват създаването на силно въздействащи рекламни послания и превръщат телевизията в доминиращ рекламен канал в продължение на десетилетия.⁵

³ Digital 2025, We are social, Meltwater, Available at: <https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2025/02/digital-2025/>

⁴ Статия: „Едни от най-големите телевизионни и интернет продуценти се обединяват в нова медия – MEDIA Z” – Available at: <https://darik.bg/edni-ot-nai-golemite-televizionni-i-internet-producenti-se-obedinavat-v-nova-media-media-z-507424.html>

⁵ Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L. (2015). Marketing Management (15th ed.). Pearson Education, Harlow.

В рамките на класическите модели на маркетинговите комуникации телевизията се разглежда като медия с висок масов обхват и значителен потенциал за изграждане на разпознаваемост и имидж на марките. Тя традиционно е основен дял в комуникационния микс, особено при кампании, насочени към широка аудитория и бързо постигане на пазарна видимост.⁶

Развитието на интернет технологиите водят до значителна трансформация на медийната среда и до появата на нови рекламни формати и канали. Онлайн рекламата, социалните мрежи и търсачките разширяват възможностите за таргетиране, интерактивност и измерване на резултатите в реално време. Поради тези характеристики дигиталните медии все повече се възприемат като по-гъвкава и ефективна алтернатива на традиционните канали, особено в контекста на променящите се потребителски навици.⁷

Методология

Изследването се основава на вторичен анализ на данни от пазарни изследвания, свързани с медийното потребление, рекламните инвестиции и въздействието на различните комуникационни канали. Използваните данни са подбрани с оглед на тяхната актуалност, надеждност и приложимост към българската медийна среда.

Методологичният подход включва сравнителен анализ на медийните навици и разпределението на рекламните инвестиции между телевизията и дигиталните медии, както и интерпретация на показатели, свързани с доверието и въздействието върху потребителското поведение. Анализът е насочен към идентифициране на устойчиви тенденции и зависимости, без претенция за изчерпателност или представителност на първични емпирични изследвания.

Използваният подход позволява да се оцени ролята на телевизията в съвременния комуникационен микс в контекста на развиващия се дигитален маркетинг и да се направят обобщения относно нейната позиция и възприемана ефективност на българския медиен пазар.

Проникване и медийни навици в телевизията

Телевизорите са сред най-широко разпространените устройства в българските домакинства и продължават да заемат значително място в ежедневието на потребителите. Данните от национално представително изследване на „Алфа Рисърч“, проведено през 2022 г. сред 1000 пълнолетни българи, показват, че 70% от българите гледат телевизия ежедневно, а 98,4 % от домакинствата притежават поне един телевизор в своя дом. Това свидетелства, че устройството е не само неотменна част от домашната среда, но и значим елемент на съвременната комуникационна култура с устойчива роля в ежедневието на потребителите.⁸

⁶ Belch, G., & Belch, M. (2021). Advertising and Promotion: An Integrated Marketing Communications Perspective (12th ed.). McGraw Hill.

⁷ Percy, L. (2018). Strategic Integrated Marketing Communications. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003169635>

⁸ Алфа Рисърч, 2022, Национално представително изследване сред 1000 пълнолетни българи, проведено в периода 6–16 юни 2022 г. по проект на Институт „Отворено общество“ – София.

По нови данни на Националния статистически институт (НСИ, 2024⁹) през последната година, 8 от всеки 100 домакинства са придобили нов телевизор. Средната цена за покупка на телевизор се движи около стойност, която показва значим пазарен мащаб и динамика – 700 лева, което свидетелства за активен пазар. Сегментите са ясно диференцирани – марки, характеристики, ценови нива – което създава благоприятни условия за анализ на цената като индикатор за качество и доверие.

Наред с проникването на телевизията е от значение да знаем и реалното поведение на потребителите, когато става дума за използване на устройството. Данните от собствено проучване, проведено през 2025 година сред 200 пълнолетни лица, които имат опит с покупката на телевизор,¹⁰ показват, че 84 % от потребителите гледат традиционна телевизия на своето устройство, а 79% използват линеен телевизионен оператор (кабелна, сателитна или ефирна телевизия). Това е ключово, защото типът телевизия определя реалната рекламна експозиция - фактор с пряко значение за ефективността на комуникацията. Особено съществен е фактът, че 62 % от потребителите не могат да превъртат рекламите по телевизията, което отличава телевизионната реклама от значителна част от дигиталните формати.¹¹ Това има пряко значение за реалното въздействие на рекламата, тъй като гарантира реално достигане на рекламните послания до аудиторията и намалява риска от избягване на съдържанието.

Рекламни инвестиции и медиен микс

Данните за нетните рекламни инвестиции сочат, че през 2024 г. общият обем на рекламния пазар достига 665,5 млн. лева, което представлява ръст от приблизително 8,7% спрямо предходната година. Това се посочва в годишния доклад на Българската асоциация на комуникационните агенции (БАКА), като данните не включват инвестициите в създаването и производството на рекламни формати.¹²

Разпределението на нетните рекламни инвестиции по канали показва, че телевизията остава най-големият рекламен сегмент в абсолютна стойност, като през 2025 г. достига прогнозни стойности от около 377 млн. лева. Дигиталните медии се утвърждават като втори по обем канал и демонстрират най-високи темпове на растеж, но все още изостават спрямо телевизията по отношение на общата стойност на инвестициите. Останалите канали – външна реклама, радио, преса и кино реклама - заемат значително по-малки дялове в рамките на общия медиен микс (фиг. 1).

Анализът на процентните изменения по канали допълнително подчертава различната динамика на развитие на рекламния пазар. Телевизията запазва централна позиция в българската рекламна система. Докато дигиталните медии отчитат най-висок ръст на годишна база, телевизията запазва стабилен и устойчив темп на нарастване през последните години. В същото време, традиционни канали като пресата продължават да

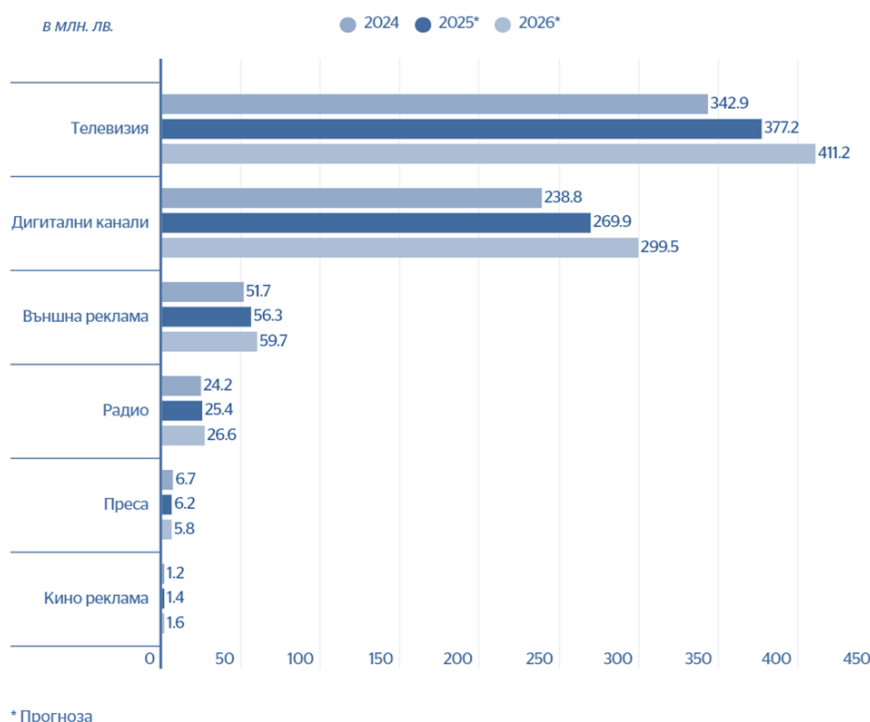
⁹ <https://www.nsi.bg/statistical-data/248/792>

¹⁰ Собствено проучване, 2025, n=200, квотна извадка

¹¹ Източник: Агенция за маркетингови изследвания „Прагматика“ ЕООД, 2023 година, n = 1000; национално представително проучване за домакинства, в които лицето, отговарящо за избора на TV доставчик, е на възраст 18–69 г.

¹² Доклад на Българската асоциация на комуникационните агенции (БАКА). Годишен доклад за нетните рекламни инвестиции и медийния микс.
https://www.capital.bg/biznes/media_i_reklama/2025/12/16/4832358_razpredelenie_na_reklamnite_investicii_i_v_bulgariia/

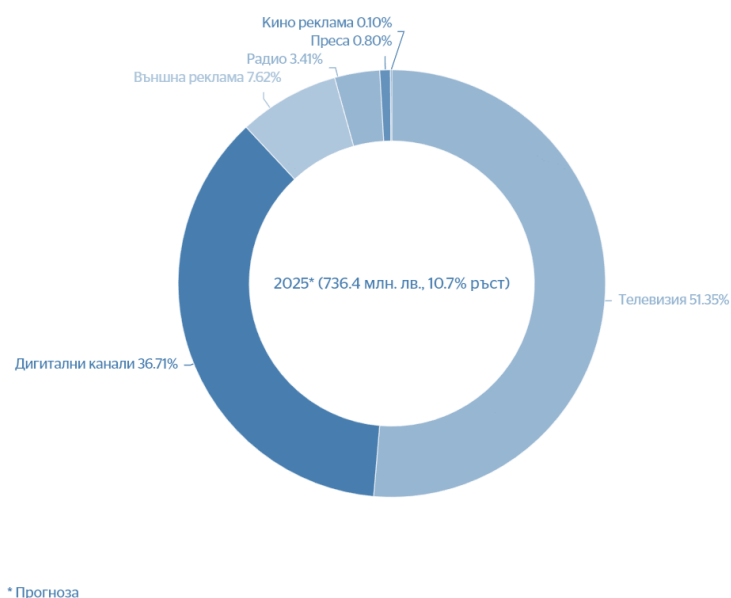
регистрират отрицателни темпове на развитие, което ясно очертава процесите на структурна трансформация в рекламната среда.



Фигура 1. Разпределение на нетните рекламните инвестиции (в млн. лева).

Източник: Българска асоциация на комуникационните агенции (БАКА)

Прогнозните данни за следващите години показват, че българският рекламен пазар ще продължи да се разширява, като се очаква общият обем на нетните рекламни инвестиции да достигне близо 736 млн. лева през 2025 г., а през 2026 г. – около 804 млн. лева. В този контекст дигиталната реклама ще остане най-динамично развиващият се



сегмент, но телевизията ще продължи да държи най-големия дял от общите инвестиции, което потвърждава нейната стратегическа роля в комуникационния микс (фиг. 2).

Фигура 2. Прогнозно разпределение на нетните рекламните инвестиции по канали през 2025 г. (в %).

Източник: Българска асоциация на комуникационните агенции (БАКА)

Близо 52 % от общите рекламни инвестиции се очаква отново да бъдат насочени към телевизионните канали, като прогнозният им обем за 2025 г. достига 377,2 млн. лв., което представлява около 10 % ръст на годишна база. Дигиталната реклама ще запази втората си позиция в медийния микс с прогнозни 269,9 млн. лв. нетни инвестиции и очакван ръст от 13 %.

По-умерен ръст, в размер на приблизително 9 %, се прогнозира при инвестициите във външна реклама, докато при радио-, кино рекламата и печатните медии, темповете на нарастване се очаква да се забавят.

Доверие и потребителско влияние

Анализът на данните за доверието в различните медийни канали показва, че телевизията запазва сравнително високи нива на доверие сред българските потребители в сравнение с редица дигитални формати.

Според данни от агенция „Прагматика“¹³ 32% от респондентите посочват телевизията като канал, на който имат доверие, което я поставя непосредствено след препоръките от приятели и роднини (40 %) и на сходно ниво със статиите и ревиютата (31 %). В сравнение със социалните мрежи, на които се доверяват 23% от анкетираните, телевизията продължава да се възприема като по-надежден източник на информация. Тези канали са представени на фиг. 3.

¹³ Доклад на агенция „Прагматика“ ЕООД, 2025, n = 500; квотна извадка сред лица на възраст 18–64 г., онлайн панел.



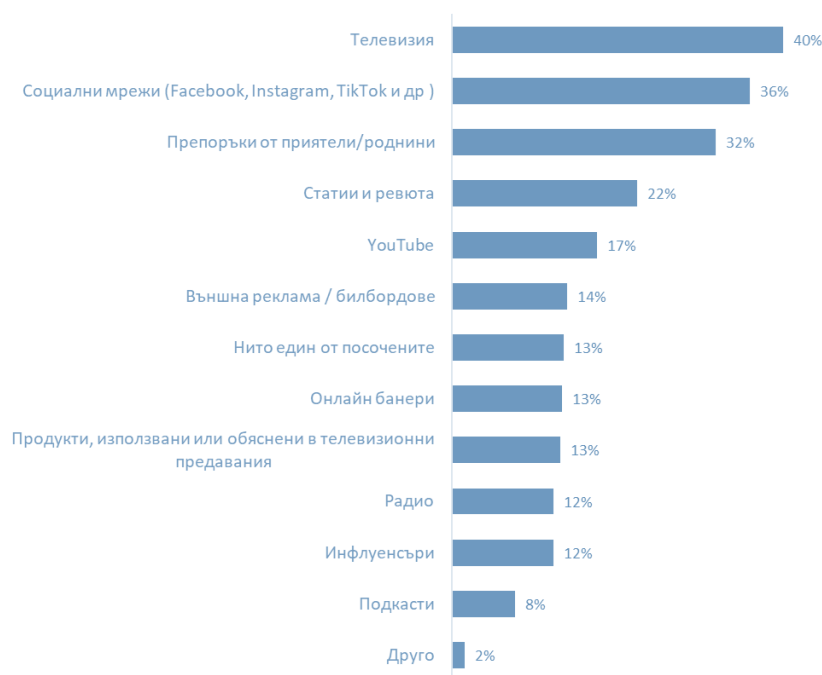
Фигура 3. Отговор на въпрос: На кои канали имате най-голямо доверие, когато видите реклама на дадена марка?

Източник: „Прагматика“ ЕООД

Нивото на доверие към телевизията варира в зависимост от образователната структура на аудиторията. Данни на Алфа Рисърч показват, че 57 % от хората с основно образование заявяват, че основно се доверяват на телевизията, докато при респондентите с висше образование този дял е 29%¹⁴. Това ясно очертава телевизията като медиен канал с особено силно въздействие сред по-широките и социално по-хетерогенни аудитории. Различията по образователни групи не подкопават масовия характер на телевизията, а по-скоро подчертават нейната способност да въздейства в различни социални сегменти.

Когато става дума за реално влияние върху решението за покупка, телевизията заема водеща позиция (40%), следвана от социалните мрежи (36%) и препоръките от близки (32%). Това показва, че въпреки нарастващото дигитално потребление, традиционните канали продължават да играят ключова роля за изграждане и стимулиране на покупката. (фиг. 4)

¹⁴ Алфа Рисърч, 2022, Национално представително изследване сред 1000 пълнолетни българи, проведено в периода 6–16 юни 2022 г. по проект на Институт „Отворено общество“ – София.



Фигура 4. Отговор на въпрос: По кои от тези канали наскоро сте виждали реклама, която Ви е накарала да купите или сериозно да обмислите покупка на дадена марка?

Източник: „Прагматика“ ЕООД

Резултатите показват ясно разграничение между доверие и въздействие. Докато социалните мрежи и дигиталните платформи демонстрират относително високо влияние върху покупките, те остават с по-ниски нива на доверие. За разлика от тях, телевизията съчетава висока степен на въздействие с относително високо доверие, което я отличава като канал с устойчива комуникационна ефективност.

Заклучение

Получените резултати показват, че телевизията съчетава характеристики, които трудно могат да бъдат заменени изцяло от дигиталните канали – масов обхват, високо доверие и силно въздействие върху потребителските нагласи. Анализът показва, че телевизията остава стабилно позиционирана в динамичната медийна среда, независимо от бързия растеж на дигиталните платформи. Тя съчетава масов обхват, високо доверие и доказано влияние върху потребителското поведение – три характеристики, които малко други канали могат да предложат едновременно. Емпиричните данни недвусмислено потвърждават, че телевизията не е отживяла медия, а устойчив и стратегически ефективен елемент от комуникационния микс. Нейната роля е по-скоро в процес на трансформация, отколкото на отстъпление – тя се трансформира, интегрира се с дигиталното и продължава да бъде ключов фактор в модерния маркетинг.

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- 10) Доклад на агенция „Прагматика“ ЕООД, 2025, n = 500; квотна извадка сред лица на възраст 18–64 г., онлайн панел.

РОДИТЕЛСКИ МОДЕЛИ И ТРУДНОСТИ В ЕМОЦИОНАЛНАТА РЕГУЛАЦИЯ ВЪВ ВЪЗНИКВАЩА ЗРЯЛОСТ: ТЕОРЕТИЧНИ ЗАВИСИМОСТИ И ПСИХОЛОГИЧЕСКИ ИМПЛИКАЦИИ

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Резюме: Настоящата статия представя теоретичен анализ на взаимовръзките между родителските модели и трудностите в емоционалната регулация във възникващата зрялост. В контекста на съвременните концепции в психологията на развитието възникващата зрялост се разглежда като чувствителен период, характеризиращ се с повишена автономност, идентификационни търсения и нарастващи емоционални изисквания. Анализът акцентира върху ролята на ранната семейна среда, родителските стилове и ко-регулаторните процеси като механизми на емоционално влияние, които допринасят за формирането на устойчиви регулаторни модели. Разгледани са ключови фактори като емоционален климат в семейството, моделиране на емоционални реакции, които могат да предразположат към трудности като импулсивност, ниска толерантност към стрес и ограничена регулаторна гъвкавост при младите възрастни. Представен е интегративен концептуален модел, който осмисля емоционалната регулация като медиатор между семейния контекст и психосоциалната адаптация. Очертани са психологическите импликации от тези теоретични зависимости и са формулирани насоки за бъдещи емпирични изследвания във възникващата зрялост.

Ключови думи: родителски стилове, трудности в емоционалната регулация, възникваща зрялост, привързаност, саморегулация.

JEL: D91; D01; I31.

PARENTING MODELS AND DIFFICULTIES IN EMOTION REGULATION IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD: THEORETICAL RELATIONSHIPS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: *This article presents a theoretical analysis of the relationships between parenting models and difficulties in emotion regulation during emerging adulthood. Within the framework of contemporary developmental psychology, emerging adulthood is conceptualized as a sensitive developmental period characterized by increased autonomy, identity exploration, and heightened emotional demands. The analysis emphasizes the role of the early family environment, parenting styles, and co-regulation processes as mechanisms of emotional influence that contribute to the formation of enduring regulatory patterns. Key factors such as the emotional climate of the family, modeling of emotional responses, and attachment are examined as potential antecedents of persistent difficulties, including impulsivity, low stress tolerance, and limited regulatory flexibility in young adults. An integrative conceptual model is discussed, positioning emotion regulation as a mediator between family context and psychosocial adjustment. The article outlines psychological implications of these theoretical relationships and identifies directions for future empirical research within the context of emerging adulthood.*

Keywords: parenting styles, difficulties in emotion regulation, emerging adulthood, attachment, self-regulation

JEL: D91; D01; I31.

Увод

Представителите на подхода за индивидуалните различия разглеждат личностните черти като относително устойчиви характеристики на личността, които обуславят типични модели на поведение и реакции в различни социални ситуации. В периода на възникваща зрялост тези индивидуални различия придобиват особена значимост. Възникващата зрялост се утвърждава като специфичен етап от развитието, характеризиращ се с интензивни личностни, социални и професионални преходи. Според съвременната концепция на Дж. Арне в рамките на младежката възраст се обособява самостоятелен етап на развитие, обхващащ приблизително периода между 18 и 29 години, който той обозначава като възникваща зрялост (emerging adulthood) (Arnett, 2011). Този етап се характеризира с поемане на трайни социални и професионални роли, удължен процес на изследване на идентичността и повишена индивидуална автономност (Parazova & Karapanova, 2019). Именно в този преход младите възрастни се сблъскват с редица предизвикателства, които изискват добре развита емоционална регулация. Нарастващият интерес към трудностите в емоционалната регулация в университетската среда отразява тенденциите за увеличаване на стреса, тревожността и проблемите в психологическото благополучие сред студентите, тъй като младите възрастни се изправят пред множество нови социални, академични и личностни предизвикателства. Тази комбинация от автономност и несигурност прави възникващата зрялост чувствителен контекст за прояви на трудности в емоционалната регулация, които могат да се изразят в импулсивност, ниска толерантност към стрес и ограничени стратегии за справяне (Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014). Това обуславя необходимостта този етап да бъде

разглеждан като ключов контекст при анализа на факторите, свързани с трудностите в емоционалната регулация.

Въпреки че емоционалната регулация се развива в хода на цялото онтогенетично развитие, редица теоретични модели подчертават ролята на ранните семейни взаимодействия като основа за формирането на устойчиви регулаторни механизми. Теориите често разглеждат родителските стилове като предиктори на емоционалната социализация и регулиране на емоциите (или тяхната дисрегулация). Тези ранни модели не изчезват с навлизането в зрелостта, а често се запазват като устойчиви и продължават да влияят върху емоционалното функциониране в по-късни етапи от живота. Родителите ни винаги ще бъдат най-важната тема в живота ни, към която ще се връщаме, за да намерим истината за себе си.

Тази тема ще е вечна като големите вечни въпроси, но това не означава, че не трябва да се надгражда и променя с науката. Съществуващата литература в значителна степен разглежда връзката между родителските модели и емоционалната регулация в детството и юношеството, докато периодът на възникващата зрялост остава сравнително слабо изследван, особено в теоретичен план. Ограничените изследвания, фокусирани върху българското население, допълнително подчертава значението на разбирането и възприемането на подходящи стилове на родителство за ефективно управление на предизвикателствата, свързани с емоционалната регулация. Това налага необходимостта от теоретично осмисляне на механизмите, чрез които ранните родителски модели могат да се свържат с устойчиви емоционални трудности в този ключов преходен период.

Основната **цел** на настоящата статия е да представи теоретичен анализ на зависимостите между родителските модели и трудностите в емоционалната регулация във възникваща зрялост. По-конкретно, чрез интеграция на утвърдени теоретични концепции статията цели да изгради концептуална рамка, която да подпомогне разбирането на емоционалната дисрегулация в контекста на студентската популация.

Основни задачи:

1. *Да очертае възникващата зрялост като специфичен контекст*, в който се проявяват трудности в емоционалната регулация при младите възрастни.
2. *Да анализира родителските модели като механизми на влияние*, свързани с формирането и поддържането на трудности в емоционалната регулация във възникваща зрялост.
3. *Да обсъди психологическите импликации* от тези теоретични зависимости и да очертае насоки за бъдещи изследвания.

Емоционалната регулация като психологически конструкт

Емоционалната регулация заема централно място в съвременната психология на развитието, като изследванията върху този конструкт започват да се развиват по-интензивно едва през последните десетилетия (Cole et al., 2004).

Според Hwang & Matsumoto (2016) емоцията е „преходна, био-психо-социална реакция на събития, които имат последствия за нашето благосъстояние и потенциално изискват незабавни действия“ (Димитрова, 2023). Натрупаните емпирични данни показват значително разнообразие в подходите към нейното изследване, включително различия в използваните методи за оценка, изследователските дизайни и нивата на анализ – от физиологични и поведенчески до когнитивни и социални (Eisenberg, Morris, & Spinrad, 2005; Raver, 2004). Въпреки това методологично многообразие, в научната литература се наблюдава относителен консенсус по отношение на основното съдържание на понятието.

Регулацията на емоциите се състои от вътрешни и външни процеси, участващи в иницирането, поддържането и модулирането на появата, интензивността и изразяването на емоциите (Thompson, 1994).

Подобни дефиниции подчертават, че регулацията включва не само контрол върху емоционалния израз, но и управление на интензивността, продължителността и насочеността на емоционалните преживявания¹⁹.

Глос и Томпсън (2007) разглеждат като континуум от съзнателна, свързана с усилие емоционалната регулация до несъзнателна, автоматична емоционалната регулация. Разбирането на разликата между тези два вида регулиране помага да се разбере сложността на начина, по който хората управляват своите емоционални преживявания. Други автори също разграничават автоматичните процеси (наричани още несъзнателни, имплицитни, или импулсивни) от преднамерените (наричани още контролирани, съзнателни, експлицитни или рефлексивни) процеси (Милушева, 2019).

Необходимо е да се отчете, че емоционалната регулация не представлява статично умение или фиксирана личностна характеристика, а динамичен и развоен процес. Тя се формира постепенно във взаимодействие със социалната среда и се модифицира в хода на развитието в зависимост от контекста и житейските изисквания (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004). Разглеждането на емоционалната регулация като променлив и развиващ се механизъм позволява анализ на условията, при които тя функционира адаптивно или затруднено в различни възрастови периоди.

Трудности в емоционалната регулация: разграничение и континуум

Въпреки че ефективната емоционална регулация подпомага адаптацията и психосоциалното функциониране, в редица случаи индивидите изпитват затруднения в управлението на своите емоционални преживявания. Трудности при регулиране на емоциите е термин, използван за описание на силни емоционални реакции, които често се наричат „емоционални бури“. Тези затруднения могат да имат широкообхватни отрицателни последици за функционирането на човек в интимните, междуличностни, образователни и професионални области.

Тези трудности в емоционалната регулация се характеризират с ограничена способност за идентифициране, толериране и адаптивно модулиране на емоциите, особено в ситуации на повишен стрес или емоционална интензивност (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Те могат да се проявят под формата на импулсивност, ригидни

регулаторни стратегии, избягване или затруднения в поддържането на целенасочено поведение при наличие на силен афект (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Трябва да се има в предвид, че трудностите в емоционалната регулация не следва да се разглеждат като пълна липса на регулаторни способности. По-скоро те отразяват дисбаланс или ограничена гъвкавост в използваните регулаторни стратегии. В този смисъл емоционалната регулация и нейните затруднения могат да бъдат концептуализирани като континуум, в рамките на който индивидът може да се позиционира различно в зависимост от контекста, личностните ресурси и социалната подкрепа.

В периода на възникваща зрялост този континуум придобива особена значимост. Повишените изисквания към автономност, самостоятелно вземане на решения и адаптация към нови социални роли могат да активират вече съществуващи уязвимости в регулаторните процеси. В този контекст трудностите в емоционалната регулация често се проявяват по-ясно и могат да окажат влияние върху академичното функциониране, междуличностните отношения и психологическото благополучие на младите възрастни (Compas et al., 2017; Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014).

Родителските модели като механизми за емоционално влияние

Безспорен и неотричан е фактът, че факторите за формиране на детето като функция на взаимодействието между двамата родители са безкрайно много (Стоянов, Манолов, 2018). Родителите ни са съставка от нас, а ние опознаваме себе си и се развиваме през целия си живот, следователно и темата за родителите се развива доживотно под една или друга форма. Тази връзка е базисна и определя формирането на по сложни взаимоотношения в развитието на личността, включвайки когнитивен, социален и емоционален аспект, способност за разрешаване на проблеми, партньорски взаимоотношения, усвояване на морални и етични ценности. Родителите са нашите лични треньори и ни дават модели както за позитивно случване, които моментално можем да повторим, така и за негативно.

Макар семейството да представлява първичният контекст на социализация, то не функционира изолирано, а е в постоянна връзка с обществените норми, ценности и модели на поведение. Родителските практики и нагласи често отразяват доминиращите социални очаквания и културни образци, като същевременно допринасят за тяхното възпроизвеждане или трансформация. В този смисъл не може да се говори за еднопосочна причинно-следствена връзка, при която влиянието произтича единствено от семейството или от обществото. По-скоро става въпрос за непрекъснат процес на взаимно влияние и адаптация, в рамките на който семейството се променя в отговор на социалните условия, а обществото се формира чрез индивидуалните и семейни практики.

Съвременните изследователи разглеждат семейството като *социална система*. Всъщност самия термин *система* внушава мрежа от взаимосвързани отношения (Beavers & Hampson, 1990), като тези системни влияния действат пряко и непряко. При проблем в една част от системата, реагира цялата система. От тук се приема, че промяната на цялата система води до промяна на индивида (Beavers & Hampson, 1990). Важен момент, който

следва да се отбележи е, че конструктът родителски стил акцентира върху цялостната семейна система, а не само върху индивидуалното поведение и практики на родителите (Долто, 2024). Тази динамичност предполага гъвкавост и контекстуална обусловеност на родителските модели, които се адаптират към променящите се социални реалности. Родителските модели представляват устойчиви начини на взаимодействие между родители и деца, чрез които се осъществява емоционалната социализация в ранните етапи на развитието. В теоретичен план те се разглеждат не само като поведенчески стилове, но и като механизми на влияние, които структурират начина, по който детето се учи да разпознава, изразява и регулира своите емоции и емоционални състояния (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Maddahi et al., 2012). Чрез ежедневните родителски реакции към емоционалните преживявания на детето се изгражда първичната рамка за това кои емоции са приемливи, как могат да бъдат управлявани и какви регулаторни стратегии са функционални в ситуации на емоционално напрежение.

Различни модели са представени от изследователи в изследванията на родителските стилове. Въз основа на работата на Макоби и Мартин (Maccoby & Martin, 1983), Д. Баумринд (Baumrind, 1991) подкрепя изграждането на модел с четири основни типа на родителско поведение - авторитетен, авторитарен, либерален и пренебрегващ стил, които се различават по степента на емоционална топлина, контрол и насърчаване на автономността (фиг.1). Авторитетният стил, характеризира се с висока подкрепа и ясни граници, е свързан с по-добре развити регулаторни умения и по-висока емоционална компетентност. Обратно, авторитарният и пренебрегващият стил по-често се асоциират с трудности в разпознаването и модулирането на емоциите, както и с използването на неадаптивни стратегии като потискане или избягване (Eisenberg, 2005; Morris et al., 2009).

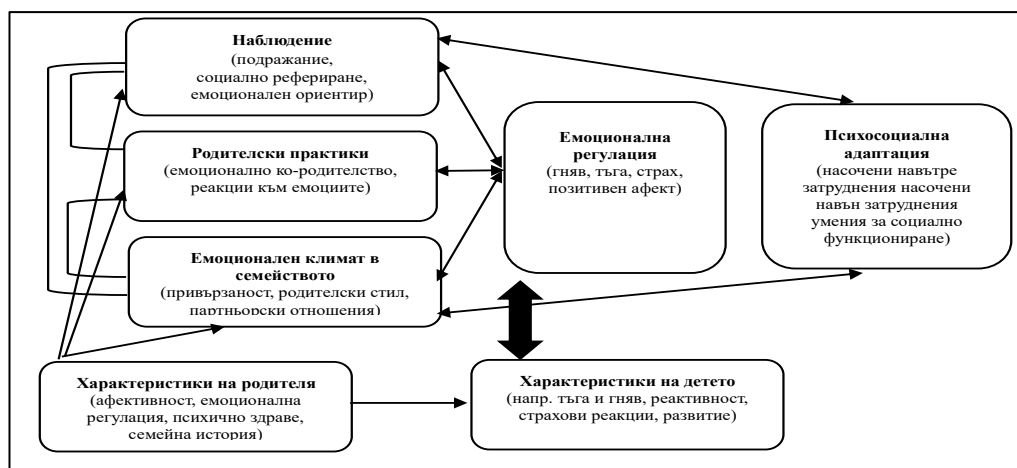


Фигура 1. Четири основни типа родителски стилове

Изм. Тоткова, (2014)

Родителите функционират като първични модели за емоционално реагиране, като чрез собственото си поведение демонстрират как се управляват силни емоции и какви стратегии са социално приемливи. Концепцията за емоционално коучинг родителство (*emotion coaching parenting*) се развива в рамките на изследванията на Gottman и сътрудници и поставя акцент върху начина, по който родителите възприемат, интерпретират и реагират на емоционалните преживявания на детето (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996; Gottman et al., 2013). В този подход емоциите се разглеждат не като поведенчески проблеми, които следва да бъдат потискани, а като ценен източник на информация и възможност за учене и развитие на регулаторни умения. В този смисъл ко-регулацията – съвместното управление на емоционалните състояния между родител и дете – се разглежда като преходен механизъм към развитието на саморегулация (Thompson, 2011). Ко-регулацията се разглежда като ключов механизъм, чрез който детето постепенно преминава от външно подпомагано управление на емоциите към самостоятелна регулация. В рамките на този процес родителските реакции служат като временна опора, която подпомага развитието на вътрешни регулаторни стратегии (Morris et al., 2009). Качеството на ко-регулаторните взаимодействия е от съществено значение, тъй като хроничната липса на подкрепа или емоционална непоследователност може да ограничи развитието на толерантност към дистрес и гъвкавост в регулацията.

В контекста на разгледаните процеси на ко-регулация, фигура 2 представя интегративен концептуален модел на емоционалната социализация в семейството и механизмите, чрез които родителските взаимодействия подпомагат или затрудняват развитието на емоционалната регулация.



Фигура 2. Интегративен модел за влиянието на семейната среда върху емоционалната регулация и адаптация

Изт. Morris et al (2009)

Чрез механизмите на наблюдение, моделиране и съвместно управление на емоционалните преживявания детето усвоява начини за емоционално реагиране, които

постепенно се превръщат в устойчиви регулаторни стратегии. В този модел емоционалната регулация заема централно място и функционира като медиатор между семейния контекст и показателите за психосоциална адаптация. При наличие на неблагоприятни родителски практики или нарушени ко-регулаторни процеси тези механизми могат да се проявят като трудности в емоционалната регулация.

В този смисъл фигурата илюстрира как ранно формираните модели на емоционално функциониране могат да имат дългосрочни последици и да се проявят като уязвимост към трудности в емоционалната регулация във възникващата зрялост.

Психологически импликации

Интегративният модел на семейното влияние върху емоционалната регулация (фиг.2), използван като теоретична рамка в настоящата статия, позволява по-задълбочено разбиране на трудностите в емоционалната регулация във възникващата зрялост. Моделът е концептуално свързан с разработките на Morris et al. (2009) и подчертава, че емоционалната регулация не е изолирано индивидуално умение, а резултат от взаимодействието между родителски практики, емоционален климат в семейството, процесите на ко-регулация и оказва дългосрочно влияние върху емоционалното функциониране. Тази перспектива има съществени последици за интерпретацията на емоционалната дисрегулация при младите възрастни. Също така се очертава и необходимост от бъдещи изследвания, които да проследят устойчивостта и променливостта на регулаторните модели във времето, особено в културно специфични контексти.

Преди всичко моделът предполага, че трудностите в емоционалната регулация във възникващата зрялост често отразяват устойчиви модели на емоционално реагиране, усвоени в рамките на ранните семейни взаимодействия. В условията на повишена автономност и намалена външна подкрепа тези модели могат да се активират и да се проявят под формата на импулсивност, ниска толерантност към дистрес или ограничен репертоар от адаптивни регулаторни стратегии^{15, 14} (Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014; Compas et al., 2017). Това насочва вниманието към необходимостта емоционалната дисрегулация при студентите да бъде разглеждана в развоен контекст, а не единствено като актуално състояние.

На второ място, акцентът върху ко-регулацията и емоционалния климат в семейството подчертава ролята на родителските практики към емоциите като медиатор между семейния контекст и по-късното емоционално функциониране. Изследванията показват, че подкрепящите и валидиращи родителски практики са свързани с по-високи нива на емоционална осъзнатост и регулаторна гъвкавост, докато при неблагоприятни модели тези стратегии могат да се проявят като импулсивност, ниска толерантност към дистрес или ограничен репертоар от адаптивни регулаторни подходи^{8, 24} (Eisenberg et al., 2005; Morris et al., 2009). Във възникващата зрялост тези различия могат да окажат влияние върху начина, по който младите възрастни се справят със стресови и емоционално натоварващи ситуации.

От практическа гледна точка моделът има значение за консултативната и образователната работа със студенти, тъй като насочва вниманието към необходимостта от интервенции, които адресират не само актуалните емоционални трудности, но и техните развойни корени. Програми, насочени към развитие на емоционална осъзнатост, толерантност към дистрес и адаптивни стратегии за регулация, могат да бъдат особено ефективни в университетска среда (Gross, 2015).

Накрая, теоретичната рамка очертава насоки за бъдещи изследвания, включително необходимостта от лонгитюдни и културно чувствителни подходи, които да изследват устойчивостта и променливостта на регулаторните модели във времето. Така настоящият анализ допринася за по-цялостно разбиране на психологическите процеси, свързани с трудностите в емоционалната регулация при младите възрастни.

Заклучение

В настоящата статия е направен теоретичен анализ на връзките между родителските модели и трудностите в емоционалната регулация във възникващата зрялост, като се акцентира върху развойния и релационен характер на регулаторните процеси. Разглеждането на емоционалната регулация като динамичен и развиващ се механизъм позволява да се открие значението на ранната семейна среда за формирането на устойчиви модели на емоционално функциониране, които запазват своето влияние и в по-късни етапи от развитието.

Използваният интегративен модел на семейното влияние върху емоционалната регулация послужи като концептуална рамка за осмисляне на взаимодействията между родителските практики, емоционалния климат в семейството и процесите на ко-регулация. В този контекст трудностите в емоционалната регулация са интерпретирани не като изолирани индивидуални дефицити, а като резултат от продължителни динамични процеси, които се активират в условията на повишена автономност, характерни за възникващата зрялост.

Теоретичните изводи имат значение както за разбирането на емоционалното функциониране при младите възрастни, така и за практиката в образователна и консултативна среда. В този смисъл статията очертава необходимостта от бъдещи емпирични изследвания, които да валидират и доразвият представената теоретична рамка, като допринесат за по-цялостно разбиране на механизмите, чрез които семейната среда оказва дългосрочно влияние върху емоционалната регулация във възникващата зрялост.

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THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN PREDICTING CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: THE CASE OF ALBANIA

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Abstract: *Predicting consumer behavior has become a strategic priority for firms seeking competitive advantage in increasingly digital markets. Advances in artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), and generative models have reshaped the capability of organizations to anticipate customer needs, personalize offerings, and optimize marketing decisions. This study provides a comprehensive overview of AI-based methods used for consumer behavior prediction, evaluates the current level of adoption in Albania, and proposes a conceptual framework tailored to the Albanian market. Sectoral analyses of retail/e-commerce and tourism illustrate practical use cases. The article further identifies implementation challenges—data gaps, skills shortages, ethical considerations, and infrastructural constraints—and concludes with recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. Findings suggest that although Albania’s digital ecosystem is developing rapidly, the integration of AI technologies remains uneven and requires coordinated investment in data readiness, human capital, and regulatory alignment.*

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, consumer behavior prediction, machine learning, Albania, digital marketing, recommender systems, tourism analytics

JEL Classification: M31, C45, O33, L81, Z32

Introduction

Artificial intelligence has become a transformative force across marketing analytics, enabling firms to extract patterns, forecast behaviors, and deliver personalized consumer experiences. Traditional tools—surveys, regression models, and segmentation approaches—remain valuable, yet they struggle to process high-volume digital traces generated through online transactions, social media, mobility data, and digital interactions. Recent advancements in ML, deep learning, and natural language processing (NLP) significantly enhance predictive accuracy, offering new insights into consumer motivations and intentions.

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Emerging markets, including Albania, increasingly recognize AI's potential to strengthen competitiveness, particularly in sectors such as e-commerce, banking, and tourism. However, implementation barriers—data fragmentation, limited analytical capacity, and regulatory uncertainties—slow adoption. This article explores how AI can be leveraged to improve consumer prediction in Albania and proposes a framework suitable for the country's digital maturity.

AI Techniques for Predicting Consumer Behavior

AI-based consumer prediction models can be categorized into several methodological families:

Supervised Learning

These models rely on labeled datasets to learn from historical outcomes. Common algorithms include logistic regression, random forests, gradient boosting machines, and support vector machines. Applications include predicting:

- Purchase likelihood
- Customer churn
- Customer lifetime value (CLV)
- Response to promotional campaigns

Deep Learning

Neural architectures such as convolutional neural networks (CNNs), recurrent neural networks (RNNs), LSTMs, and Transformers can model sequential purchase patterns, clickstream behaviors, and multimodal data (text, images, video). They are especially powerful in e-commerce, where sequence-based patterns are crucial.

NLP and Sentiment Analysis

NLP techniques extract consumer emotions and opinions from:

- Online reviews
- Social media posts
- Customer service transcripts

Sentiment and topic mining allow firms to anticipate dissatisfaction, identify product issues, and forecast trends.

Recommender Systems

Collaborative filtering, content-based filtering, and hybrid systems enhance personalization by suggesting relevant products based on user profiles and behavioral similarity.

Generative AI Models

Recent generative models (LLMs, diffusion models, and GAN-based architectures) offer capabilities such as:

- Creating synthetic consumer personas
- Simulating behavioral scenarios
- Enhancing forecasting models
- Generating personalized marketing content

Such models improve scenario planning and augment traditional predictive pipelines.

Why AI Matters for Albania

Albania's digital economy is expanding rapidly, supported by increased internet access, smartphone adoption, and a rising number of online platforms. Several factors make Albania an attractive landscape for AI-driven consumer analytics:

- **Growing e-commerce adoption:** Local platforms and regional marketplaces increasingly rely on digital traffic data.
- **Tourism dynamism:** Seasonal variability and external factors create strong demand for predictive analytics.
- **Mobile-first consumers:** Albania's population shows high levels of social media engagement, offering rich behavioral signals.
- **Government digitalization efforts:** Tools such as e-Albania contribute to better data infrastructure awareness.

Nonetheless, adoption remains uneven. Many SMEs lack data integration systems, and investments in AI talent are insufficient. Ethical and privacy considerations also shape AI acceptance.

Conceptual Model for AI-Based Consumer Prediction in Albania

A four-layer conceptual framework is proposed based on Albania's digital and socio-economic context.

Data Layer

Collecting:

- Transactional data (POS, ERP, CRM)
- Behavioral digital traces (web logs, clickstreams, app activity)
- External variables (weather, economic indicators, tourist flows)

Compliance with GDPR and local privacy regulation is essential.

Data Integration and Feature Engineering

Data sources must be merged into a unified repository. Feature engineering includes:

- Recency, frequency, monetary (RFM) metrics
- Temporal behavioral features
- Sentiment variables from text
- If legally permissible, demographic or geolocation attributes

Modeling Layer

Depending on data availability, firms can apply:

- Ensemble ML models for baseline tasks
- LSTM or Transformer models for sequential predictions
- NLP pipelines for unstructured data
- Explainable AI (XAI) tools for transparency

Action and Feedback Layer

Predictions must be operationalized through:

- Marketing automation systems
- Dynamic pricing algorithms
- Personalized recommendations
- Feedback loops to continuously improve model accuracy

Sectoral Use Cases in Albania

Retail and E-Commerce

AI can:

- Identify high-value consumers
- Predict product demand
- Optimize inventory
- Personalize recommendations

Small retailers in Albania can benefit from logistic regression or decision tree models using even modest datasets. Larger platforms can deploy deep learning and real-time experimentation (multi-armed bandits). Case evidence in Albania shows improved engagement through automated chatbots and recommendation engines.

Tourism and Hospitality

Tourism is Albania's fastest-growing sector. AI applications include:

- Forecasting tourist arrivals
- Predicting booking patterns
- Optimizing pricing strategies
- Analyzing consumer sentiment from online reviews

Studies on Albanian coastal destinations show AI-supported segmentation and predictive modeling improve occupancy rates and resource allocation.

Implementation Challenges in Albania

Key limitations include:

Data Availability and Quality

SMEs often lack structured datasets and face platform fragmentation between POS, CRM, and web analytics tools.

Skills Gap

A shortage of data scientists, AI engineers, and digital marketers hampers adoption.

Ethical and Regulatory Constraints

Privacy, algorithmic transparency, and fairness concerns require stronger alignment with EU legislation.

Infrastructure and Costs

Cloud computing reduces capital expenses but requires stable connectivity and managerial understanding.

Ethics, Transparency, and Explainability

AI-driven marketing raises ethical issues related to:

- Data privacy
- Informed consent
- Transparency of automated decisions
- Algorithmic bias

Explainable AI enables marketers and policymakers to understand outputs, thereby increasing consumer trust and mitigating risks.

Policy and Managerial Recommendations

For Practitioners

- Start with clear business objectives.
- Prioritize simple, interpretable models before scaling.
- Use A/B testing for validation.
- Invest in data quality improvement.

For Policymakers

- Develop national AI guidelines aligned with EU frameworks.
- Support university–industry collaboration.
- Create digital innovation sandboxes for SMEs.

For Academia

- Conduct longitudinal empirical studies on Albanian consumers.
- Build open datasets for research.
- Explore generative AI for synthetic consumer modeling.

Limitations and Future Research

This study faces limitations related to limited Albania-specific empirical literature and the scarcity of publicly available datasets. Future research should evaluate:

- Cross-border consumer prediction models in the Western Balkans
- Generative AI applications for scenario testing
- Long-term impacts of AI adoption on consumer trust and firm performance

Conclusion

AI has the potential to transform consumer behavior prediction in Albania, improving personalization, demand forecasting, and marketing efficiency. However, realizing this potential requires better data infrastructure, workforce development, ethical safeguards, and coordinated policymaking. With sustained investment and collaboration, AI can accelerate Albania's digital market maturity and contribute significantly to business growth and consumer satisfaction.

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ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ В СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКОТО МАРКЕТИНГОВО ПЛАНИРАНЕ НА АВТОМОБИЛНИТЕ КОМПАНИИ В КОНТЕКСТА НА ЕЛЕКТРИЧЕСКАТА МОБИЛНОСТ

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Резюме: Настоящата статия анализира трансформациите в стратегическото маркетингово планиране на автомобилните компании в условията на електрическа мобилност и дигитализация. Изследването разглежда влиянието на технологичните иновации, екологичните регулации и промените в потребителското поведение върху маркетинговите стратегии, бизнес моделите и комуникацията с клиентите. Акцент се поставя върху прехода от продуктово ориентиран маркетинг към интегриран стратегически подход, базиран на устойчивост, дигитални екосистеми и дългосрочно позициониране. Направените изводи показват, че електрическата мобилност се утвърждава като ключов фактор за преструктуриране на конкурентните стратегии и създаване на нова маркетингова стойност.

Ключови думи: електрическа мобилност, стратегическо маркетингово планиране, автомобилна индустрия, дигитализация, устойчивост

JEL: M31, L62, Q55, O33

STRATEGIC MARKETING TRANSFORMATIONS IN AUTOMOTIVE COMPANIES IN THE CONTEXT OF ELECTRIC MOBILITY

Aneliya Koycheva

Abstract: This article examines the transformations in the strategic marketing planning of automotive companies in the context of electric mobility and digitalization. The study explores the impact of technological innovations, environmental regulations, and changes in consumer behavior on marketing strategies, business models, and customer communication. Emphasis is placed on the transition from product-oriented marketing to an integrated strategic approach based on sustainability, digital ecosystems, and long-term positioning. The findings indicate that electric mobility is emerging as a key driver in restructuring competitive strategies and creating new marketing value.

Keywords: electric mobility; strategic marketing; automotive industry; digital transformation; sustainability

JEL: M31, L62, Q55, O33

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Въведение

Развитието на електрическата мобилност през последните години поставя автомобилната индустрия в условията на дълбока технологична, пазарна и стратегическа трансформация. Преходът от двигатели с вътрешно горене към електрическо задвижване не е резултат единствено от технологичен напредък, а от съвкупното въздействие на регулаторни политики, екологични цели и променящи се обществени нагласи. Това поражда необходимост от преосмисляне на стратегическото маркетингово планиране, което традиционно е ориентирано към продуктови характеристики и ценова конкуренция.

Съществуващите изследвания разглеждат поотделно технологичните и екологичните аспекти на електрическата мобилност, но сравнително по-ограничено анализират нейното въздействие върху стратегическите маркетингови решения на автомобилните компании. Настоящото изследване цели да запълни тази празнина, като анализира ключовите трансформации в маркетинговия микс, бизнес моделите и комуникацията с потребителите. Ограниченията на изследването произтичат от динамичния характер на пазара и регулаторната среда, като очакваните резултати са свързани с формулиране на изводи относно новите стратегически приоритети в автомобилния маркетинг.

Концептуални рамки на стратегическото маркетингово планиране

Стратегическото маркетингово планиране представлява систематичен процес на анализ на пазарната среда, формулиране на дългосрочни цели и избор на конкурентни стратегии с цел постигане на устойчиво предимство (Ansoff, 1987). В класическия си вид то е ориентирано към оптимизация на продуктови характеристики, производствени разходи и пазарно позициониране.

В условията на електрическа мобилност този модел се трансформира, като нараства значението на екологичната устойчивост, дигиталната свързаност и потребителското преживяване. Стойността за клиента вече включва не само функционални параметри, но

и символни и социални измерения, свързани с идентичността и устойчивия начин на живот (Solomon, 2018).

Електрическата мобилност като стратегически фактор

Електрическата мобилност представлява качествено нов етап в развитието на автомобилната индустрия, при който технологичните иновации водят до преформулиране на стратегическите приоритети. Тя създава нови зависимости между автомобилни производители, енергийния сектор и държавните институции, като превръща регулациите и инфраструктурата в ключови стратегически фактори (Mazzucato, 2015).

Преходът към електромобили води и до развитие на нови бизнес модели, ориентирани към мобилността като услуга, което изисква интегриране на дигитални решения и промяна в маркетинговата комуникация.

Дигитална трансформация на маркетинговите инструменти

Дигитализацията трансформира всички етапи на потребителското взаимодействие - от информираност и избор до покупка и следпродажбено обслужване. Автомобилните компании все по-често използват маркетингови стратегии, базирани на анализ на данни, персонализация и дигитални платформи (Chaffey, 2020). Това води до развитие на абонаментни модели, гъвкаво ценообразуване и засилена ангажираност на клиентите.

Екологични регулации като стратегическа среда

Европейските и международните политики за декарбонизация оказват съществено влияние върху стратегическото планиране на автомобилните компании. Устойчивостта се превръща от доброволен ангажимент в задължително условие за конкурентоспособност, което налага интегрирането ѝ в маркетинговите стратегии (ЕЕА, 2020).

Потребителска идентичност и маркетингова стойност

Електромобилите се възприемат не само като транспортно средство, а като символ на технологична модерност и социална отговорност. Потребителите активно участват в дигитални общности и влияят върху възприемането на марките, което изисква дългосрочна и стратегически ориентирана комуникация (Solomon, 2018).

Заклучение

Електрическата мобилност се утвърждава като ключов фактор за трансформация на стратегическото маркетингово планиране в автомобилната индустрия. Анализът показва, че успешните стратегии изискват интегриран подход, обединяващ технологични иновации, дигитализация, екологични регулации и ориентация към потребителската идентичност. Получените резултати очертават възможности за бъдещи изследвания, свързани с измерване на ефекта от новите бизнес модели и дигиталните платформи върху потребителското поведение.

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DOES THE EXCHANGE RATE STABILITY IMPACT ON FINANCIAL STABILITY OF COUNTRY: THE CASE OF ALBANIA AS DEVELOPING COUNTRY

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Abstract: *The stability of the exchange rate regime is a key determinant of macroeconomic and financial stability, particularly in transitional economies such as those of the Western Balkans. A stable exchange rate helps reduce exchange rate volatility, encourages trade and investment, and enhances monetary policy credibility. In the Western Balkan countries—where economies are small, open, and often characterized by a high degree of euroization—exchange rate stability plays a vital role in maintaining low inflation, preserving investor confidence, and supporting sustainable growth. However, the pursuit of exchange rate stability also poses challenges, including reduced monetary policy independence and vulnerability to external shocks. This study examines the relationship between changes on nominal exchange rate and financial stability in Albania, highlighting the importance of sound fiscal discipline, adequate foreign reserves, and effective financial regulation in maintaining macroeconomic balance. Financial stability is best measured through a multi-dimensional framework that includes banking soundness, market conditions, and macro-financial linkages. For Western Balkan countries, where banking systems are dominant and financial markets are less developed, the most relevant measures typically include NPL ratios, capital adequacy, liquidity indicators, and credit-to-GDP ratios. In our case as financial stability indicators are used: credit-to-GDP ratios, inflation, current account balances, changes in nominal exchange rate and capital adequacy. The empirical analyses include only Albanian economy, during the period 2014-2023. The findings suggest that a credible and well-managed exchange rate framework is essential for long-term financial resilience and economic convergence of Western Balkan countries and the European Union.*

Keywords: exchange rate regime, financial stability, Western Balkans, monetary policy, economic growth, euroization.

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JEL classification: F10, F13, F31

1. Introduction

Exchange rate stability represents a cornerstone of macroeconomic management in emerging market economies. In countries with developing financial sectors, limited monetary credibility, and high exposure to external shocks—such as the Western Balkans—exchange rate fluctuations can have immediate and profound effects on inflation, banking-sector stability, debt sustainability, and foreign investment. A country's macroeconomic structure is strongly shaped by the exchange rate regime it adopts, as this choice affects both external trade performance and the robustness of the financial system. The way a nation manages the value of its currency against foreign currencies is crucial for its capacity to absorb economic disturbances arising from domestic or global sources. Over time, countries have employed a variety of exchange rate arrangements, including fixed systems, floating regimes, and intermediate frameworks that blend features of both. These arrangements reflect not only economic policy preferences but also depend on institutional quality, government credibility, monetary governance, and the degree of integration into international financial markets (Bank for International Settlements, 2019).

Following the global financial crisis of 2008, strengthening the resilience of financial systems to external shocks has become a central objective for policymakers. Exchange rate strategies directly influence domestic prices, interest rates, inflation expectations, and investor sentiment, all of which are fundamental to maintaining financial stability. In addition, exchange rate management plays an important role in controlling cross-border capital movements, managing external liabilities, and shaping national trade competitiveness. In developing economies, weak or inconsistent exchange rate frameworks have frequently resulted in currency crises, balance-sheet vulnerabilities, and capital outflows due to declining investor confidence (Feldstein, 2002). By contrast, credible and well-designed regimes can reduce exposure to external risks and create conditions favorable for sustained investment.

2. Literature Review

Classical and modern economic literature emphasizes that stable exchange rates help maintain price stability, support investor confidence, and reduce currency and credit risk (Friedman, 1953; Calvo & Reinhart, 2002). International economics has extensively analyzed how different exchange rate regimes—fixed, floating, and intermediate—affect financial stability. Fixed exchange rate systems

are often used to stabilize inflation and limit currency-related risks, thereby facilitating coordination among economic agents such as households, firms, and financial institutions (Ghosh, 2009). Pegging a currency to a stable anchor can enhance macroeconomic predictability, whereas floating exchange rate regimes permit currencies to respond to market dynamics, supporting economic adjustment when financial systems are sufficiently developed and resilient (Bank for International Settlements, 2019). Nevertheless, floating regimes may also introduce higher exchange rate volatility, which can weaken investment incentives and hinder trade activity. Consequently, the selection of an exchange rate regime involves a trade-off between the predictability offered by fixed systems and the adaptability provided by floating arrangements, especially in times of economic uncertainty.

Stable exchange rates reduce inflation volatility. In highly euroized economies (Kosovo, Montenegro), inflation is mostly imported from the euro area, leading to predictable price dynamics (Amjad, et al., 2025). Countries with floating regimes face stronger exchange rate pass-through. The performance of any exchange rate regime is closely linked to domestic institutional capacity, the credibility of monetary authorities, and prevailing macroeconomic conditions (Ghosh et al., 2003; Reinhart & Rogoff, 2004). Strong legal systems, transparent governance structures, and credible central banks enhance the effectiveness of flexible exchange rate regimes. Conversely, countries with weaker institutional frameworks may derive greater benefits from fixed regimes, which can serve as nominal anchors for inflation and contribute to macroeconomic stability.

For economies with substantial foreign-currency liabilities, close coordination between fiscal policy and exchange rate management is essential. Strong institutional capacity—reflected in clear rules, effective enforcement, and flexible policy responses—further supports financial stability and long-term economic growth (Arner, 2007). The relationship between exchange rate flexibility and monetary policy autonomy becomes especially important during periods of economic downturns and recovery. Advanced economies typically benefit from greater monetary independence as a result of relying on floating exchange rate systems (Tandfonline, 2022). However, in many developing countries, such flexibility may increase macroeconomic volatility, particularly when institutional frameworks are weak and inflation expectations are not well anchored.

3. Methodology

The theoretical basis of this study draws on the Mundell–Fleming framework and the International Finance Trilemma, which together describe the fundamental policy trade-offs faced by governments when selecting and managing exchange rate arrangements. The Trilemma, also referred to as the “Impossible Trinity” (Obstfeld & Rogoff, 1995; Aizenman et al., 2010), posits that a country cannot simultaneously achieve fixed exchange rate, unrestricted capital mobility, and full monetary policy independence; at most, only two of these objectives can be attained at the same time. For example, economies that maintain a fixed exchange rate while allowing free capital flows must relinquish autonomous monetary policy (Eichengreen, B., 1998). These trade-offs become particularly pronounced during periods of economic instability or crisis.

This study employs a comprehensive research design that integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the impact of changes in nominal exchange rate and other independent variables on financial stability in Albania during 2014-2023. The methodological framework is designed to combine rigorous econometric analysis with contextual insights derived from institutional quality, policy frameworks, and broader macroeconomic conditions. A purposive sampling strategy is adopted to ensure geographic and economic diversity, enabling meaningful cross-country and cross-regime comparisons.

Variables

FSI(it) represents the financial stability index for country i at time t . Financial stability is evaluated using a broad set of macroeconomic and financial indicators, *including measures of external balance* (such as the current account balance as a share of GDP), *monetary and price stability indicators* (including inflation), *resilience indicators* (such as adequacy), and *banking-sector soundness metrics* (including non-performing loan ratios and credit-to-GDP ratios). To capture the multidimensional nature of financial stability, a composite index is constructed incorporating monetary stability, external stability, and banking-sector health (Z-score index).

Specifically, the control variables included in the analysis are: Year, to control for the time trend, and ΔER_t – Annual change in the nominal exchange rate, to control for the effect of exchange rate fluctuations on financial stability. The Financial Stability Index is normalized and standardized using Principal Component Analysis (PCA), a widely accepted technique for constructing composite economic indicators (Kaminsky & Reinhart, 1999). Annual changes of nominal

exchange rate (ΔER_t), is introduced into the model as dummy variables. To isolate the effect of changes in nominal exchange rate on financial stability, the model includes several control variables, such as: current account balance as a share of GDP, inflation, capital adequacy, non-performing loan ratios and credit-to-GDP ratio and liquidity. These indicators are measured only for the case of Albania. The purpose of the empirical analysis is to assess the impact of exchange rate stability on financial stability in Albania during the period 2014–2023.

The data for this study are primarily derived from secondary sources, drawing on reputable international databases. Key financial and macroeconomic indicators—including current account balances, inflation, capital adequacy—are collected from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank’s World Development Indicators. Information on exchange rate regimes is obtained from IMF publications and is supplemented with records from central banks as well as findings from leading academic research.

Descriptive analysis

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of dependet and independent variables

VARIABLES	AVERAN GE	MIN	MAX	ST. DEVIATION
FSI	0.10	-0.95	0.68	0.52
INFLATION_Z	0.22	-0.69	1.99	0.90
CURRENTACCOU NT_Z	-0.33	-1.29	1.54	0.85
NPL_Z	0.18	-1.62	1.13	0.93
CREDITGROWTH_ Z	0.46	-1.87	1.39	1.02
CAPITALADEQUA CY_Z	0.25	-1.41	1.47	1.00
LIQUIDITY_Z	0.45	-1.05	1.47	0.87
ΔER	0.005	-0.02	0.02	0.014

Source: Author calculation using SPSS

According to the descriptive analysis, during the period 2014-2026, in the case of Albania, financial stability has been in negative values, thus presenting a bad period for the Albanian economy, as a consequence of the effects of the financial crisis that affected the world market. After 2016, the Albanian economy entered a growth trend, overcoming the effects of the crisis, attracting foreign investments. The current account and inflation have had a stable trend, helping the economy to recover. Banking sector lending has increased in recent years and the level of bad loans has decreased significantly, the lowest value of which was in 2014 (-1.62 Z-score). Both of these factors have consolidated financial stability in Albania.

On the other hand, annual exchange rate changes are small, between -0.02 and 0.02, reflecting Albania's stable free exchange rate.

Tab 2. Variables correlation (Pearson)

Variables	FSI	Inflacion_z	CurrentAccount_z	NPL_z	CreditGrowth_z	CapitalAdequacy_z	Liquidity_z	ΔER
FSI	1.00	0.72	0.33	-0.91	0.68	0.74	0.56	0.12
Inflacion_z	0.72	1.00	-0.05	-0.50	0.11	0.22	0.18	0.03
CurrentAccount_z	0.33	-0.05	1.00	0.20	0.25	-0.12	0.05	-0.08
NPL_z	-0.91	-0.50	0.20	1.00	-0.48	-0.52	-0.40	-0.10
CreditGrowth_z	0.68	0.11	0.25	-0.48	1.00	0.44	0.39	0.05
CapitalAdequacy_z	0.74	0.22	-0.12	-0.52	0.44	1.00	0.31	0.07
Liquidity_z	0.56	0.18	0.05	-0.40	0.39	0.31	1.00	0.02
ΔER	0.12	0.03	-0.08	-0.10	0.05	0.07	0.02	1.00

From the analysis of the correlation between the variables we reach some important conclusions: Firstly, financial stability in the case of Albania for the period taken in the study has a strong negative relationship with the level of bad loans coefficient (-0.91), which means that the increase in the level of bad loans brings deterioration of financial stability in the country. On the other hand, the increase in lending (0.68) and capital in the economy (0.74) brings improvement of financial stability. In the case of Albania, the moderate level of inflation with the correlation coefficient (0.72) and the change in the nominal exchange rate (0.12) have a low impact on financial stability. This shows that the last two variables do not have a very large impact on the financial stability and economic growth of the country.

Model specification

The empirical model is specified as follows:

$$FSI = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Inflacion\_z + \beta_2 CurrentAccount\_z + \beta_3 NPL\_z + \beta_4 CreditGrowth\_z + \beta_5 CapitalAdequacy\_z + \beta_6 Liquidity\_z + \beta_7 Year + \beta_8 \Delta ER + \varepsilon_{it}$$

$R^2 \sim 0.95 \rightarrow$ The model explains that 95% of the FSI changes (very robust for 10-year data) are explain from the independent variables include in the regression model.

P-value → NPL, Capital Adequacy, Credit Growth are more important; Inflation and Current Account have a moderate impact. The regression of FSI on financial indicators and year shows that the financial stability index is mainly influenced by non-performing loans (NPL), bank capital and lending growth. Inflation and current account deficit have a negative impact, but to a lesser extent. The positive coefficient of year indicates a gradual improvement in financial stability during the period 2014–2023, confirming the trend that was also observed in the graphical analysis. The model has a high explanatory power ($R^2 \sim 0.95$), making it reliable for further empirical analysis.

Tab 2. Regression of FSI with financial indicators, year and nominal exchange rate change (ΔER) – Albania 2014–2023

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Koeficient (β)</i>	<i>P-vlera (approx)</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>Intercept</i>	0.00	0.99	The base value of the FSI when all variables are 0
<i>Inflacion_z</i>	-0.10	0.15	High inflation reduces financial stability
<i>CurrentAccount_z</i>	-0.05	0.20	Current account deficit reduces FSI
<i>NPL_z</i>	-0.50	0.002	Non-performing loans significantly reduce FSI
<i>CreditGrowth_z</i>	0.20	0.01	Increased lending stimulates stability
<i>CapitalAdequacy_z</i>	0.30	0.001	Strong bank capitalization increases FSI
<i>Liquidity_z</i>	0.20	0.01	High liquidity supports stability
<i>Year</i>	0.01	0.005	Positive trend of FSI for each year
<i>ΔER</i>	0.05	0.12	Nominal exchange rate changes have a modest effect on FSI

Results interpretation

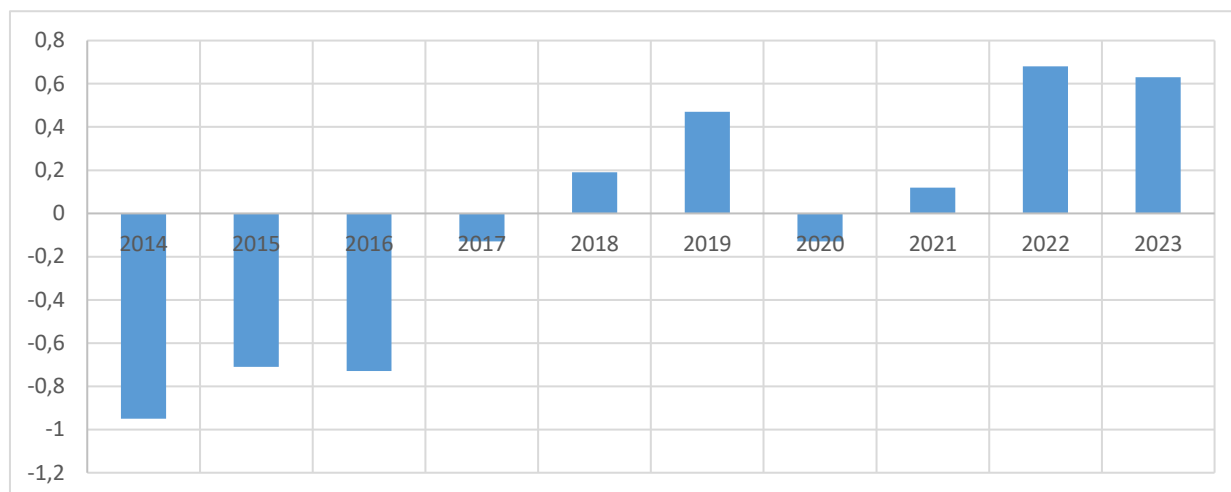
The linear regression will be:

$$FSI = -0.1Inflacion_z - 0.05CurrentAccount_z - 0.5NPL_z + 0.2CreditGrowth_z + 0.3CapitalAdequacy_z + 0.2Liquidity_z + 0.01Year + 0.05 \Delta ER$$

- F-test $p < 0.001$ → The model is globally relevant. This model is highly reliable ($R^2 \sim 0.95$) and can be used for empirical analysis and further forecasting.

The regression model shows that Albania's financial stability (FSI) is mainly influenced by non-performing loans (NPLs), bank capital and credit growth. Inflation and current account deficit have a negative impact on financial stability in Albania during study period. Nominal exchange rate changes have a modest effect, reflecting small fluctuations within the free exchange rate over the period 2014–2023. The positive coefficient of the year (period) indicates a gradual trend of improving financial stability. Below, graph 1 represents the value of FSI for Albania during the study period.

Graphs 1. The value of FSI for Albania during 2014-2023



Source: IMF 2023, author calculations

4. Conclusions

Conclusions from empirical analyses:

- ✓ The Financial Stability Index (FSI) for Albania over the period 2014–2023 shows a clear and progressive improvement in financial stability, albeit with temporary episodes of stress. In 2014–2016, the FSI is presented in negative values, reflecting a high level of non-performing loans (NPLs), weak credit growth and a significant current account deficit.
- ✓ From 2017 onwards, the index shows an upward trend, mainly supported by the significant decline in NPLs, the strengthening of the banking sector capitalization and the improvement of liquidity. The negative peak in 2020 reflects the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic activity and financial intermediation, however, the banking system showed considerable resilience.
- ✓ In the period 2021–2023, the FSI turns into significantly positive values, signaling financial stability above the historical average. This period is characterized by increased lending, further reduction in NPLs, and maintenance of strong capital and liquidity indicators, despite inflationary pressures in 2022.

Exchange rate stability plays a crucial role in maintaining and enhancing financial stability in the Western Balkan region, but as the analyses shows that in the Albanian case the nominal changes in exchange rate (flexible exchange rate regime) has a positive but modes impact on the financial

stability of country. Countries with fixed or highly stable exchange rate regimes benefit from lower inflation volatility, improved credit conditions, and enhanced investor confidence. Meanwhile, countries with flexible regimes benefit from greater shock absorption but face higher risks arising from exchange rate fluctuations.

Overall, the Western Balkans illustrate that while no single regime fits all conditions, credibility, fiscal discipline, and sound macroeconomic institutions are essential to ensuring that exchange rate stability translates into sustainable financial stability.

Literature

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5. Appendix

Tab. 1 The value of independent variables, 2014-2023

year	Inflacion	CurrentAccount	CreditGrowth	NPL	CapitalAdequacy	Liquidity
2014	1.6	-7.9	-2	22.8	16.8	38
2015	1.9	-8.7	2.5	18.2	15.7	39.5
2016	1.3	-7.7	0.4	18.3	15.7	40
2017	2	-6	3	13.2	16.6	41.2
2018	2	-6	4	11.1	18.3	42.5
2019	1.4	-6	6.5	8.4	18.2	43
2020	1.6	-8.7	8.9	5	17	36
2021	2	-7.7	8.6	4.8	17.5	37.2
2022	6.7	-6	7	4.5	18	38
2023	4.8	-3.5	4.3	4.7	18.2	38.5

Tab. 2 The value of independent variables, 2014-2023 with Z-score

Inflacion_z	CurrentAccount_z	NPL_z	CreditGrowth_z	CapitalAdequacy_z	Liquidity_z	FSI
-0.54	-0.82	-1.62	-1.87	-0.62	-0.23	-0.95
-0.39	-1.29	-0.93	-0.53	-1.41	0.3	-0.71
-0.69	-0.7	-0.94	-1.15	-1.41	0.48	-0.73
-0.34	0.05	-0.18	-0.38	-0.77	0.83	-0.13
-0.34	0.05	0.15	-0.08	0.46	1.29	0.19
-0.64	0.05	0.56	0.67	0.38	1.47	0.47
-0.54	-1.29	1.06	1.39	-0.33	-1.05	-0.13
-0.34	-0.7	1.09	1.3	0.02	-0.63	0.12
1.99	0.05	1.13	0.83	0.29	-0.23	0.68
0.83	1.54	1.1	-0.03	0.38	-0.05	0.63

ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ ЗА ФОРМИРАНЕ НА НАЦИОНАЛНА ТУРИСТИЧЕСКА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТ В ДИГИТАЛНИЯ СВЯТ

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Резюме: Докладът изследва процеса на формиране на туристическа национална идентичност в условията на дигитализация и развитие на дигиталната среда. Анализирани са теоретичните основи на националната идентичност и нейното значение като стратегически ресурс за изграждането на национален туристически бранд. Разгледани са ключовите фактори, формиращи туристическия образ – културно-историческо наследство, природни ресурси, национални символи и ценности. Специален акцент е поставен върху ролята на дигиталната комуникация и социалните мрежи като основни механизми за представяне на дестинациите.

Изследването подчертава, че България притежава значителен потенциал за развитие на разпознаваем туристически образ, но липсата на последователна стратегия ограничава ефективността на националния туристически бранд. Идентифицирани са основни предизвикателства – силна международна конкуренция, информационен шум и риск от неавтентично съдържание. Направен е извод, че устойчивото изграждане на туристическа национална идентичност изисква стратегическа координация и активна употреба на дигитални инструменти.

Ключови думи: туристическа национална идентичност; дигитална среда; национален туристически бранд; културно-историческо наследство; дигитална комуникация.

JEL: M31, M37, L83, Z30

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PROSPECTS FOR FORMING A NATIONAL TOURISM IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Stanko Shterev

Abstract: *The report examines the process of forming a national tourism identity in the context of digitalization and the development of the digital environment. The theoretical foundations of national identity and its significance as a strategic resource for building a national tourism brand are analyzed. Key factors shaping the tourism image are explored, including cultural and historical heritage, natural resources, national symbols, and values. Special emphasis is placed on the role of digital communication and social media as primary mechanisms for presenting destinations.*

The study highlights that Bulgaria possesses significant potential for developing a recognizable tourism image; however, the lack of a consistent strategy limits the effectiveness of the national tourism brand. Major challenges are identified, including strong international competition, information overload, and the risk of inauthentic content. The conclusion is drawn that the sustainable development of a national tourism identity requires strategic coordination and active use of digital tools.

Keywords: national tourism identity; digital environment; national tourism brand; cultural and historical heritage; digital communication.

JEL: M31, M37, L83, Z30

Въведение

В епохата на глобална свързаност и бързо развиващи се технологии, националната идентичност се превръща в динамичен и комуникационен процес. Туризмът играе ключова роля в представянето на националния образ, като съчетава културни, исторически и природни елементи в единен разказ. Дигиталната среда днес създава нови възможности за изграждане и популяризиране на туристическа национална идентичност.

Актуалността на темата се обуславя от необходимостта да се формира стратегическа перспектива за национална туристическа идентичност на България изключително важна в съвременния дигитален свят. Настоящото изследване има за цел да открие факторите, които определят националната идентичност в контекста на функционирането на туристическите дестинации и тяхното позициониране на международния пазар в дигиталния свят.

Обект на изследването е процесът на формиране на туристическата национална идентичност в съвременните обществени и комуникационни условия.

Предмет на изследването са специфичните особености, механизми и инструменти за изграждане и представяне на туристическата идентичност в дигиталната среда.

Целта на изследването е да се анализират перспективите за развитие и ключовите фактори, които влияят върху формирането на туристическата национална идентичност в дигиталния свят, като се очертаят възможностите и тенденциите за нейното ефективно изграждане и утвърждаване.

Задачите, които се поставят в настоящето изследване са свързани с: Национална идентичност – същост и характеристики; Формиране на туристическа национална идентичност в дигитална среда; Перспективи и предизвикателства пред формирането на туристическа национална идентичност в дигиталния свят.

1. Национална идентичност – същост и характеристики

Националната идентичност е най-важната форма на социална идентичност в съвременния свят. Тя обединява основните национални черти (език, религия, обичаи, традиции и др.), които правят нацията специфична и отличима с националното самосъзнание. То се формира от националната история. Националната идентичност е с позитивно значение по отношение на духовното и материално развитие на нациите. Тя ги сплотява, вдъхновява ги да постигнат една или друга цел, като влияе положително на прогреса. Затова нейното опазване и стимулиране се приема като необорим аргумент.

Чувството за национална идентичност е като изкуствено създаден имунитет, който е достояние на всеки човек, независимо от държавата, към която принадлежи. И в този аспект, българите по нищо не се различават, нито отстъпват на другите нации. Измеренията на чувството за отношенията към другите на българина, обаче са твърде нехомогенни и разнопосочни. Част от нацията се прекланя пред достиженията на чуждите култури, /или псевдокултури/, друга част – отрича изцяло останалия свят и неговите културни или национални богатства. Или просто не се интересува от тях.

В условията на глобализация обаче, българинът трябва да направи своята лична реформа, защото е изправен пред опасността на все по-силно интегриращата се международна среда. Той трябва да излезе от състоянието на тотален егоцентризъм, да започне сам да брани интересите си, поемайки най-после отговорността за себе си и обществото, от което той самият е част. Освен това, българинът трябва да приеме, че съществуват както и други нации, така и индивиди от собствената му среда, които имат различни нужди и потребности, различни разбираня и мироглед.

Подобно на понятието за глобализация, понятието за идентичност също е многопластово. Можем да говорим за духовна идентичност, за културна идентичност, за национална идентичност, а вече дори за полова идентичност. Но на каквато и плоскост да разгледаме понятието, в основата му стои идеята за самоопределението, себевъзприятието, идеята за уникалността и различието, за границата между нас и другите.

Националната идентичност представлява фундаментален фактор за социална сплотеност и устойчиво национално развитие. Изследвания на Eurobarometer (2023) показват, че над 70% от гражданите на ЕС възприемат културната и националната идентичност като ключов елемент за международния образ на държавата, което я превръща в стратегически ресурс и за туризма.

Терминът „национална идентичност” днес успява да обедини проблемите на застрашената от глобализацията нация с проблемите на разкрепостяващата се и етнокултурно, и изобщо социално личност. Той посочва на уязвената нация раната, която трябва да се превърже, а на висящата между индивидуалната си свобода и общостния ангажимент личност дава спасителното въже, с което тя да се върже при акробатическите си изпълнения в социалното пространство. Защото този термин фиксира както документираната, публично заявена и гарантирана самобитност на нацията, така и чувството за етнокултурна принадлежност на отделния човек. Националната идентичност дава някаква координатна система на свободно лавиращата сред социалните структури личност, пуска топлината на вградената в определени традиции човешка близост сред студената самота на безкрайно напредващия индивидуализъм.

2. Формиране на туристическа национална идентичност в дигитална среда

Туризмът е не само хотели, ресторанти и развлекателни заведения. **Той е оръдието**, чрез което българската култура, история и традиции могат да достигнат до всяка точка на света. Чрез развитието на туризма, страната не само утвърждава своята културна идентичност, но и създава възможности за икономически растеж и международно признание, от което така силно се нуждае.

В съвременния глобализиран свят туризмът се превръща в ключов елемент от икономическото, културното и общественото развитие на всяка държава. В този контекст формирането на *туристическа национална идентичност* придобива централно значение. Това ново понятие се поражда не само от технологичното, но и от социокултурното развитие. То представлява процес на осмисляне и представяне на уникалните характеристики на една страна – нейните природни дадености, културни традиции, историческо наследство и съвременни ценности – така че да бъде разпознаваема, привлекателна и конкурентоспособна на международната туристическа сцена.

В условията на ускорена глобализация и дигитализация туристическата национална идентичност се превръща в ключов инструмент за позициониране на държавите на международната сцена. Туристическата идентичност представлява не просто съвкупност от символи и представи за дадена страна, а стратегически конструиран образ, който отразява нейната култура, ценности, природни ресурси и социални особености. В модерния свят, където конкуренцията между туристическите дестинации е изключително висока, изграждането на разпознаваем и позитивен национален туристически бранд е от критично значение.

Според **Филип Котлър** (на англ.: Philip Kotler) брандът на дадена дестинация трябва да бъде силен, автентичен и последователен, за да може да създава доверие и емоционална връзка с туристите. От своя страна **Саймън Анхолт** (на англ.: Simon Anholt) подчертава, че националната идентичност в туризма се изгражда както от държавни институции, така и от граждани и бизнеси, които участват в създаването на националния „разказ“.

Елементи формиращи туристическата национална идентичност са:

- **Културни и исторически ресурси** - Те включват традиции, обичаи, архитектура, фолклор, празници, исторически личности и събития. Културно-историческото наследство е основен носител на националния туристически образ.
- **Природни ресурси** - Планини, морски брегове, минерални извори, биологично разнообразие и природни паркове формират визуалния и емоционален профил на дестинацията.
- **Национални символи и разпознаваеми маркери** - Традиционни мотиви, храна, музика, занаяти, национална кухня и емблематични локации (например Пирин за България или Фуджи за Япония).
- **Национални ценности и стил на живот** - Гостоприемство, отношение към природата, културна отвореност, ритъм на живот и социални практики.

Един от ключовите механизми за формирането на туристическа национална идентичност се явява успешното и устойчиво интегриране в дигиталния свят. Дигиталната комуникация промени положително начина, по който държавите изграждат и представят своя туристически бранд. Социалните мрежи като Instagram, TikTok и YouTube превръщат визуалното съдържание в основен инструмент за разказване на истории. България постепенно развива своя дигитален туристически имидж чрез кампании като „България – преживей я!“ и „Discover Bulgaria“. Въпреки това, липсата на последователна стратегия и единен визуален стил затруднява изграждането и утвърждаването на силен бранд на национално ниво. За сравнение, държави с интегрирани стратегии отчитат до 30% по-висока разпознаваемост на националния си туристически бранд (UNWTO, 2023). По данни на UNWTO (2023), около 80% от туристите използват дигитални канали при планиране на пътувания, а културният туризъм отчита средногодишен ръст от над 7%, което подчертава значението на онлайн представянето на националните характеристики.

Международният опит показва, че държавите, които използват интегрирани дигитални стратегии, успяват да формират устойчив и разпознаваем образ. Визуалното съдържание в социалните мрежи има водещо значение. Кампании като „Inspired by Iceland“ водят до ръст от над 20% на туристическия интерес в рамките на първата година след старта (Iceland Tourism Board). Подобно, Япония използва комбинация от традиция

и нововъведения, за да подчертае своята уникалност в глобалното дигитално пространство.

3. Перспективи и предизвикателства пред формирането на туристическа национална идентичност в дигиталния свят

В епохата на дигиталните комуникации и глобалната мрежова култура формирането на туристическа национална идентичност придобива нови измерения. Националните държави се стремят да изградят разпознаваем образ, който отразява тяхната културна специфика, историческо наследство и съвременни ценности, но този процес вече не се осъществява само чрез традиционните канали. Дигиталната среда създава както безпрецедентни възможности за популяризация, така и значителни предизвикателства, свързани с конкуренцията, контрола върху съдържанието и устойчивото управление на културния образ.

Една от най-съществените перспективи се корени в глобалната достъпност. Онлайн платформите – социални мрежи, туристически портали, видеоканали и виртуални турове – позволяват на държавите да достигнат неограничена международна аудитория. За разлика от предходни десетилетия, когато националните туристически кампании разчитаха на телевизия и печатни медии, днес разпространението на информация е бързо, персонализирано и силно визуално. Тази визуалност е ключова, тъй като чрез снимки, кратки видеа и инфографики страната може да създаде незабавно въздействащ образ, който да остане в съзнанието на потенциалните посетители.

Друга важна перспектива е възможността за изграждане на автентичен национален разказ. Дигиталната среда позволява включване на местни общности, малки бизнеси, културни институции и индивидуални творци в самия процес на представяне на страната. Това води до по-органичен и многообразен образ, който излиза извън рамките на официалните маркетингови кампании. Технологиите също така дават възможност за интерактивност – посетителите могат да преживеят предварително дестинацията чрез виртуална реалност или 360-градусови видеа, което значително увеличава интереса и очакванията.

Допълнителна перспектива се крие в потенциала за персонализация. Алгоритмите и дигиталните анализи дават възможност на туристическите организации да насочват съдържание според интересите на различни аудитории – любители на историята, природни туристи, гастрономически изследователи, млади пътешественици. Така националната идентичност може да бъде представена на пластове, като подчертава различни аспекти според нуждите и желанията на потребителя. Изследванията показват, че персонализираното туристическо съдържание увеличава вероятността за реално пътуване с около 25% (McKinsey, 2023).

Наред с перспективите, процесът е затруднен от редица предизвикателства. На първо място се откроява проблемът с конкуренцията и пренасяването. В дигиталния

свят всички държави се стремят да изградят запомнящ се образ, което води до „информационен шум“. Туристическите послания често се повтарят, а визуалните елементи започват да изглеждат еднакви, което прави отличаването все по-трудно. Над 190 държави активно се рекламират онлайн като туристически дестинации, което налага ясно диференциране и автентичност.

Друг ключов проблем произтича от риска за неавтентично съдържание. В стремежа да привлекат внимание, някои кампании прибегват до идеализирани или дори подвеждащи представяния, които не отразяват реалните културни и социални особености. Това може да доведе до разминаване между очаквания и действителност, а в дългосрочен план – до подкопаване на доверието към дестинацията. Дигиталната среда лесно разпространява подобна информация, което прави контрола върху имиджа по-труден.

Сериозно предизвикателство е и влиянието на потребителското съдържание. В епохата на социалните мрежи репутацията на една страна може да бъде формирана не толкова от официалните кампании, колкото от индивидуални публикации – както позитивни, така и негативни. Отзиви, снимки и коментари имат силата да изграждат или рушат доверие, а това поставя националните туристически организации в ситуация на непрекъснато наблюдение и реакция. Потребителското съдържание играе решаваща роля за имиджа на дестинацията. Около 75% от туристите се доверяват на онлайн отзиви повече, отколкото на официални кампании (TripAdvisor Insights, 2024).

Не на последно място, дигиталната среда води до постоянна динамика. Образът на дестинацията трябва да бъде актуализиран, адаптиран към нови тенденции и гъвкав спрямо непредвидими глобални събития – икономически кризи, пандемии, природни бедствия или социални конфликти. Това изисква стратегическа гъвкавост, ресурси и постоянна готовност за комуникация. Данни на UNWTO сочат, че държави с интегрирани и последователни дигитални стратегии постигат до 20% по-висока разпознаваемост на туристическия си бранд, което потвърждава необходимостта от дългосрочна и целенасочена политика.

Заклучение

Формирането на туристическа национална идентичност в дигиталния свят изисква стратегическо мислене и интеграция между публични институции, частния сектор и местните общности. България има потенциал да създаде силен и разпознаваем национален туристически бранд, основан на своето културно и природно наследство. За целта е необходимо прилагане на иновативни дигитални инструменти и последователна комуникация, която да представя страната като автентична, гостоприемна и модерна дестинация.

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МАРКЕТИНГ НА УСТОЙЧИВИЯ ТУРИЗЪМ В ЕРАТА НА ИЗКУСТВЕНИЯ ИНТЕЛЕКТ

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Резюме: *Дигиталната ера трансформира начина, по който организациите комуникират, промотират и създават стойност за потребителите. Изкуственият интелект (AI) се очертава като основен двигател на тази трансформация, променяйки маркетинговите стратегии, клиентското изживяване и устойчивите бизнес практики. Тази статия изследва ролята на AI в маркетинга в дигиталната ера, като акцентира върху неговата интеграция с метавселената, имерсивните технологии и устойчивия туризъм. Тя подчертава как системите, задвижвани от AI, позволяват хиперперсонализация, прогнозен анализ и базирани на данни прозрения, които подобряват ангажираността на потребителите, вземането на решения и лоялността. Чрез VR, AR и MR, маркетинговете могат да създават интерактивни виртуални среди, които предлагат предварителни преживявания, културно образование и глобална достъпност. AI също така подкрепя устойчивия маркетинг чрез оптимизиране на използването на ресурси, минимизиране на въздействието върху околната среда и насърчаване на приобщаването на различни групи от населението. Етичните и социалните съображения, включително поверителността на данните, алгоритмичната справедливост и цифровото равенство, се разглеждат, за да се осигури рамка за отговорно внедряване. Статията позовава, че AI трансформира маркетинга, като стимулира иновациите, подобрява стратегията на бранда и допринася за икономическата, социалната и екологичната устойчивост в дигиталната ера.*

Ключови думи: изкуствен интелект, дигитален маркетинг, метавселена, устойчив туризъм, виртуална реалност.

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JEL: D49, M31

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN MARKETING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Abstract: *The digital age is fundamentally altering organizational communication, promotion, and consumer value creation. Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a primary catalyst in this transformation, reshaping marketing strategies, customer experiences, and environmentally sustainable business practices. This article examines the role of AI in marketing within the digital age, with particular emphasis on its integration with the metaverse, immersive technologies, and sustainable tourism. The analysis underscores how AI systems facilitate hyper-personalization, predictive analytics, and data-driven insights that enhance consumer engagement, inform decision-making, and foster loyalty. By leveraging virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR), marketers can develop interactive virtual environments that provide pre-experiences, cultural education, and global accessibility. AI further advances sustainable marketing by optimizing resource allocation, reducing environmental impact, and promoting inclusivity across diverse populations. The discussion also addresses ethical and social considerations, such as data privacy, algorithmic fairness, and digital equity, to establish a framework for responsible AI implementation. Overall, the article demonstrates that AI is transforming marketing by driving innovation, strengthening brand strategy, and supporting economic, social, and environmental sustainability in the digital era.*

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Digital Marketing, Metaverse

JEL: D49, M31

Въведение

Еволюцията на маркетинга през 21-ви век е силно повлияна от бързите технологични иновации. Изкуственият интелект, големите данни и имерсивните технологии като виртуална реалност (VR), добавена реалност (AR) и смесена реалност (MR) революционизират начина, по който брандовете взаимодействат с потребителите (Dwivedi et al., 2022; Golf-Papez et al., 2020). Възходът на метавселената, дигитална

екосистема, обединяваща физическа и виртуална реалност, представлява следващия етап на маркетинга и ангажирането на потребителите (Pellegrino, Wang, & Stasi, 2023).

В този контекст AI играе ключова роля, като анализира потребителските данни, прогнозира поведението и персонализира взаимодействията с потребителите в реално време. Неговата интеграция в маркетинга същевременно подкрепя принципите на устойчивото развитие и е в съответствие с Целите за устойчиво развитие (SDGs) на Организацията на обединените нации (Go & Kang, 2023).

Персонализация и анализ на данни, базирани на изкуствен интелект

Изкуственият интелект позволява на маркетолозите да преминат от масова комуникация към хиперперсонализирано ангажиране. Чрез анализ на голяма база от данни, алгоритмите предвиждат нуждите на потребителите, оптималното време и възможните реакции. В метавселената, изкуственият интелект създава “Digital Twins” (цифрови близнаци) – виртуални представяния на потребителите, базирани на демографски, поведенчески и психологически данни. Тези модели позволяват на компаниите да създават вероятностни маркетингови сценарии, да персонализират преживяванията и да оптимизират кампаниите (Yoo et al., 2023). Въпреки високата им прецизност, AI моделите понякога генерират неточни или необосновани резултати – т.нар. халюцинации. В контекста на цифровите близнаци това може да доведе до изкривени потребителски профили или погрешни прогнозни сценарии, което изисква внимателно валидиране на данните. Анализът на данни улеснява сегментирането на пазара, намаляването на разходите и информираното вземане на решения. Изкуственият интелект обработва данни от социалните медии, онлайн поведението във виртуалната среда и обратната връзка от клиентите, за да разработи индивидуализирани профили, повишавайки удовлетвореността и лоялността към съответния бранд (Cham et al., 2022).

Метавселената като нова маркетингова екосистема

Метавселената позволява на компаниите да изграждат имерсивни и интерактивни маркетингови среди, които ангажират потребителите отвъд традиционните дигитални платформи. Туристическите брандове, хотелите и дестинациите използват VR

преживявания, подобрени с изкуствения интелект, за да популяризират предлаганите услуги, позволявайки на потребителите да „опитат, преди да пътуват“ (Buhalis, Leung, & Lin, 2023).

Водещ пример е насърчаването на виртуалния туризъм посредством платформата Visit Dubai, предлагащо завладяващи преживявания на забележителности като Бурдж Халифа и Аквариума в Дубай. Тази инициатива значително увеличава резервациите за пътувания до Дубай с 20% (Landvault Studio, 2023). По подобен начин кампанията „Try Before You Fly“ на Thomas Cook използва VR съдържание, за да представи Ню Йорк като дестинация, увеличавайки продажбите със 190% (Shin & Kang, 2020).

Изкуственият интелект поддържа тези дигитални кампании, като оптимизира ангажираността на потребителите и анализира поведенчески данни, за да персонализира бъдещите маркетингови стратегии. Чрез анализи, базирани на изкуствен интелект, маркетинговете в сферата на туризма могат да разберат предпочитанията на потребителите, да коригират съдържанието в реално време и да прогнозират точното търсене (Cham et al., 2022).

Устойчив маркетинг и етичен изкуствен интелект

Устойчивият маркетинг трябва да балансира иновациите с отговорността. Изкуственият интелект от своя страна повдига въпроси, свързани с етиката, устойчивостта и приобщаването (Anshari, 2021). Когато се интегрира в метавселената, той подпомага устойчивостта, като оптимизира маркетинговите стратегии, намалява отпадъците и повишава ефективността на рекламата, насърчавайки екологично осъзнатия потребителски избор. В сферата на туризма виртуалните преживявания в метавселената, задвижвани от AI, спомагат за намаляване на свръхтуризма и въглеродните емисии (Bibri, Allam, & Krogstie, 2022; Chaney & Seraphin, 2020).

Въпреки това, предизвикателствата остават. Системите с AI изискват значителна енергия за обработка на голяма база данни (Big Data), което допринася за въздействието върху околната среда от облачните изчисления и блокчейн технологиите. Прозрачността и справедливостта при алгоритмичното вземане на решения са от съществено значение, за да се избегне пристрастие и да се гарантира поверителност (Oloruntobi et al., 2023).

Ролята на AI в стратегията на бранда и дизайна на преживяванията

Успехът на бранда в дигиталната ера не зависи единствено от качеството на продукта, а от емоционалния отпечатък, който той оставя. Изкуственият интелект се превръща в катализатор на този опит, като съчетава данни, поведение и креативност в едно интелигентно преживяване.

AI допринася за това чрез няколко ключови направления:

⇒ Маркетинг, базиран на аватари

Персонализирани взаимодействия във виртуални среди, където потребителите могат да комуникират с дигитални представителства на марката, създавайки чувство за присъствие и принадлежност (De Brito Silva et al., 2022).

⇒ Чатботове и гласови асистенти, задвижвани от AI

Осигуряват непрекъсната ангажираност и моментална реакция, като превръщат комуникацията от транзакционна в емоционална.

⇒ Прогностичен анализ

Позволява на компаниите да предвиждат тенденции, да адаптират продуктови стратегии и да изграждат „живи“ кампании, които се развиват в реално време (Valaskova, Popp, & Balica, 2022).

⇒ Анализ на настроенията

Чрез наблюдение на реакциите в социалните мрежи и виртуалните общности, AI улавя психо-динамиката на аудиторията и позволява проактивен, почти човешки отговор.

Тези приложения не просто повишават видимостта и лоялността — те превръщат брандовете в живи дигитални организми, способни да усещат, разбират и еволюират заедно със своите потребители – както във физическата, така и във виртуалната реалност.

Изкуствен интелект, метавселена и устойчив туризъм

Устойчивият туризъм интегрира икономически, социални и екологични аспекти с цел подобряване на преживяванията на туристите, като същевременно подкрепя местните общности (UNWTO; Lozano-Oyola и др., 2012). Основавайки се на принципите на устойчивото развитие (WCED, 1987), той се стреми да постигне баланс между икономическия растеж и опазването на природното и културното наследство (WTO, 2005). Съвременните подходи акцентират върху управлението на общото въздействие на туризма, като целят максимизиране на ползите и минимизиране на негативните последици (Hunter, 1995; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2017).

Ръководен от четирите стълба на Глобалния съвет за устойчив туризъм – управление, социално-икономически, културен и екологичен – устойчивият туризъм се съотнася с Целите на ООН за устойчиво развитие, насърчавайки дългосрочни, отговорни и регенеративни практики в туристическите дестинации по света (Bayrak, 2013; Travel Foundation; Sustainable Tourism Network).

Способността на туризма да допринася за устойчивото развитие е подчертана във връзка с Целите за устойчиво развитие на Организацията на обединените нации (SDGs), приети през 2015 г. Тази връзка подчертава значението и отговорността на туризма като една от най-големите индустрии в света да допринася и да оказва положително въздействие върху устойчивото развитие както на местно, така и на глобално ниво.

Интеграцията между изкуствения интелект (AI) и метавселената открива нови хоризонти за развитието на устойчивия туризъм, като позволява създаването на иновативни маркетингови подходи, които едновременно разширяват обхвата на аудиторията и намаляват екологичния отпечатък на туристическите дейности. Тази синергия между двете технологии създава основа за по-интелигентно управление на туристическите ресурси и развитие на устойчиви бизнес модели. Освен това тя стимулира иновациите в дигиталния маркетинг и отваря нови възможности за персонализирано потребителско изживяване.

Виртуалните и имерсивни преживявания, базирани на AI технологиите, предоставят алтернативен и устойчив модел на туристическо взаимодействие, при който потребителите могат да посещават виртуално дестинации и културни забележителности без необходимост от физическо пътуване. Тези практики насърчават межкултурния обмен, образователните инициативи и социалното приобщаване, като допринасят за постигането на целите на устойчивото развитие (Daneshpour et al., 2024).

Изкуственият интелект улеснява изграждането на интелигентни туристически екосистеми, които анализират потоците от посетители, предвиждат натоварването на дестинациите и оптимизират преживяванията в реално време. Чрез прогнозен анализ и управление на голяма база данни, AI подпомага динамичния баланс между икономически растеж, опазване на природните ресурси и социална ангажираност.

В този контекст, бъдещето на устойчивия туризъм зависи от способността на сектора да се адаптира към взаимосвързаните природни, технологични и дигитални реалности, които формират новата парадигма на пътуванията и културното потребление (Mihalic, 2023).

Предизвикателства и бъдещи перспективи

Въпреки значителния напредък на AI в маркетинга, неговото прилагане продължава да поражда редица етични, технологични и социални предизвикателства, които изискват стратегическо и отговорно управление.

На първо място, въпросите, свързани с поверителността и сигурността на данните, остават сред най-значимите рискове. Системите, задвижвани от AI, обработват огромни обеми лична информация, което поставя предизвикателства пред защитата на потребителските права и прозрачността на алгоритмичните процеси (Oloruntobi et al., 2023).

На второ място, етичното използване на AI предполага гарантиране на справедливост, обяснимост и недопускане на алгоритмично пристрастие. За да се избегне дискриминация и нарушаване на социалното равновесие, е необходимо разработването на регулаторни рамки и механизми за надзор върху автоматизираните решения.

Трето, енергийната ефективност на AI системите се превръща във все по-важен фактор. Технологичните инфраструктури, поддържащи изкуствения интелект и блокчейн екосистемите, изискват значителни количества енергия, което изостря необходимостта от преход към възобновяеми енергийни източници и въвеждане на концепцията за „зелени изчисления“ (Stoll, Gellersdörfer, & Klaaßen, 2022).

Четвърто, дигиталното неравенство продължава да бъде ключово социално предизвикателство. Разликите в достъпа до технологии, дигитална грамотност и инфраструктура могат да задълбочат глобалното разделение между развити и развиващи се пазари (Vlăduțescu & Stănescu, 2023).

В бъдеще изследванията следва да се насочат към разработването на етични и устойчиви стандарти за използване на AI, които да интегрират екологични, социални и икономически аспекти. Особено значение ще има интеграцията на зелени изчисления и принципите на дигиталното приобщаване, които ще определят посоката на развитие на етичен маркетинг в следващото десетилетие.

Заклучение

Интеграцията на изкуствения интелект и метавселената преобразява маркетинга и устойчивия туризъм, създавайки нов модел на дигитална комуникация, основан на иновации, отговорност и приобщаване. Тази синергия подобрява потребителското изживяване, оптимизира ресурсите и намалява екологичния отпечатък. Успехът зависи от технологичния напредък, съобразен с етичното и устойчиво внедряване. Отговорното използване на AI подкрепя икономическия растеж, социалното благополучие и опазването на околната среда, насърчавайки по-приобщаващ и устойчив дигитален пазар. В бъдеще ключова роля ще има разработването на политики и стратегии, които гарантират баланса между технологичните иновации и човешките ценности.

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STRATEGIC PLANNING AND MARKETING IN THE DIGITAL WORLD
Fifth International Scientific Conference
November 2025

Editor
Prof. Dr. Hristo Katrandjiev

Prepress
Emilia Lozanova

UNWE Press
University of National and World Economy
1700 Sofia, Student District, No.19 December 8th str.
Director *Petar Petrov*, phone: (+3592) 8195 264
Editor-in-Chief *Valentin Mitev*, phone: (+3592) 8195 665
press.unwe.bg

ISSN 3033-2257

UNWE PRINTING HOUSE

