ANALYZING USER OPINIONS ON CONTENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA APPS FOR ONLINE MARKETING: EVIDENCE FROM ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between online marketing and social media apps (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and LinkedIn) or content apps (YouTube and Netflix), focusing on Albanian markets. Based on the analysis of 525 Albanian social media users from different age groups, the findings illustrate that 90% of the respondents prefer to use a smartphone rather than a personal computer for small tasks in their daily life. Except for LinkedIn and Facebook, all social media apps had higher usage rates among the younger demographic, according to data analysis. The most popular app among older generations is Facebook. Based on age-based differentiation strategies, our data support the findings. Every app can help businesses reach the Youth category (aged 14 to 24), but social networking apps and YouTube should be the main priorities. Adults in the target audience in the 25–45 age range can be found primarily on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, while people over 45 can be found primarily on Facebook. Specifically, companies investing in online marketing can use Instagram and YouTube, which are more popular among younger social media users, while older users prefer Facebook and LinkedIn. Meanwhile, it would be better not to use in-app purchase strategies for companies that intend to invest through their apps.

Keywords: online marketing; social media apps; content media apps, smartphone users

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INTRODUCTION

The smartphone has become the most critical personal device for an individual. Throughout history, there has never been another device used so extensively on a personal level as a smartphone. According to Arbore et al. (2013), users are open to sharing with others almost every personal item except a smartphone. There has been a rapid increase in the use of smartphones in various areas of our everyday lives since the first modern smartphone (iPhone 1) was introduced in 2007. A significant number of mobile applications are in the play store or app store, like Google's Android and Apple's iOS,

which are the most used operating systems in mobile technology (Clement, 2020a; Clement, 2020b) with expected revenue of $693 billion for the year 2021 (Clement, 2020c).

The usage of smartphones in the target population of this study is in line with the most developed countries. The percentage of mobile-cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants was 94.18% in 2018, and the portion of the population using the internet was 71.85% in 2017 ("Statistics," 2022). These two facts indicate that nowadays, smartphones and mobile apps have become an integral part of their activities. When Steve Jobs announced a mobile advancement during the iPhone 1 presentation, which included three components in one (a new user interface, an internet browser, and a media player), he did not know that a new era had begun. Soon, smartphones changed the lifestyle of every person around the globe. The rapid development of mobile apps in the early 2010s dramatically changed how people communicate and interact with each other, organize their jobs and daily life, and even conduct e-commerce transactions (Stärke et al., 2011).

This study explores the customers' behavior divided into age groups, focusing on smartphone usage. The analysis of these data can be used then by businesses to drive their online marketing strategies and campaigns through social and content media apps or by creating age group-oriented apps.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The last decade saw the rise of social media platforms, supported by affordable smartphone technologies, internet penetration (broadband and mobile), telecommunication advancements (4G, 5G), and attractive data communication packages. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and LinkedIn switched to mobile to consolidate their market. Other platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok started as mobile applications and became very popular among youth and young adults. In their book, Eyal and Hoover (2014) explain that these platforms are designed to refactor human behavior towards creating new human habits connected to technology. Nowadays, every person who can afford a smartphone and an internet connection has an online presence with at least one social media account, as stated in Chambers's study (2013). This led to the creation of new marketing tools and techniques that analyze user behavior and target individuals based on online activities. The internet and social media changed consumer behavior, how companies conduct their businesses, and their marketing strategies. Generally, businesses responded to that change by making digital and social media the most integral component of their business marketing plans (Stephen, 2016). This new way of marketing offers significant opportunities to various businesses to increase sales and brand awareness (Dwivedi et al., 2021), which are achieved through lower costs (Ajina, 2019). Social media marketing enabled companies to reach targeted consumers efficiently, effectively, and instantly. One of the reasons for this is that users are becoming "content creators," which means functional consumers instead of just consuming, as in the past (Nadaraja and Yazdanifard, 2013).

On the other hand, as Appel et al. (2020) mentioned, the future of social media in marketing is exciting but uncertain due to its fast-paced, ever-changing nature and how consumers use it. Nevertheless, many researchers show the presence and usefulness of social media in marketing. For example, new customer acquisition and sales (Trusov et al., 2009; Stephen and Galak, 2012), new product adoption (Hennig-Thurau, 2012), and exciting interaction with other forms of media such as television (Fossen and Schweidel, 2017; Fossen and Schweidel, 2019).

Companies spend a significant portion of their digital budget on mobile marketing, which has grown exponentially in the past decade and has had a lasting impact on retail environments and shopping behaviors (Shankar et al., 2010). Prior research has illustrated that the effectiveness of mobile communication is positively associated with consumer engagement, which can be increased by mobile shopper marketing, a new marketing term involving shopper, employee, and mobile technology to create mutually beneficial outcomes (Shankar et al. 2016).

Among mobile marketing, mobile app revenue has been increasing dramatically in the past three years, and worldwide revenue is projected to grow to $935 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2021). Android had 6 million mobile app developers in 2019, and Google Play will have approximately 3 million apps in 2021 (Statista, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial having an optimized versioning

strategy by offering multiple options of apps with differentiated functionality and quality. While most apps are free, prior research has demonstrated that the monetization method between the free and paid apps involves a complicated versioning decision. It is based on the factors such as timing of version, simultaneous vs. sequential release, or whether it's monopolistic sellers (Borkovsky 2017; Bhargava and Choudhary 2008).

The mobile marketing environment in the 2020s is dramatically changing to adapt to the constantly evolving consumer interest and engagement. For example, in a large-scale field study, Mulier et al. (2021) found that vertical video ads are more effective in increasing engagement than horizontal video ads. More importantly, they identified that the preference for vertical video is not the same across different age groups and that younger mobile users are more likely to be fluent when watching vertical videos on mobile phones than older generations (Mulier et al., 2021). In other words, mobile users' age plays a moderating role in the effects of mobile marketing. Compared to older generations, young consumers are heavy smartphone users due to the technical environment in which they grew up and are more experienced with a mobile lifestyle (Southgate, 2017). On the other hand, older generations are less familiar with mobile marketing activities, so the effectiveness of mobile advertising is weaker among older consumers (Smith, 2017).

The analysis of social media usage and its impact on marketing appears in a lot of research, with different theoretical research models and methods. For example, Andzulis et al. (2012) analyzed the role of social media in the business-to-business sales process through the eight-step meta-synthesis methodology introduced by Hoon (2013). Itani et al. (2016) examine how social media use for information communication leads to customer satisfaction. They applied Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using EQS software for their hypothesized relationships. Rodriguez et al. (2012) used the same methodology to show social media usage and its positive impact on relational sales. Finally, Chena et al. (2011) analyze posting reviews from online consumers related to the product price and quality. They use the Bayesian Inference method with Gabbs Sampling on data associated with the number of postings and ratings.

To better explore the main topic of this research of analyzing opinions on Albanian social and content media users, a literature search was done using well-known online databases such as ACM, SpringerLink, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. The keywords used were "online marketing," "social media," "content media," and "Albania." The search results evidenced some specific work in the fashion sector (Bello et al., 2021) or a use case from a local provider in Albania, showing the effectiveness of marketing technologies (Dureen et al., 2015). However, no scientific publications on online marketing related to social and content media usage were discovered in Albania. Based on this research gap, this study examines the preferences of social and content media usage in online marketing in different age groups. Furthermore, it provides incremental data that facilitate future research, focusing on the Albanian business context.

METHODOLOGY

This work used an experimental method to gain a better understanding of the usage of social and content apps. The target population was Albanian citizens over 14 years old living in Albania. A google form questionary link is shared and forwarded through social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Quantitative data are obtained from several questions related to social and content media apps. There are three demographic questions, and the other questions are related to time consumption in the use of apps, app purchase costs, and app categories. Answers are obtained through closed-ended questions with multiple choice, with the possibility to choose only one answer. The voluntary response sample is gathered through the period of March-April 2019. The data was collected and organized to be anonymized to prevent leaks of sensitive information. Therefore, the study can be repeated using new data from the same domain and target population.

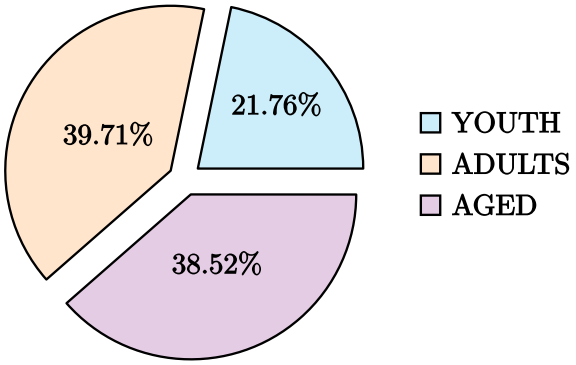

Figure 1. Albanian population based on age (Instat, 2020).

Six hundred twenty individuals answered the questionnaire. The respondents are categorized based on the age parameter: Youth (14-24), Adults (25-45), and Aged (over 45) with the respective distribution: 25,16%, 40,48%, and 34,36%. The data from Instat (Fig. 1) show the proportions of the Albanian population (around three million) regarding the three categories defined above. A random sample pool of 525 questionaries is chosen for the study. The sample pool includes 115 youth, 210 adults, and 200 aged subjects. This technique is called poststratification (Glasgow, 2005) and is often used when a simple random sample does not reflect the distribution of some known variable in the population, in our case, the age group.

The focus of this study is to investigate how social and content media apps can drive online marketing based on users' opinions. This research statement turns into the following research questions:

1. How has the smartphone affected the lifestyle of online customers?
2. What correlation is between the age groups and an active internet connection on smartphones?
3. What social or content app should be used for marketing purposes when the focus is a target population based on age groups?
4. Who from the target population is demanding paid mobile apps?

To answer these questions, through the experimental research design, we want to explore the relationship between an "active internet connection" and the two variables: the "age groups" and the "time" variable. The last refers to the amount of time spent on a smartphone. The third research question will focus on the relation between the "age groups" variable and the "usage of a specific app" variable. Meanwhile, the fourth research question analyzes the correlation between the variables "age groups" and "free/purchased apps" to gain insight into how much a person is willing to spend on a particular app.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first research question investigates the changes in people's everyday lifestyles related to smartphones. Based on the results, 81% of participants prefer using a smartphone to a personal computer for handling small tasks such as searching for a topic, reading the latest news, purchasing goods and services, etc. The percentage is higher among younger people (89%) and lower among adults (75%), but it is significant in all cases.

Similar results are obtained by asking a different question: What device would you like to use in your free time? 87% of participants preferred a smartphone over a personal computer this time. This trend is in line with the EU community as shown by the (Eurostat, 2016) statistics where the Youth group prefers smartphones rather than laptops to surf the internet 94% vs. 71%, followed by Adults (83% vs. 64%) and Aged (56% vs. 57%)

The following interesting result is obtained by analyzing the time spent on a smartphone. As Figure 2 shows, there is a peak of two to four hours of usage of mobile devices for all age groups. This interesting indicator shows the extensive use of mobile phones in Albania. About 81% of the respondents use the smartphone not less than 2 hours per day, while 37% of all respondents use the smartphone for more than 4 hours per day.

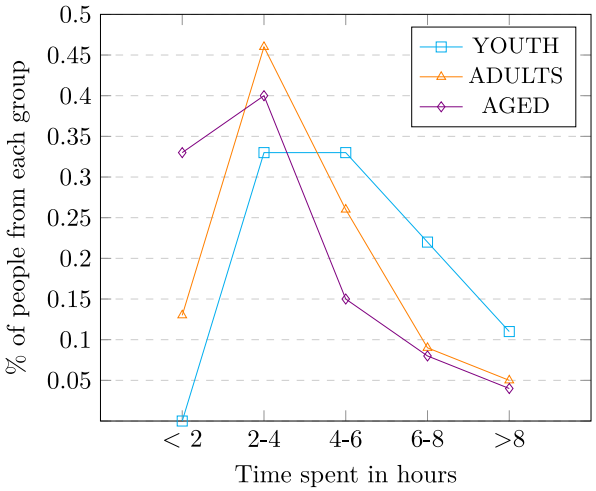

Figure 2. Time spent on a smartphone by the three target groups.

Since most mobile apps do not work without an active internet connection (besides offline games, system apps, etc.), the participants are asked about their smartphones' active internet connection frequency (wireless, 3G/4G, or 5G). Figure 3 shows the distribution of an active internet connection across the three age groups. The primary outcome is that most participants have an internet connection at least 75% of the time. The second is the presence of a correlation between age and internet connection. Adults and Aged groups seem to have a higher frequency of internet connection on their smartphones. This behavior is mainly related to the lack of financial resources in the young generation and the high prices of internet providers' internet packages.

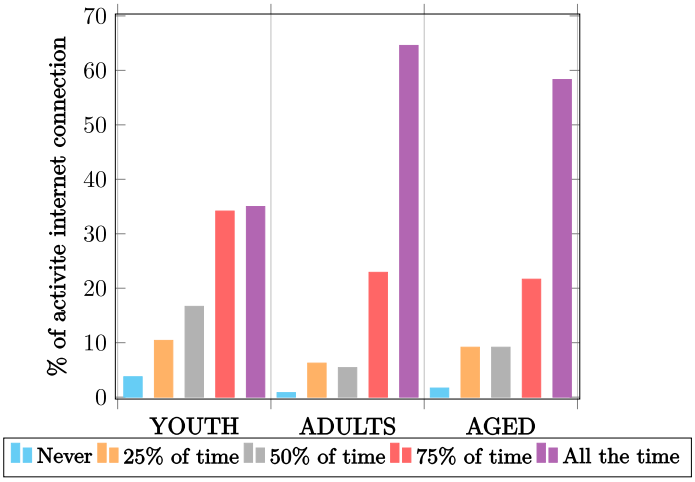

Figure 3. Distribution of an active internet connection.

The time spent on smartphones is divided into three categories: social media apps such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and LinkedIn; content apps such as YouTube and Netflix; and instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp. Figure 4 shows the usage percentage of at least 10 minutes for every age group of the mentioned apps. The distribution is demonstrated through a histogram graph integrated with a logarithmic trend function.

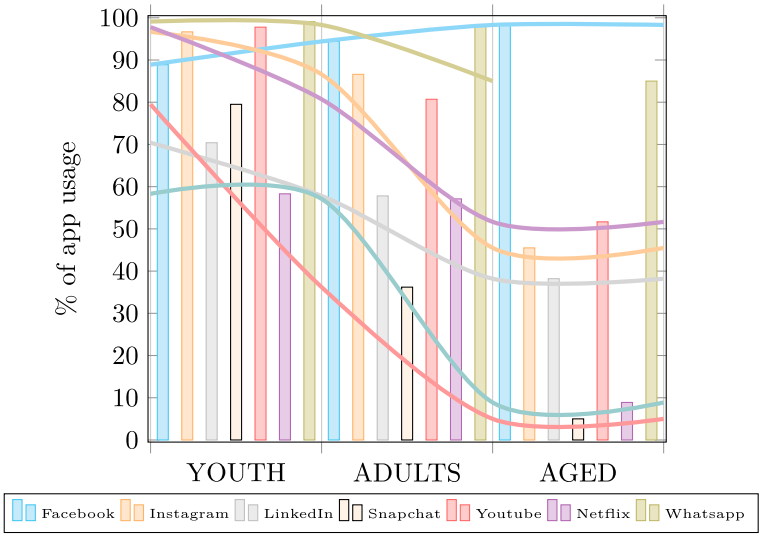

Figure 4. Percentage of apps used at least 10 minutes by the three different age groups.

Figure 4 can be interpreted from different points of view, but the primary outcomes related to the third research question presented earlier are:

- Every social app, except LinkedIn, has the highest rate among the Youth group, with a more than 70% of usage rate. Facebook is the fourth most used app among youth, the second among Adults, and the first among the older generations. This is mainly related to the fact that Facebook's share of use among the young generation declined over the last few years, with Instagram taking the lead (Duggan, 2015).
- Facebook and Instagram have a reverse trend related to age. Instagram is used among younger people. Meanwhile, Facebook is very popular among older generations. These findings are enforced by statistics and trends from (Datareportal, 2022) on worldwide audiences on Facebook in July 2022, and they are divided into youth (28.2%), Adults (48.6), and Aged (23.2%). However, there are some slight differences when we look at worldwide statistics related to Instagram, with youth having 39.1%, Adults at 47.5%, and Aged 13.4% (Statista, 2022).
- Netflix and Snapchat apps are the less used on the list, with the first being more prevalent in younger generations. The low percentage of Netflix is probably because this platform was introduced late in Albania when it became available worldwide in 2016s.
- WhatsApp is the most used application among Youth and Adult groups, probably because it is primarily a communication app. From a complete breakdown of the percentage based on age groups that use WhatsApp in the U.S.A. (Statista, 2020), there are similar findings where usage penetration is 19% (Youth), 47% (Adults), and 30% (Aged).

YouTube has a double use compared to Netflix, mainly because YouTube has been available to the target audience since its original release in 2005. There is a correlation between the "age group" variable and the "usage of a specific app" because the app development technology is new, changes constantly, and is more difficult for older people than younger ones to adapt. The correlation between the "age group" variable and "social apps is also evidenced in the (Eurostat, 2021), where it is pointed out that one of the most popular activities on the internet is participation in social networks, for example, using Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok or Twitter. Age and the likelihood of using these services are closely related. Statistics show that the participation percentage for the Youth group was 87%, nearly four times higher than the rate for the Aged group, which was 22%.

The fourth research question investigates if there is a demand for paid apps in Albania and, if yes, how much they are willing to pay for an app. The first question was if they already had paid apps on their phones. The answers (Fig. 5) show that 90% of the participants have only free apps on their smartphones, while the rest have a few paid applications (up to 5€), but most of their apps are free.

Suppose we look at the individual results for each group (Youth, Adults, and Aged). In that case, we get an interesting fact: the percentage of paid apps in Adult and Aged respondents is higher than in younger generations. Only 6% of the young participants have paid apps, compared to 11,25% of Adults and 12,73% of the Aged. This common trend shows the nature of the younger generation: dynamic, constantly experimenting with new things, less loyal to the brand, and with fewer financial resources. On the other hand, we have an older generation with more financial resources, focused on the app's usefulness, and less adaptable to the always-changing world of apps.

The second question asked in the questionnaire was how much they are willing to pay for an app. The analysis is based on the results of the previous question. The answers were divided into two groups:

a. participants who do not have paid apps on their smartphones,
b. participants who have some paid apps on their smartphones.

Figure 5 shows that 32% of those who do not have paid apps are willing to pay for an app, with only 6% willing to pay more than 5 euros. On the other hand, 85% of those with at least one paid app on their phone are willing to spend for an app, with around 37% willing to pay more than 5 euros. Therefore, based on the collected data, about 63% of respondents are not willing to spend any money on apps, and around 9% of respondents are willing to pay more than 5 euros for an app.

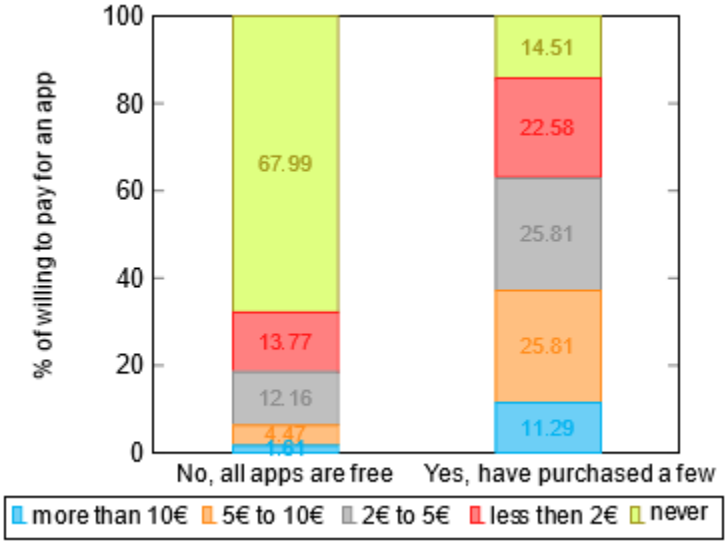

Figure 5. Customers are grouped by paid/not paid apps and the percentage of each group willing to pay for an app.

It has been reported that nearly half of smartphone users have never paid for an app, and 63% of smartphone users are more likely to purchase when apps provide pertinent marketing recommendations. In addition, because of the possibility of earning awards or points, 51% of smartphone users are more likely to utilize a company or brand's mobile app when browsing or shopping(Google/Ipsos, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The increased internet access with mobile data and the worldwide usage of social and content media apps changed consumer behavior, how companies conduct their businesses, and their marketing strategies (Mulier et al., 2021). The findings of this work have provided a landscape of online media usage in Albania, which future researchers could utilize to examine this issue further. In addition, the current work provided meaningful marketing implications for businesses focusing on local Albanian markets.

Firstly, the results indicate that the smartphone affected the lifestyle of Albanian online customers, where 81% of participants prefer using a smartphone to a personal computer for daily tasks. It is consistent with a prior industrial report that reported that most of the global website traffic is created by mobile devices (Statista, 2018). The percentage is higher for younger respondents (89%) and lower for older respondents (75%). In addition, an average of 78% of participants have an active internet connection for at least 75% of the time. Thirdly, the findings indicate a promising market for mobile apps, calling international business managers to pay more attention to this global market with a tailored standardized approach given the similar online consumption trend (Liu et al., 2014). For example, the results disclose that all social apps have a higher usage rate among the younger group (70%), except for LinkedIn and Facebook. Facebook is the most used app among the older generations (98%). Lastly, the findings demonstrate that younger users (vs. older users) are more likely to use free apps. Only 6% of the young participants have paid apps, compared to 12.73% of the aged group. However, regardless of age, 85% of the participants who have at least one paid app on their phone are willing to spend money for an app, with around 37% ready to pay more than 5 euros for the app.

Prior research has shown that companies using social media marketing platforms to brand and interact with consumers achieve superior performance in enhanced brand loyalty (Labrecque, 2014) and increased long-term customer relationships (Liu et al., 2022). These findings guide the companies to focus on Albanian online marketing. We can divide these companies into those who drive online marketing through existing apps and those willing to create their apps. The first one includes existing apps, both social media and content

media. The second category includes all those apps a company develops in-house to market its products online. These apps can then be offered as free or paid options.

The reason for the increasing influence of social media is the inefficiency of traditional media in reaching young consumers whose brand attitudes and buying intentions are affected by others (King et al., 2014). Social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, have become increasingly popular with this group of customers (Hamilton et al., 2016). Our work echoes those findings in terms of age-based differentiation strategies. The first category companies targeting the Young group (14-24 years old) can achieve it through every app, but the focus should be on social media apps and YouTube. The Adults group (25-45 years old) is targeted mainly on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, and the Aged people (over 45 years old) are primarily through Facebook. On the other hand, to attract young consumers, companies in the second category should reach customers through their apps whose cost does not exceed 5 euros per user.

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