
PLACE AND ROLE OF MARKETING COMMUNICATION IN RURAL AREAS IN CENTRAL SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

Social media is a new emerging field in agricultural marketing, and its use is rapidly evolving, upgrading, and expanding. The aim of this study is to determine the attitudes of agricultural product producers in central Serbia regarding the use of social media in their business, with a focus on identifying the perception of the promotional potential of social networks themselves. The research included a final sample of 200 respondents. The basic hypothesis in this paper is that the internet as a technology for e-commerce, information, and advertising has great potential to improve the position of farmers and producers, but it is not fully utilized. The majority of agricultural producers still use Facebook as one of the main promotional channels.

Introduction

The importance of communication, both at the individual and business entity levels, is reflected in the fact that social acceptance is precisely based on the successful conduct

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of the communication process, and in the context of a business entity, successful market performance. In order for a business entity to ensure that its products and services are successfully sold, it must communicate with its current and potential customers, offering its products through messages that must be informative and substantive, tailored to each specific target group in order for the products and services to meet the needs and desires of customers.

The role of social media in agribusiness and advertising agricultural products is becoming increasingly significant in today's digital age (Dašić, et al, 2023a:). Social media enables direct communication with consumers, brand expansion, and product promotion on a global level (Felix, et al., 2016). Social media allows agribusiness to communicate directly with consumers. This is particularly important for small producers and local farmers who can use platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to promote their products, share information about their origin, quality, and production methods, thus building trust with consumers (Raketić, 2022). Through active presence on social media, agribusiness can increase the visibility of its brand among consumers. Regularly publishing content such as product images, recipes, usage tips, or stories about farms and producers can attract the attention of new consumers and raise awareness about the brand. Social media has transformed the marketing landscape, as businesses leverage social media to educate, engage, and entice their current clientele. Social media marketing empowers business firms to generate perceived brand equity activities and build the notion among consumers to continue using the firms' products and services (Yang, et al., 2022).

Additionally, they offer various opportunities for advertising and promoting agricultural products. Through targeted advertising on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, agribusiness can target specific demographic groups and target markets, increasing advertising efficiency and return on investment. Social media also allow agribusiness to educate consumers about the importance of healthy eating, sustainable production, environmental protection, and other topics relevant to the agricultural industry. By publishing informative articles, video content, and interactive posts, agribusiness can raise consumer awareness and promote its values. Finally, but not less importantly, social media enable agribusiness to track current industry trends, consumer reactions to new products and campaigns, and to receive direct feedback from consumers through comments, ratings, and surveys. This allows agribusiness to quickly respond to market needs and improve its products and services. The digital economy has its own set of business characteristics that necessitate the creation of new company models in order to attain strategic marketing excellence. It has been confirmed that half of all people on the planet use social media. Businesses may enhance their business intelligence and obtain market insights with the use of social media. Businesses may utilize social media as a flexible tool for marketing strategies, to increase engagement, to create a communication plan, and to track results. Marketing strategies in social media is a strategy to communicate brands, services, products, and ideas (Rosário & Dias, 2023).

Literature review

Marketing communication encompasses all promotional activities including advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, the Internet, public relations, and communications with the functional elements of the marketing mix. Marketing communication comprises all elements of the organizational marketing mix that encourage exchange by establishing common significance with consumers or clients (Cheng Chu Chan, et al., 2023; Pantić et al., 2022; Meliawati, et al., 2023). Global agriculture is expanding and becoming more intensive, which are significant developments. In every industry, including agriculture, firms need to communicate strategically (Ruban & Yashalova, 2022). The way farmers obtain information and interact with customers has been greatly impacted by the Internet. Agriculturalists may now interact with their audience members through free, almost immediate channels because to the usage of user-generated media, particularly social media (White, et al., 2014).

Social media technologies have given rise to influencers who shape the purchasing behaviors of their followers (peer consumers), thus enabling consumer-initiated social commerce (Wu, et al., 2022). Social media and social networks are often associated terms but have several significant differences. The term “social media” encompasses a broader spectrum of digital platforms and tools that enable interaction, content sharing, and communication among users (Ibáñez-Sánchez, et al., 2022). This includes social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, as well as blogs, forums, video-sharing websites like YouTube, and other online platforms for information exchange. The term “social networks” specifically refers to online platforms or applications designed to allow users to connect, communicate, share content, and interact with other users. Social networks typically have a profile for each user, enable friend connections (following, being followed), posting status updates, sharing photos, videos, and messaging. In summary, while social media is a general term that encompasses various online platforms for interaction and content sharing, social networks are a specific type of social media that allows users to connect and communicate in a personalized manner (Varela-Neira, et al., 2023).

The Internet has proven its capabilities to many individuals and organizations in the promotion of their products, but also in other business segments (Mihic, et al., 2023). Among other things, the goals of the Internet in any business are to expand the business to the goal of reaching the largest number of customers currently possible and find the best distribution channels (Razaque Chhachhar & Hassan, 2013; Dašić & Jeličić, 2016). Putting the Internet into the function of e-business implies exactly the aforementioned. Promotion, that is, presentation of the offer of the goods in a way that will attract customers (Tasić & Đokić, 2022) is directly related to this. Social networks have taken the central role in modern society during the last two decades. They are part of the basic communication, entertainment and various other online activities (the Covid-19 era has enhanced this even more), and as such, have become an integral part of marketing strategies for companies (Dašić, et al., 2024).

In the study performed by Kocan and associates (2017), the factors that have a great impact on (un)successful business of agricultural households in Serbia were analyzed. The authors emphasize how crucial it is to implement preventative measures in order to shield crops from the damaging consequences of climate change. Apart from the aforementioned, it is necessary to give small and medium-sized farming households access to more finance, expertise, and technology.

Serbia has all the natural, cultural and social preconditions for healthy food development and production, such as various biodiversity, noticeable agricultural resources, a large percentage of active agricultural origin, traditional farming methods, limited use of chemicals, etc. (Dašić et al., 2020; Ilić et al., 2022; Leković, et al., 2022). The reasons why this potential has not yet been used to this day may be found in the inadequate and insufficient Internet promotion of domestic agricultural products (Dašić, et al., 2022).

The agriculture industry may use a variety of techniques to promote its products and services on social media. One tactic is sponsored content, when ads are shown prominently next to users' normal browsing activities. Because they are made for shorter content and have sizable user populations, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are frequently utilized for sponsored content advertising (Ju, et al., 2021).

Similarly, social media can be used to interact directly with customers and potential customers (Pikelj, 2020; Li, et al., 2021). When consumers express interest in their goods and services, the industry may respond quickly by posting comments and answering questions. The use of social media and the internet has changed consumer behavior as well as corporate operations. Social and digital marketing offers significant opportunities to organizations through lower costs, improved brand awareness and increased sales (Bushara, et al., 2023 ; Dwivedi, et al., 2021; Dašić, et al, 2023b).

Research Methodology:

Descriptive research on social media was used as the foundation for this study since the researcher was interested in learning how people who fit the study's criteria used social media. The study framework is defined by the terms social networks and Internet marketing. These days, social media plays a significant role in online marketing. The purpose of the relationship between these crucial terms and the previous section is only to emphasize how significant they are; the study's main objective is to find out how Central Serbian farmers see social media marketing in general. In keeping with the foregoing, the main goal of this essay is to show how social networks may be used to promote agricultural products.

Our objectives were to ascertain the extent to which respondents were aware of the benefits of using social networks for Internet promotion, the specific social networks they utilized for product marketing and sales, and their level of familiarity with these platforms. Two hundred agricultural farm owners and holders made up our sample group. In 2024, the research was conducted in Central Serbia in the months of February

and March. Both primary and secondary data sources were employed, and the degree of presentation of the study results was built around a descriptive analysis.

H1: Agricultural producers from central Serbia are not utilizing social media platforms to their full potential for marketing.

H2: Agricultural producers from central Serbia mostly use the social network Facebook to promote their products

The Sample

A total of 200 respondents—180 men and 20 women—submitted the right form of replies to the survey, which was distributed to 226 addresses. This means that there were 90% more men than women among the 200 respondents. From Table 1, we can see that the largest number of respondents, 43%, are between 30 and 40 years old, while only 6 respondents, or 4%, are over 50 years old.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents

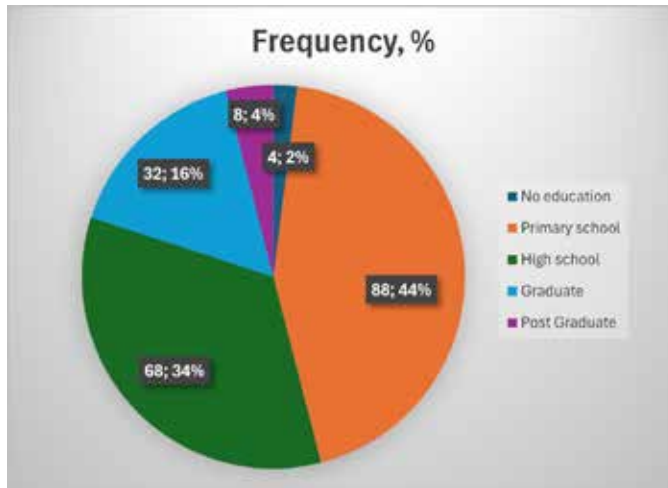
Age (Yrs)	Frequency	%
20 – 30	58	29
30 – 40	86	43
40 – 50	50	25
≥ 50	6	4
Gender		
Male	180	90
Female	20	10

Results and discussion

Education and training play a crucial role in the success and sustainability of agricultural producers. By investing in education, farmers gain the knowledge and skills needed to adopt modern techniques, improve productivity, and mitigate risks. From Figure 1, we notice that 4 respondents, or 2%, answered “no education,” which is a disappointing statistic. The largest number of respondents, 88 or 44%, completed primary school. On the other hand, it is encouraging to see that 68 respondents, or 34%, completed high school, while 32 respondents, or 16%, completed college or university.

Furthermore, education fosters a deeper understanding of sustainable farming practices, environmental stewardship, and efficient resource management, contributing to long-term agricultural viability and resilience. Overall, continuous education and training are key drivers of growth and competitiveness in the agricultural sector, ensuring a brighter future for producers and sustainable food production for generations to come.

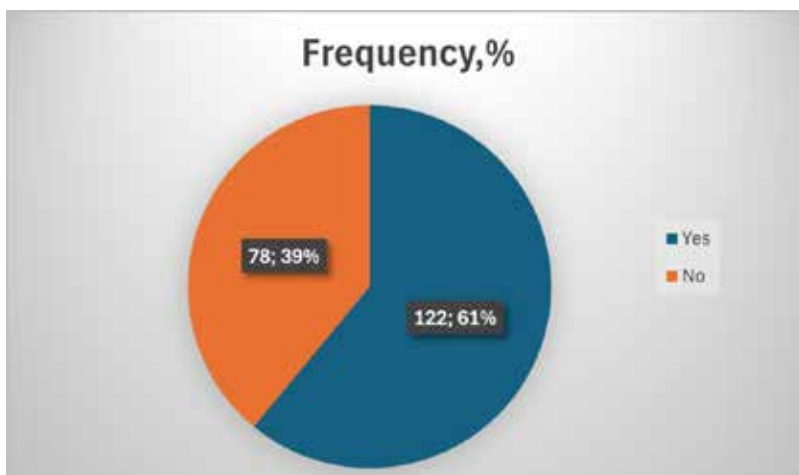
Figure 1. The education of the respondents



Source: Authors

The phenomenon of social networks refers to the pervasive impact of online platforms that enable people to connect, interact, and share information virtually. Social networks offer a multitude of benefits, such as enhancing communication, fostering collaboration, and promoting cultural exchange. They provide platforms for expressing opinions, sharing experiences, and building relationships with like-minded individuals. Businesses leverage social networks for marketing, customer engagement, and brand promotion, tapping into vast audiences and targeting specific demographics. From Figure 2, we can see that 122 respondents, or 61%, use one or more social networks in their business, while 78 respondents, or 39%, reported that they do not use any social networks for business or promoting their agricultural products.

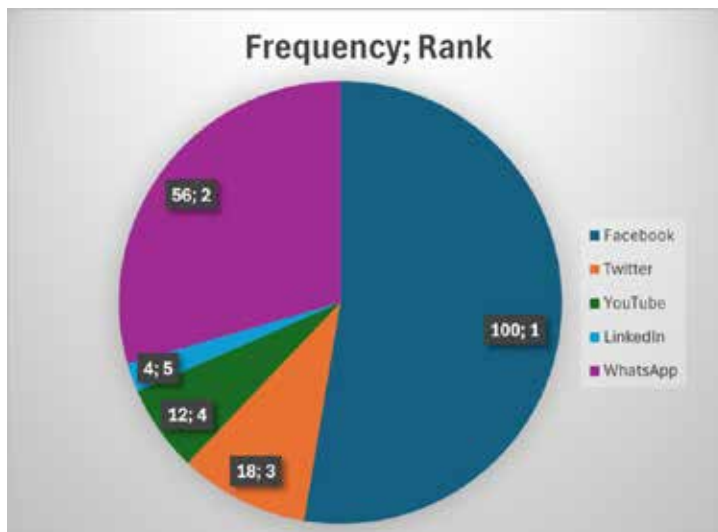
Figure 2. Do you have account on social media?



Source: Authors

Facebook is the most popular social networking site on the planet and a vital tool in the lives of users. Particularly on Facebook, individuals frequently form business groups that enable them to transact business. A marketplace is a type of organization that enables users to engage in consumer-to-consumer business transactions. Facebook users may form marketplace groups in which to sell their goods. Social media platforms are widely used by both developed and developing nations to make purchases of goods. COVID-19 has also had a major effect on consumers' decision to buy things in marketplaces. Moreover, popular social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, are used by marketers to draw attention to their products and services and reach out to the customers (Ebrahimi, et al., 2022). The social network with the largest number of users in 2024 is Facebook, over 3 billion, followed by Whatsapp, Youtube, Instagram, etc. (Shewale, 2024). And the data from Figure 3 show us that the largest number of agricultural producers from central Serbia, 100 of them, use Facebook.

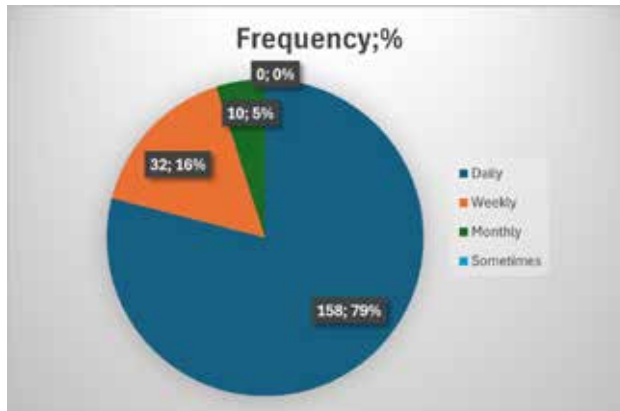
Figure 3. Which social media account do you use?



Source: Authors

Recent research shows that in 2012, people spent an average of 90 minutes per day on social media, while data for 2023 indicates that individuals spend as much as 151 minutes using social networks throughout the day (Statista, 2024). This data is also confirmed by the results from Figure 4, where the vast majority of respondents, 158 or 79%, answered that they use one of the social networks every day.

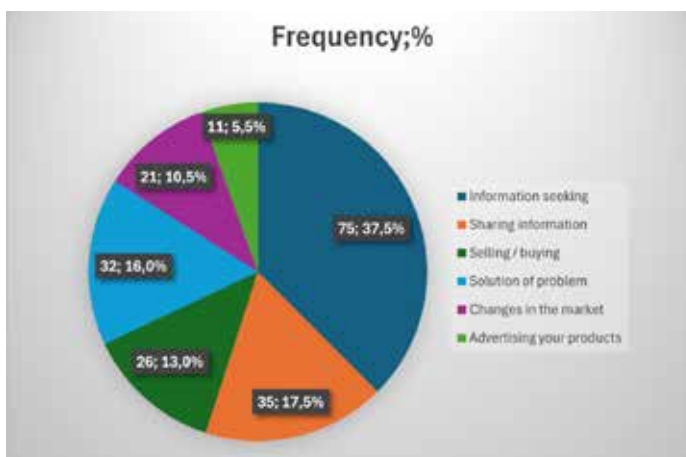
Figure 4. Frequently of visiting Social Media



Source: Authors

Web 2.0 along with user generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) allowed for fast spreading of collaboration tools, such as weblogs or social networking sites or collaborative communities among employees all over the world. The question that obviously arises is: what makes users to adopt social media for their work? (Leftheriotis, Giannakos, 2014). One possible answer to this question is: “87% of buyers think that social media helps them make shopping decisions.43% of customers learn about new products through social media networks.66% of customers buy after seeing other people’s social media posts.71% of people are more likely to buy something based on social media referrals.A successful social selling program leads to increased pipeline, better win rates, and up to 48% larger deals” (Manich, 2024). From Figure 5, we see that the largest number of agricultural producers use social media to search for or share information about their work, and then to solve some of their problems or to sell and buy.

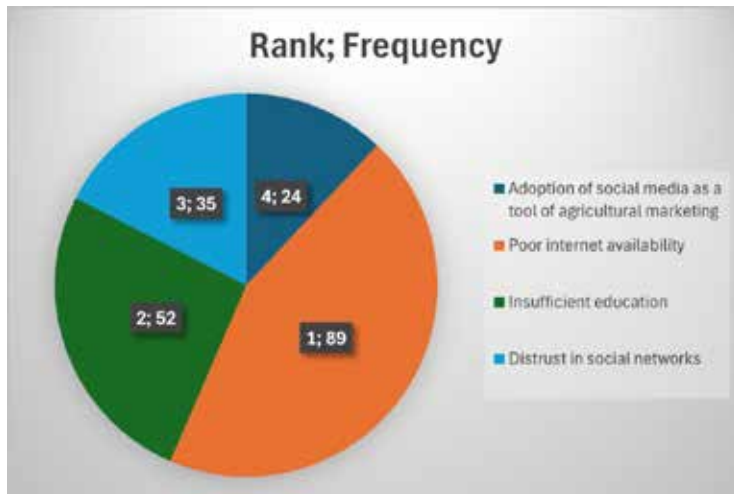
Figure 5. Use of social media in agricultural marketing for:



Source: Authors

The need to follow and integrate modern market communications into business processes is a prerequisite for improving business and providing higher quality services to consumers. The foundation of successful business is innovation, and communication becomes the primary means for profit growth and ensuring a good market position (Stevanović, et al., 2022). Media professionals and providers have a special responsibility, being challenged to take on a role as multipliers for awareness raising and human rights education (Bauer, et al., 2024). The use of social media by agricultural producers can bring various challenges and issues. One of the primary concerns is misinformation and the spread of rumors or false information that can harm a producer's reputation or mislead consumers. Privacy and data security are also significant concerns. Sharing too much information about farming practices or personal details on social media can expose producers to risks such as theft, fraud, or misuse of data (Vlajić, 2023). From Figure 6, we observe that 35 respondents answered that they do not use social media in their business due to lack of trust in them.

Figure 6. Issues with social media marketing for agriculture



Source: Authors

Conclusions

Social networks have taken the central role in modern society during the last two decades. They are part of the basic communication, entertainment and various other online activities (the Covid-19 era has enhanced this even more), and as such, have become an integral part of marketing strategies for companies (Dašić, et al., 2021). Maintaining a favorable image for the company is one of the key objectives of communication, which is a purpose-driven, goal-directed activity (Erickson, et al. 2011). Social networks are an appealing option for the marketing and sale of agricultural products because they offer efficient means of swiftly and affordably contacting a large number of potential buyers. The ease with which items could be ordered online and through social media

during the Covid-19 outbreak immediately demonstrates how crucial it is to use these channels into marketing plans.

Social media platforms provide direct communication between users and service providers, clients, information exchange hubs, etc. Social media is being used by farmers to boost production at every level. Social media is becoming into a potent instrument that links millions of people worldwide. Social media is being used by farmers because it allows them to communicate virtually with other farmers, agribusiness, and agriexperts. Social media in agricultural marketing helps to solve some of the issues in the field to some level. Social media's primary goals are awareness-raising and information dissemination.

Traditional media and social media are quite different. To exchange information, social media users are starting their own communities, blogs, pages, and organizations. Additionally, they are buying and selling agricultural goods in this group. You may accomplish this by sending links, movies, photographs, and more. The creation of networks and the sale of farmers' goods are made easier by this information exchange. Information on agricultural marketing is covered in a lot of blogs.

As in the previous similar study (Dašić, et al., 2023b), based on the results of the research in this paper, it can be said that agricultural producers from Central Serbia recognize social networks as an important way of promotion, but still not all respondents think so, considering that not all of them have personal or business accounts within these networks, the first hypothesis is confirmed by this. Also, from the results we can see that Facebook is still the most popular social network, thus confirming the hypothesis "agricultural producers from central Serbia mostly use the social network Facebook to promote their products".

Limitations and recommendations

This study's primary limitations are its large dependence on qualitative interpretations and sample size. Furthermore, the findings indicate that just a tiny percentage of central Serbian farmers have a website, which may be one way to enhance future marketing and sales.

Conflict of interests

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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