

The influence of social networks on consumer loyalty in crisis periods

Uticaj društvenih mreža na lojalnost potrošača u periodima kriznih promena

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Abstract

In the changing market conditions characterized by intense competition, consumer loyalty is a key success factor. The aim of the research presented in this paper is to determine how social networks in periods of crisis change or affect the building of consumer loyalty, in terms of interactive communication aimed at recognizing and integrating consumer needs into the business offer of companies. The empirical research was used in the paper, based on appropriate research methods and techniques. For the purposes of the research primary data was collected using the survey method and the questionnaire technique. Based on the relevant measurement scales in the domain of social networks and consumer loyalty, the selected findings correspond to the current conditions of crisis changes, especially in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Statements used in the research process were taken and adapted from similar studies by the authors. The research process was carried out electronically, as the questionnaire was created in electronic form and distributed to respondents through social and communication media. During data processing, statistical methods such as descriptive statistical analysis, internal consistency test, correlation, and regression were used. The results of the analysis show that consumers expressed loyalty to companies using social networks in periods of changes caused by crisis, particularly during the virus pandemic.

Keywords: changes in crisis, social networks, pandemic, consumer loyalty

Sažetak

U uslovima promenljivog tržišta karakterističnog po izraženoj konkurenciji, lojalnost potrošača predstavlja ključni faktor uspeha. Cilj istraživanja ovog rada je da utvrdi na koji način društvene mreže u periodima kriznih promena deluju na izgradnju lojalnosti potrošača, u smislu interaktivne komunikacije usmerene na prepoznavanje i integrisanje potreba potrošača u poslovnu ponudu kompanija. U radu je korišćeno empirijsko istraživanje, zasnovano na odgovarajućim metodama i tehnikama istraživanja, gde je za potrebe istraživanja sprovedeno prikupljanje primarnih podataka primenom metode ankete i tehnike upitnika. Na osnovu relevantnih mernih skala u domenu društvenih mreža i lojalnosti potrošača, izabrane su one konstatacije koje su primerene aktuelnim uslovima kriznih promena, naročito u periodu pandemije COVID-19. Proces istraživanja sproveden je elektronskim putem, tako što je upitnik kreiran u elektronskoj formi i putem društvenih i komunikacionih medija distribuiran ispitanicima. Prilikom obrade podataka korišćene su statističke metode poput deskriptivne statističke analize, testa interne konzistentnosti, korelacije i regresije. Rezultati analize pokazuju da su potrošači iskazali lojalnost kompanijama na društvenim mrežama u periodima kriznih promena, a posebno u toku pandemije virusa.

Ključne reči: krizne promene, društvene mreže, pandemija, lojalnost potrošača

1. Introduction

During the virus pandemic, the use of social networks increased for several reasons. In this period, social networks were not only used for entertainment, but also

for business, communication with friends and relatives, education, sharing content and the like. Also, during the pandemic, webinars were held via social networks, as well as numerous media conferences that were broadcast live. Most importantly, people were informed about the virus

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through social networks, its spreading manner and rate, the consequences, the way to cure it and the like. Health organizations shared relevant information about the virus through social networks (Wong et al., 2020; Abbas et al., 2021), and Facebook introduced a special option for users where they can get information about the virus, as well as the number of infected people and protection guidelines in the immediate vicinity.

A relatively limited number of studies on this topic show that the average time spent using social networks during the virus pandemic increased by about 2 hours (Fernandes et al., 2020, p. 62). As for the Republic of Serbia, there are no official data on the time spent using the social networks, but there are data on the number of users (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020, 2021, 2023). In 2019, the average number of social network users with an Internet connection was 83.3%, in 2020, the number increased to 84%, and in 2021, the number again increased to 84.7%.

During the virus pandemic, in addition to entertainment, information and education, social networks were actively used for shopping, which companies used in order to develop relationships with consumers, which should lead to building customer loyalty. During the pandemic, due to the deterioration of financial situation, the aforementioned loyalty certainly stands out as relevant.

The main feature of social networks is reflected in the increased possibility of establishing direct contact between companies and consumers, because instead of passively collecting information, consumers become engaged in social networks by collecting information and creating content. The consumers used that content to express their opinions about products and services, simultaneously creating the information basis to be used by other consumers in the decision-making process. Therefore, it is in the interest of every business to meet the needs of consumers and manage communication channels to ensure positive word of mouth (Wang & Kim, 2017, p. 15).

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

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The exponential growth of users of social networks around the world has led companies to explore effective ways of their presence in that domain. Accordingly, the trend of advertising as one of the most important forms of communication mix has changed and now companies are mainly focused on advertising on social networks (Đurićanin et al., 2021, p. 171).

Every company strives to create long-term relations with consumers through social networks, because it is a way of mutual maximization of value, creating satisfaction and thus consumer loyalty. This process is facilitated through social networks because the social networks accounts are followed by consumers who express preferences for the products and services of those companies. The companies themselves can also see the relevant information about consumers on social networks. This creates an information base for the development of a service or product offer, as well as promotional messages that will be directly aimed at the target group and that should cause a positive reaction (Ang, 2011, p. 32).

If companies manage to build the loyalty of a certain group of customers through social networks, one can expect a positive reaction from their friends, both in real life and those using social networks. Namely, consumers are much more willing to believe the word of other consumers than the promotional messages of companies. This actually leads to the spread of positive electronic

word-of-mouth propaganda (Woodcock et al., 2011, p. 51). Information sharing and communication between consumers themselves and companies and consumers become key determinants of the consumer loyalty development in the field of social networks (Trainor et al, 2013, p. 3).

It is therefore not surprising that almost every company today has an account on one or more social networks, considering that it is a very effective communication channel. Along with the development of loyalty, relationships with consumers on social networks lead to an increase in reputation, image, growth in sales volume and profit (Radenković et al, 2015, p. 206). Social networks have led to the development of the so-called 2.0 consumer loyalty, considering that relations with consumers in this case are realized through digital technologies and in a virtual environment (Gamboa & Goncalves, 2014, p. 10). Through online channels, there is a possibility of meeting daily needs while respecting physical distancing. With this, salespersons and management of numerous sales companies remained in contact with consumers, but also showed additional concern, which is reflected in the distribution of information on how to protect oneself from infection. No additional positive impact on loyalty was detected when companies expressed concern for consumers through social networks (Kosasi et al., 2021, p. 1423).

Employees who work with social networks must answer every question of users, be professional and polite (Naz et al., 2021). Also, the customer loyalty can be improved through electronic commerce, and this is especially important in the period of the pandemic when the electronic commerce in the world peaked. Namely, many companies link their official website to their profile on the social networks. Thus, the user visiting the social network is redirected to the website, where communication with the consumer is improved.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a number of challenges in terms of meeting consumer needs and exceeding expectations. In addition to everything else, the issue is how to attract the attention of consumers and build loyalty through marketing efforts in the best way, due to the fact that consumers seek to be entertained on social networks, but also because they are facing an abundance of other information.

The challenge of building loyalty arises in the case of those consumers who are used to establishing direct contact with the company, but who cannot so easily adapt to a virtual environment. It is important to mention the possibility of using so-called cookies, which are special services that record the user's movements and preferences. This gives an additional opportunity to create a personalized offer of products and services, which is certainly useful in the domain of loyalty (Gu et al., 2021, p. 264).

Bearing in mind the above, the subject of the paper is social networks and the influence of social networks on consumer loyalty, especially in crisis periods such as the

COVID-19 pandemic, and a positive influence of social networks on consumer loyalty in the period of crisis. The positive impact of social networks on loyalty during the pandemic occurs not only because of the possibility of personalized communication, as well as the definition that is in line with the pandemic characteristics, but also because companies have shown a real interest in consumers through social networks. This led consumers to the conclusion that companies are not only interested in profit, but also in social responsibility. Taking care of the needs and health of consumers develops the attitude of consumers that really matters to them, which makes them feel safe and respected, and that is certainly important.

The subject of the paper is social networks, consumer loyalty, as well as the relationship between social networks and the concept of building consumer loyalty during the period of the COVID-19 virus pandemic. The aim of the paper is to determine whether the social networks act on building consumer loyalist during the COVID- 19 pandemic, and in what way. The general assumption, that is, the hypothesis of this paper, is that social networks in the period of the COVID-19 virus pandemic represent a significant determinant of consumer loyalty.

The following specific hypotheses arise from this general hypothesis:

- The pandemic of the COVID-19 virus has led to an increase in the use of social networks in the world and in the Republic of Serbia;
- The degree of electronic commerce, i.e., buying and selling products on social networks, increased after the start of the COVID-19 virus pandemic;
- There is a statistically significant and positive influence of social networks on the degree of consumer loyalty during the period of the COVID-19 virus pandemic.

At the base of every business orientation, consumers have the central attention. Every company on the market strives to recognize and satisfy the needs of consumers as best as possible, since dissatisfaction leads to loyalty over time. The loyal consumers are able to buy more, more often, allocate larger sums of money, transfer their satisfaction to other consumers and remain loyal to the company even in a moment of crisis, such as the pandemic crisis.

Thanks to technological progress, companies are able to identify the needs and behavior of consumers more easily and better. In this regard, social networks should be singled out, as a generation of web 2.0 and web 3.0 technologies, whose basic characteristics are interactivity and immediacy. Users can share multimedia content and experiences on different social networks, and this is certainly important from a marketing perspective. Social networks as such are very important in the period of the virus pandemic, since the pandemic initiated the increased growth of e-commerce due to quarantines, curfews and the like. As a result of such changes, companies became more oriented towards appearing on commercial networks, e-commerce grew, and for consumers this actually meant a greater amount of information. Namely, through social

networks, consumers can directly communicate with sellers and companies, learn more about the products, the way to buy and pay. Additionally, consumers can express their views on products and services, and companies can recognize them as relevant in order to improve the offer. When the consumer's opinion is integrated into the business offer, there is a positive influence on the consumer's attitudes. The consumers satisfy their needs related to respect and self-actualization, so there is a positive impact on satisfaction, and consequently on loyalty.

3. Methodology

In order to test the set hypotheses, the paper used empirical research, based on appropriate research methods and techniques. For the purposes of the research, the collection of primary data was carried out using the survey method and the questionnaire technique. Based on the relevant measurement scales in the domain of social networks and consumer loyalty, those statements that are appropriate to the current pandemic conditions were selected. The research process was carried out electronically, as the questionnaire was created in electronic form and distributed to respondents through social and communication media. The sample was formed on the basis of respondents in the Republic of Serbia, most of whom are located in Kosovo and Metohija.

Statistical methods such as descriptive statistical analysis, internal consistency test, correlation, regression, t test and ANOVA test were used for the purpose of data processing. Data processing was performed in statistical software SPSS v.25. The obtained results are presented graphically and in tables.

Findings in the research process were taken and adapted from similar studies by Zhang (2022), Jawaid & Rajadurai (2021), Kim & Kim (2022). Respondents expressed their degree of agreement or disagreement with the statements. Grade 1 referred to complete disagreement, while grade 5 referred to complete agreement with the statement. The research was carried out within a project with master's students at the Faculty of Economics of Kosovska Mitrovica, as a part of the analysis of the influence of social networks in building consumer loyalty during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the research process, a sample of 79 respondents was formed. In determining the degree of reliability of variables, the Cronbach alpha coefficient is often used. In order for the variable to be considered reliable, the value of this coefficient must be at least 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978).

4. Results

The largest number of respondents belongs to the age group of 30 to 45 years (47%). Respondents aged 18 to 30 (33%) are in second place in terms of participation. Respondents over 55 make up 11% of the sample, and respondents aged 46-55 make up 9% of the sample. The largest number of respondents have a university degree (75%), while 25% of respondents have completed secondary school. The sample consists of 67% of female

respondents and 33% of male respondents. Also, 44% of respondents earn a monthly income of more than 60,000 dinars, while respondents who earn up to 40,000 and from 40,001 to 60,000 make up 28% of the sample. The largest number of respondents is employed (68%), while 24% are unemployed. There are 8% pensioners in the sample.

Before starting the analysis of respondents' attitudes, it is necessary to observe certain results of the analysis that may be of importance for answering the defined research hypotheses. First, Table 1. shows the networks that are used most often. Table 1. shows that respondents mostly use Instagram (44%), followed by Viber (23%), YouTube (14%), and Facebook (10%). Other social media are represented by less than 5%.

Table 1. The most frequently used social networks in the period of research

Usage of social networks		
1.	Instagram	44%
2.	Viber	23%
3.	YouTube	14%
4.	Facebook	10%
5.	Other social media	<5%

Source: Authors research

On average, the largest number of respondents spend between one and three hours a day on social networks (44%). 32% of respondents spend a maximum of one hour on social networks per day, while 24% of respondents spend more than 3 hours on social networks. Of the total number of respondents in the sample, 93.7% encounter certain advertisements every day, while for 6.3% of respondents this is not the case. In this regard, 29.1% of respondents point out that advertisements on social networks influence their purchase intentions and attitudes, while 60.8% believe that there is no such influence. Out of the total number, 10.1% of respondents point out that they are not sure about the impact of advertisements on social networks on their purchase intentions and attitudes.

In the continuation of the statistical analysis, descriptive statistics were applied, the results of which are presented in Table 2. First, the results of descriptive statistics concerning the use of social networks were presented.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics: use of social networks in the period of COVID-19 pandemic

Finding	M	SD
I like to use social networks to find out about products and services that I want to buy.	3.35	1.29
On social networks, I follow influencers who promote products that I like to buy.	2	1.38
I often use social networks to purchase products and services.	2.53	1.33
After the COVID-19 pandemic started, I started to use social networks more for information purposes about products and services.	3.13	1.42
After the COVID-19 pandemic started, I use social networks more for shopping purposes.	2.75	1.44

Source: Authors research

Table 2. Continued

Finding	M	SD
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I often use social networks to compare different groups of products and services from different companies.	2.74	1.37
On social networks, I actively analyze the views of other users (via comments and "likes") regarding the product before purchasing.	2.93	1.38
I think that I use social networks more for shopping purposes since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic than before.	2.84	1.54
On social networks, I actively follow influencers who give advice regarding products and services that are relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic.	2.06	1.33
I use social networks more to express my (dis)satisfaction during the pandemic than before that period.	2.36	1.45

Source: Authors research

When looking at the results regarding the arithmetic mean, it is noticeable that the value in most cases is less than 3, which does not indicate a high favorable attitude of the respondents regarding the use of social networks for shopping purposes during the pandemic. The highest value of the arithmetic mean was achieved in the first statement: "I like to use social networks to find out about products and services that I want to buy" (3.35). This attitude of the respondents is in accordance with the fundamental characteristic of social networks. The result actually shows that respondents, that is, consumers, are ready to use social networks in order to gather information about the experience, prices, features and quality of products and services before purchasing. They get this information not only from their friends on social networks, but also by analyzing comments, reviews and ratings given by other users. Then, according to the value of the arithmetic mean, the statement "After the COVID-19 pandemic started, I started to use social networks more for information purposes about products and services" (3.13).

This result is relevant to one of the set research hypotheses, because it is in line with the initial assumption that the use of social networks increased during the pandemic, which was also confirmed by some other studies. One of the reasons for greater use of social networks, in addition to entertainment, education and communication with friends and family, is the process of purchasing products or information about purchases. The answers to the previous two statements confirm the position that the basic role of social networks during the pandemic is to inform consumers about purchases, products and services. In line with other results, the arithmetic mean showed that consumers on social networks do not follow influencers, do not use social networks to compare products and services, or make purchases directly from social networks. The lowest standard deviation was achieved in the first statement: "I am happy to use social networks for information about products and services that I want to buy" (1.29), which indicates a high degree of homogeneity of respondent's attitudes, which once again confirms the informative role

of social networks. The results of the descriptive analysis when it comes to statements for the expression of consumer loyalty are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive analysis: consumer loyalty on social networks

Finding	M	SD
On social networks, I follow the company whose products I buy.	3.31	1.46
I am satisfied with the products and services I buy, including those I buy through social networks.	3.34	1.22
I will gladly recommend the products and services I buy, both on social networks and in real life.	3.58	1.41
I intend to continue to purchase products and services through social media.	3.08	1.38
I intend to satisfy my needs for products and services by informing myself and buying through social networks in the future.	3.12	1.41
I believe that shopping with the help of social networks was satisfactory.	3.03	1.33

Source: Authors research

The obtained results are relevant for giving answers that indicate that the pandemic of the COVID-19 virus has led to an increase in the level of use of social networks in the world and in the Republic of Serbia. As shown by the views of the respondents, the use of social networks for information purposes increased during the pandemic. Although the results in the world show that the degree of electronic commerce through social networks increased during the virus pandemic (Gu et al., 2021; Taha et al., 2021), this is not the case in the Republic of Serbia. Namely, it is true that social networks were used more than before the pandemic, but when it comes to shopping, they were mainly used to inform consumers. Therefore, the use of social networks for direct purchase of products and services, or redirection from social networks to the company's official website where this process would be realized, is not noticeable. When it comes to consumer loyalty, the results of the descriptive analysis indicate more favorable attitudes, since the value of the arithmetic mean in all cases is greater than 3.

The highest value of the arithmetic mean was achieved in the third statement: "I will be happy to recommend the products and services I buy, as on social networks, as well as in real life" (3,58). Positive word-of-mouth propaganda, confirmed by the previous statement, is one of the important indicators of consumer loyalty. Being satisfied with a company's products and services, consumers are ready to share their positive experience with others, which from a social network perspective can mean a very large population. In second place, according to the value of the arithmetic mean, is the statement "I am satisfied with the products and services I buy, including those I buy via social networks" (3.34), as well as "I follow the company whose products I buy on social networks" (3.31). Consumers are satisfied with products and services, which includes those products purchased via social networks. As a result, they are ready to follow the company on social networks in order to be informed about products and services, receive news in a timely manner

and further process of purchasing them. The results of the analysis further showed that consumers are ready to continue buying products and services on social networks, because they believe that everything is fine with such purchases. The latter is in line with the earlier point that consumers are more willing to believe in the objectivity of information about products and services on social networks, because such information is posted by other people (their family and friends). The degree of reliability of the statements used to form the variables is given in Table 4.

Table 4. Reliability of the statements

Variable	Cronbach alpha
Use of social networks	0.874
Consumer loyalty on social networks	0.902

Source: Authors research

In order to determine the influence of social networks on consumer loyalty, it is necessary to apply correlation and regression analysis. The correlation results are shown in the following table.

Table 6. Regression analysis

Model	R ²	β	F	sig.
Use of social networks → Consumer loyalty on social networks	0.395	0.629	50.298	0.000

Source: Authors research

Table 6. shows that a high level of correlation was achieved between the variables “Use of social networks” and “Loyalty of consumers on social networks”, since the correlation coefficient is 0.629. The coefficient of determination in the model (R²) is 0.395, which actually means that 39.5% of the variability of the dependent variable (consumer loyalty on social networks) is described by the independent variable (use of social networks). It is actually a high degree of influence, with the data being statistically significant at the 0.000 level. Therefore, it can be argued that there is a statistically significant and positive influence of social networks on the degree of consumer loyalty during the period of the COVID-19 virus pandemic. The obtained results are somewhat in line with expectations. Namely, younger consumers use social networks more for the purchase and information process, which is expected. However, the highest degree of use for the previously mentioned needs occurs among respondents aged 30 to 45 years, thus more than in the case of the 18 to 30 age group. As expected, social networks for the purchase process and information during the pandemic are used the least by the oldest group of respondents (over 55 years of age).

5. Discussion and conclusion

Based on the research carried out in the paper, a general conclusion can be drawn that in periods of crisis changes such as the pandemic of the COVID-19 virus, there has been an increased use of social networks in the world and in the Republic of Serbia. Due to numerous advantages and positive experiences, there is a statistically significant and positive impact of social networks on the degree of consumer loyalty during the period of the COVID-19 virus pandemic. Therefore, we can expect further

Table 5. Correlation analysis

Variables	Use of social networks	Consumer loyalty on social networks
Use of social networks	1	0.629
Consumer loyalty on social networks	0.629	1

Source: Authors research

As can be concluded from Table 5., in the case of both variables there is a high level of internal consistency, because in both cases a value greater than 0.7 is achieved. A high degree of internal reliability was achieved with the variable for measuring consumer loyalty on social networks (0.902). The obtained results justify further analysis. Cohen (2013) points out that the correlation coefficient found in the interval +/-0.5-1 can be marked as high (values +/- 0.1-0.29 are low, and values +/- 0.3- 0.49 moderate).

expansion of use of social networks for purchases in future, i.e., after the pandemic. Also, it was determined that there are no differences in the volume and intensity of buying and selling products through different social networks. According to all the above, an answer can be given to the main research hypothesis of this work, which is that in the period of changes caused by the crisis, in particular the COVID-19 pandemic, social networks represent a significant determinant of consumer loyalty.

After the theoretical and empirical analysis of the impact of social networks during the COVID-19 pandemic on building consumer loyalty in the world was carried out, the obtained comparative results showed that in the world, parallel to the pandemic, there was an increased use of Internet services and information and communication technologies for various needs, including electronic commerce and electronic payment systems. The degree of use of social networks has significantly increased in the world, in addition to everything else, due to the need to purchase and be informed about products and services. The official statistics of the Republic of Serbia also show a one percent increase in the number of users of social networks, which indicates that the same trend existed in our country. However, it is noticeable that in the Republic of Serbia, during the pandemic, social networks are used more for information about various products and services, than for the actual purchase of products and services. In this regard, the usual methods of electronic commerce that take place on the official websites of sellers are still used. The main limitation of this research is related to the local character of the sample of respondents, mostly located in Kosovo and Metohija. To a certain extent, this creates the possibility of theoretical and practical implications of the obtained results on the complete objectivity of the

performed analyses. However, certain coincides with the results of similar research in the world indicate a significant trend of correlation between consumer loyalty and the degree of use of social networks in periods of crisis changes, both in the world and in our country.

Recommendations for some future research focusing on the influence of social networks on consumer loyalty would be aimed at analyzing the possibility of a more permanent correlation between consumer loyalty to companies on social networks and the willingness of companies to interactively communicate with consumers through social networks to create a personalized offer that recognizes and integrates all consumer needs. This indicates the need for this kind of business policy of the company to be used intensively even in periods that are not characterized by crisis changes.

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