

## DIGITAL MARKETING COMMUNICATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: EVIDENCE FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS

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### Accepted

13. 9. 2020

### Revised

2. 11. 2020

### Published

21. 12. 2020

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**Abstract** Digital marketing has made significant progress in recent years, in all countries, both developed and developing. Many local and international companies have largely placed their marketing activities in the digital environment. Now, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it even more important for many companies and consumers to conduct marketing, buying and selling activities through social media. Like companies, consumers are changing their buying behaviors by focusing more on social media, from which they are providing the necessary and sufficient information about all the products and services that are marketed online. This paper is of particular importance because it addresses the issue of digital marketing activities in the Western Balkans region, specifically the behavior of consumers from countries of this region on social media. From the results of the paper it can be concluded that consumers from these countries are quite engaged in social media, where they receive the necessary information for different products and services, follow the activities of different companies, etc.

### UDC

339.138:659.23(497)

### Keywords

digital marketing, communication, social media, Western Balkans, internet.

## 1 Introduction

Digital marketing began to take shape in the 1990s and rapidly evolved in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In its earlier stages, the objective was to deliver the right message to the right audience. More people use the digital devices first, instead of making visits to the stores physically, before making a decision to buy. An effective use of digital marketing especially social media can significantly lower the cost over traditional marketing. In addition, a digital platform facilitates the interaction between the brand and customers (Hudson et al., 2016; Gati et al., 2018; Gillpatrick, 2019). The use of social media and the internet has increased as a means for creating and sharing information, thoughts, ideas and relationships online (Podvorica and Ukaj, 2019).

The internet has become an important element of our daily lives, as it is used in many activities, such as shopping, banking, studying, researching, storing data, etc. (Ovčak Kos, 2019). The rapid development of the internet enabled radical changes in the field of marketing as well. *Mahmutović* (2011) emphasizes a few advantageous features of the internet, which lead to positive changes in the usage of marketing, making marketing more efficient and effective. Indeed, some of the internet features have changed traditional marketing in thorough and crucial ways. These advantages include easy and fast access to information; shifting energy from firms to customers; reducing the impact of geographical location; eliminating time zones so time is no longer a limiting factor in communication; the ability to make technological adjustments (personalization) to websites for clients so as to better target advertisements; segmentation of the market by firms at the client level (i.e. a market); easier collection of information, its processing and memorization; and, creation of databases which support high quality strategic decision making.

Despite a rapid expansion of IT and internet into developing countries, the introduction and spread of digital marketing to these countries has been slower. The primary reasons for this are multi factorial and include lower overall levels of education, less experience in traditional marketing practices, etc. In particular, overcoming the constructs of traditional marketing enables businesses to focus on digital marketing or communication through social media (Smith and Zook, 2016; Andaç et al., 2016; Kaur and Sandhu, 2017; Finne and Gronroos, 2017; Dahiya and Gayatri, 2018). Communication in traditional marketing is more static while that in digital marketing is more dynamic due to the use of social media platforms, in

particular Facebook. Also, communication through social media reduces the direct personal impact because here communication is done through the internet and not in a physical place.

Information and communication technologies are not only changing business practices significantly but are also offering new business opportunities. They also raise online privacy concerns (Anić et al., 2016). *Data protection laws and the concept of privacy are subject to multiple challenges created through the advancement of new technologies such as Big Data, Digital Identity, Biometrics and Social Media sites. Such technological changes, though extremely useful to society in general, create problems for protecting the privacy of the individual. Customer information can be controlled, accumulated and used in the digital marketing process without customer awareness. Customer privacy is important because it relates to perceived customer value, satisfaction, and loyalty* (Weber, 2015).

The aim of this study is to answer two research questions. First, do individual consumers in Western Balkan countries express positive or negative opinions about products and services which are advertised in groups of local or international companies on social media. And second, are there significant differences in consumer activities on social media between these countries. In terms of methodology, Spearman's correlation has been used to achieve empirical results. Primary data were collected from interviewing 1,200 respondents from four Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia. This paper has a special contribution because it is one of the few papers that studies digital marketing communication in Western Balkans countries. The shortcomings of this paper lie in the fact that not all Western Balkan countries are included. Since the results do not include Montenegro and Serbia the sample size could be larger, which in turn would achieve more optimal results.

## 2 Literature review

The literature concerning digital marketing involves many dimensions and applications that can be associated with this term. Synonyms such as e-marketing, online marketing, e-business or e-commerce are easily identifiable and fall into this sphere of study. *Digital marketing is a very important aspect in overall communication between the consumer and business because it is able to reach a large number of potential customers simultaneously. The potential customers viewing the digital marketing are instantaneously exposed*

*to the product brand being advertised.*

*Through social media and other digital activities, institutions and businesses can transact business internationally, thereby extending their reach to consumers far beyond their country of origin (Mazurek et al., 2019). Accordingly, they are subject to the process of digital transformation which is characterised by a fusion of advanced technologies and the integration of physical and digital systems, the predominance of innovative business models and new processes, and the creation of smart products and services (Jurčević et al., 2020).*

Smart phones have greatly influenced the development of social media platforms in particular and digital marketing in general. They have grown at rapid rates, dramatically changing the buying process, allowing the consumers to access price and product information in real time, and also allowing the businesses to constantly recall and update their followers with information. Many businesses are now putting Quick Response codes QR (which are two-dimensional codes) together with products for individuals, to access the company's website or services with their smart phones. Retailers use QR codes to facilitate customer interaction with brands by linking the code to brand websites, promotions, product information, or any other content activated by the mobile. In addition, the real-time use of bids in the mobile advertising industry is high and continues to intensify because of its value for internet browsing (Ryu, 2013; Mostafa, 2014).

It should be emphasised that there is a lack of literature on digital marketing communication between companies and consumers. Recently, social media has greatly influenced the development of digital communication between these elements. Authors such as *Biloš* and *Galić* (2016) point out that companies see digital marketing as a process of making offers, setting prices, distributing and promoting, all with the goal of satisfying customers' needs in the digital market.

Many companies are using social media, especially Facebook, to influence consumers. According to the authors *Floreddu* and *Cabiddu* (2016), and *Gvili* and *Levy* (2018), the use of social media has many benefits, both from the point of view of companies and from individual consumers. Most companies today prefer social media platforms to meet customer expectations because through these media the needs of consumers are more easily understood, and thanks to social media valuable/original, innovative, and more accurate information is disseminated

(Khandelwal et al., 2018).

Moreover, it is generally accepted that digitalization reduces marginal costs of production and distribution on the one hand, while allowing for wider access to global trade, on the other hand (Franc, 2019). *Social media has a tremendous advantage for retailers, allowing them to easily direct customers from a physical store to their online store. Due to its popularity and digital marketing capabilities social media has also provided an opportunity for companies to conduct business solely online, thus avoiding the significant costs associated with the traditional brick and mortar shops. One potential drawback of digital marketing however, is that due to the fact it is highly dependent on the internet, it may not be accessible in certain areas or consumers may have poor internet connections (Whiteside, 2016; Hari-Adi et al., 2017; Kacprzak and Dzięwanowska, 2019).*

Individual consumers use social media platforms not only to make friends but also for business purposes (Kucukemiroglu and Kara, 2015, Davies et al., 2016; Ludwing and De Ruyter, 2016; Beqaj et al., 2019). Consumers also use social media to express opinions about various products and services (Ho, 2017). In general, authors *Whiting and Williams (2013), Erkan and Evans (2016), Cabosky (2016), Wang et al. (2016), Marčić et al. (2016), Du Plessis (2017)* claim that individual consumers use social media in order to communicate and express opinions about products as well as to receive different opinions from others about the various products and services traded in the digital market.

There are several studies that have analysed the impact of cultural differences on the use of social media platforms, specifically Facebook. *Ko et al. (2016), Kim et al. (2011), Ruleman (2012), Khan and Vong (2014)* in their papers came to the conclusion that the use of the internet and social media differs from country to country. In some countries, the internet and social media are used more to search for information, while in others, the internet and social media are used to create friendships and link people together. Some countries, on the other hand, are more likely to use the internet and social media for entertainment. Cultural differences have a significant impact upon the way social media is used by individual consumers. According to *Bartosik-Purgat (2019)*, for users from individualistic countries social media are mainly a source of information, while for the people from the collectivistic countries, socialisation and self-presentation were the main motivators. Based on this theoretical evidence developed to date, our research goal was to take these findings

a step further to determine whether there is a difference in these four Western Balkan countries with regard to how social media is primarily used.

The knowledge obtained through IT contributes to improving the productivity in the businesses of developing economies. Among other things, it can reach a larger share of the young population. Although this opens up great business opportunities, it poses challenges as well. The advantage is that a young population represents a huge chunk of potential consumers and users of digital marketing. However, a number of studies examining digital marketing have discerned that the transition from traditional to digital marketing has not been entirely smooth and indeed, has been associated with some negative impacts. For instance, an increase of internet channels is associated not only with lower pay for the sales' agents, but often places their very jobs in jeopardy (Diaz et al., 2015). Although internet channels enhance customer relations trust, it does not necessarily follow that they have an immediate impact on changing consumer behaviour and decision making (Tojib and Khajehzadeh, 2017).

Technology in itself cannot be the sole driver of digital marketing. It requires business ethics to be enforced by the legal authorities, who must aggressively prosecute frauds and fake advertising, and otherwise take appropriate measures to verify the accuracy of information. Such steps are important in reducing the mistrust in digital marketing. Opportunities will continue to abound, however, fuelled largely by the growing population, especially among the youth, which is captivated by the use of IT (Kaur and Sandhu, 2017; Durai and King, 2015). The effectiveness of technology, however, depends in large measure upon how different actors employing it, such as employers, workers, competitors, and consumers adopt or embrace it (Jones and Karsten, 2008). In less developed countries, for instance, capturing the true impact that information and communications technology is having on the market place is a difficult task, among others, due to rapid overflow of information, which in turn makes the decision making by businesses tougher. This raises the necessity of selecting and grouping the relevant information into a value-added chain system, and building a digital platform that would enable its business users to better understand the consumer demands and improve the operational performance of the company (Barua et al., 2004). It should be noted that there is a dearth of literature on digital marketing activities in the Western Balkans.

During the preparation of this paper we have not encountered sufficient literature for this scientific field. Accordingly, this is the main limitation of this paper.

### 3 Methodology

The term Western Balkans includes six countries that are in the process of joining the European Union. These countries are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia (British Council, 2018; Qorraj and Jusufi, 2018; Jusufi and Ukaj, 2020; Jusufi and Ajdarpašić, 2020). The region is considered as the poorest part of the European continent. According to Qorraj and Jusufi (2019), poor industrial performance in the Western Balkans may be attributed to previous conflicts, delayed transition, poor economic management, and the so-called informal economy. The loss of markets in these countries seriously disrupted commercial and economic links among several neighbours and their main industrial partners, not to mention international production.

Table 1: Population and internet users statistics

Western Balkans Countries	Population in 2019	Internet users
Serbia	8,733,407	6,325,816
North Macedonia	2,086,720	1,583,315
Kosovo	1,907,592	1,523,373
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3,501,774	2,828,846
Albania	2,938,428	2,160,000
Montenegro	629,355	439,624

Source: Internet world statistics, 2020

The hypotheses of this paper are:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Individual consumers in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia express their opinions in social media platforms about products or services.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** The purpose of using social media varies in Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The primary data for this paper were gathered in October, November and December 2019 from a total of 1200 respondents from four Western Balkan countries: Albania (n=300), Bosnia and Herzegovina (n=300), Kosovo (n=300), and North Macedonia (n=300). It has been impossible to obtain primary data from Montenegro and Serbia. The authors of the paper have contacted research assistants from the four countries analysed in this paper. Questionnaires were given to these research assistants and these assistants during the 3-month period interviewed individual customers. These assistants are representatives of local companies that conduct research and surveys in these countries. People who participated in this research were individual consumers who use social media.

These individual customers ranged from 20 to 50 years old. Most of them were from the capitals (Tirana, Sarajevo, Prishtina and Skopje) of these countries and their suburbs. The selection of these respondents was done randomly. Their ethnicity is: Albanian (Albania), Bosnian (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Albanian and Serbian (Kosovo), Macedonian and Albanian (North Macedonia). Meanwhile, their religious affiliations were: Catholic and Islamic (Albania), Islamic (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Islamic and Orthodox (Kosovo), Orthodox and Islamic (North Macedonia). Respondents' educational level was secondary (secondary education) and higher (Bachelor).

Our questionnaire consisted of 13 questions. These individual consumers were asked to declare the reasons for using social media or digital marketing, their knowledge of digital marketing, what they are looking for from businesses or well-known brands on social media, etc. The interviews with the respondents lasted half an hour.

**Table 2: Proportion of platform users to the total population of the country**

Western Balkans Countries	YouTube subscribers	LinkedIn followers	Twitter followers	Facebook fans
Serbia	1.21%	0.22%	0.4%	9.06%
North Macedonia	0.01%	0.28%	0.001%	2.34%
Kosovo	0.019%	0.25%	0.022%	11.52%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.004%	0.13%	0.014%	4.97%
Albania	0.001%	0.33%	0.011%	5.50%
Montenegro	0.007%	0.06%	0.489%	7.50%

Source: Levkov et al., 2015

The gender structure of the sample consisted of 160 males and 140 females for each country. This mixture of two data sets, apart from general assessment on IT use, enabled us to extract a state or trend of digital marketing by the consumers. Secondary data were quantitative, which were used to analyse the traffic sources and purpose of using the IT, while primary data were mainly qualitative that were grouped and transformed into quantitative ones for statistical analysis. As ITC and digital marketing are fast changing sectors, the aim from available data was to find an approximate measure to help better understand consumer behaviour from a digital marketing stand point in a given recent time. Based upon secondary data ascertained from internet and social media use, we decided to weight the gender structure in favour of a higher percentage of males after observing the secondary data on internet and social media use. Age structure was also restricted between 20 and 50 years as this range was identified as the most active users. The sample also included almost all regions of these countries.

**Table 3: Distribution of sample survey by gender and age in Albania**

Albania	Age						
Gender	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-50	Total
Male	30	28	31	27	29	15	160
Female	26	22	20	17	25	30	140
Total	56	50	51	44	54	45	300

Source: Author's own survey data, 2019

**Table4: Distribution of sample survey by gender and age in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Bosnia and Herzegovina	Age						
Gender	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-50	Total
Male	30	24	19	38	23	26	160
Female	34	20	22	28	17	19	140
Total	64	44	41	66	40	45	300

Source: Author's own survey data, 2019

**Table 5: Distribution of sample survey by gender and age in Kosovo**

Kosovo	Age						
Gender	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-50	Total
Male	32	29	27	31	29	12	160
Female	28	23	27	30	22	10	140
Total	60	52	54	61	51	22	300

Source: Author's own survey data, 2019

**Table6: Distribution of sample survey by gender and age in North Macedonia**

North Macedonia	Age						
Gender	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-50	Total
Male	28	25	20	35	30	22	160
Female	25	25	18	33	19	20	140
Total	53	50	38	68	49	42	300

Source: Author's own survey data, 2019

Regarding employment status, young respondents are students and recent graduates, while others have secondary and graduate education and work both in the public and private sectors.

**Table 7: Variables and their categories**

Variables	Categories
Purpose of using digital marketing (social media)	1-Get acquainted with certain products of companies; 2-Find or make friends; 3-Communicate with relatives; 4-Entertainment
Knowledge about digital marketing	1-Excellent; 2- Good; 3-Fair; 4-Poor; 5-Very poor
Express positive comments about products or services in Facebook	1-Always; 2-Often; 3-Sometimes; 4-Rarely; 5-Never
Express negative comments about products or services in Facebook	1-Always; 2-Often; 3-Sometimes; 4-Rarely; 5-Never
Using promotions of certain companies for products or services	1-Always; 2-Often; 3-Sometimes; 4-Rarely; 5-Never
Information about specific products or services	1-Always; 2-Often; 3-Sometimes; 4-Rarely; 5-Never
Taking part in contests on social media	1-Always; 2-Often; 3-Sometimes; 4-Rarely; 5-Never
Following the profiles of companies that offer advantages such as discounts	1-Always; 2-Often; 3-Sometimes; 4-Rarely; 5-Never
Being a fan of companies that are active on social media	1-Always; 2-Often; 3-Sometimes; 4-Rarely; 5-Never
Being a fan of a international brand in social media	1-Always; 2-Often; 3-Sometimes; 4-Rarely; 5-Never
Opportunity to recognize innovative brands	1-Strongly Agree; 2-Agree; 3-Neutral; 4-Disagree; 5-Strongly Disagree
Great information opportunities for any innovation of business world	1-Strongly Agree; 2-Agree; 3-Neutral; 4-Disagree; 5-Strongly Disagree
Exchange of ideas regarding the quality of products and services	1-Always; 2-Often; 3-Sometimes; 4-Rarely; 5-Never

Source: Author's own survey data, 2019

Our study consisted of a relatively small number of consumers. Therefore, we utilized Spearman's rank correlation coefficient in order to examine the strength of the correlation between variables. We also employed the Likert scale to study the categories of variables. The individuals in the study expressed how frequently they engage in various activities.

#### 4 Results

The consumers studied are people who rely upon social media to make their purchases. Accordingly, social media has a huge impact on their purchasing decisions. They obtain information about products and services pertaining to local and international companies which are advertised in the groups created by these companies on social media. These products vary, depending on customer preferences. Initially, we used the Chi-Square Test of Homogeneity to determine the homogeneity of responses by countries.

**Table 8: Chi-Square Test of Homogeneity**

	<b>Value</b>	<b>Asymp.Significance</b>
Perason Chi-Square	8.461	0.036
Likelihood Ratio	8.480	0.029
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.391	0.024
Number of valid cases	14	-

Source: own study

As can be seen from the table, the data derived from this test are significant. They show that the answers of the respondents are not homogeneous, but instead differ from country to country. In the following table we present the results of the Spearman correlation.

**Table 9: Correlation Estimation Results**

Digital Marketing activities	Social media			
	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	North Macedonia
	R	R	R	R
Purpose of using digital marketing (social media)	0.276*	0.215*	0.211*	0.189*
Knowledge about digital marketing	0.144*	0.094	0.249*	0.210*
Express positive comments about products or services	0.188*	0.169*	0.154*	0.195*
Express negative comments about products or services	0.076	0.126*	0.096	0.113*
Using promotions of certain companies for products or services	0.129*	0.133*	0.215*	0.179*
Information about specific products or services	0.182*	0.044	0.214*	0.193*
Taking part in contest on social media	0.178*	0.109*	0.204*	0.211*
Following the profiles of companies that offer advantages such discounts	0.125*	0.036	0.165*	0.077
Being a fan of companies that are active on social media	0.054	0.048	0.119*	0.091
Being a fan of an international brand in social media	0.128*	0.018	0.116*	0.077
Opportunity to recognize innovative brands	0.236*	0.111*	0.251*	0.183*
Great information opportunities for any innovation of business world	0.069	0.077	0.080	0.114*
Exchange of ideas regarding the quality of products and services	0.127*	0.120*	0.174*	0.097

R – Spearman Indicator; \* Correlation is significant at the level of  $p < 0.05$

Source: own study

In her study, *Bartosik-Purgat* (2019), utilizing the Spearman Correlation, analysed the digital marketing or social media usage by consumers in their communications with companies in certain countries of Europe, Asia and the United States. Her results showed few differences among these countries in relation to the use of social media for interpersonal and marketing communication purposes. We have followed a similar approach, used similar variables, but our research instead has focused on four countries of the Western Balkans.

We obtained interesting results in response to the question concerning individuals' purpose in using digital marketing. These results reveal that individual consumers from these countries are heavily dependent upon digital marketing or social media in which digital business activities take place. A large number of them, 60 percent in Kosovo, 56 percent in North Macedonia, 50 percent in Albania and about 45 percent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, use social media extensively to get acquainted with certain products of companies, to learn what benefits various companies offer, to participate in business contests, etc. The balance of the respondents tend to rely on the use of social media more for non-business purposes such as to find friends, to socialize, etc. Meanwhile, in terms of knowledge related to digital marketing, the best results have been achieved in Kosovo, while we discerned lower results in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Young people in Kosovo are more knowledge able about communication technology than young people in other countries. This gives Kosovo a comparative advantage over other countries.

Respondents were asked if they express positive opinions about products or services in social media. Expressing positive opinions means consumers rate particular products or services highly and in favourable terms. Consumers express these attitudes on social media by writing comments that products or services are worth buying from others because they are of high quality. The results were significant in all countries. Our findings clearly indicate that consumers from these countries express their opinions about products in the groups of different companies on social media, especially on Facebook. As for negative opinions, the results are significant only in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In cases where consumers have experienced negative experiences with the products and services used, they express negative opinions on social media regarding these products and services. Our findings indicate that in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, individual consumers have no reservations about expressing negative opinions about a company's product(s) on Facebook and/or other social media platforms such as twitter, linkedin, etc.

Many consumers take advantage of promotions that some companies offer as inducements to purchase their products or services. Our survey results confirm that the consumers of these countries pay attention to these promotions offered on social media. Promotions on social media strongly impacts decision-making by consumers in these countries. Consumers were asked whether they were informed through

social media about specific products and services so that they were able to gain information about these products or services. Except in Bosnia, all other results in other countries are significant. Our results confirm that companies in our survey area are quite active in informing consumers about certain products on social media. Consumers from these countries actively follow the information about certain products in the groups of companies on Facebook. Our survey also revealed that consumers in these countries actively participate in various contests that businesses promote on social media.

Our survey also revealed that consumers in Albania and Kosovo take a strong interest in following the profiles of companies that offer advantages such as discounts, and accordingly are more likely to follow these companies' digital business activities. Our results reveal that following companies that are active on social media is significant only in Kosovo. This is evidence that Kosovar consumers are more active on social media than consumers in other countries. On the other hand, being a fan of an international brand shows significance only in the cases of Albania and Kosovo.

As for the opportunity to recognize innovative brands, all results in all countries are significant. Based upon our results, we can conclude that consumers in these countries see the recognition of innovative products through digital marketing or social media platforms as a good opportunity. Only North Macedonia's results are significant regarding great information opportunities for any innovation. This evidence shows that consumers in Western Balkan countries are more interested in getting information about certain products or services than about general business trends. The last question, the exchange of ideas on the level of products and services, is significant in the results of all countries except North Macedonia. The smallest number of statistically significant relationships was identified in Kosovo.

## **5 Conclusion**

Digital marketing is of great importance for the development of commercial activities of many companies in developing countries, especially those of the Western Balkans. The findings and data generated as a result of our study are of particular importance to these countries since they have recently intensified their activities in the digital environment, have knowledge of digital marketing, and have

the skills and abilities necessary to utilize social media in satisfying the needs and requirements of online consumers.

Despite the various barriers that are a consequence of economic underdevelopment, the countries of the Western Balkans nevertheless are in step with the times in terms of digital activities. More or less out of necessity, the economies of the Western Balkan countries are adapting their activities to the digital environment. Stated simply, their traditional economies are evolving into digital economies. While in the 1990s, the economies of the Western Balkan countries lagged behind as digital innovators, in recent years they have made significant progress in developing business activities in the digital environment.

The findings of this paper are of particular importance for local and international companies doing business in the Western Balkans. These firms should be aware that many consumers from these countries follow their activities on social media or in the digital environment. In the groups of these firms on social media, in addition to following their advertisements, online consumers also express their opinions, whether positive or negative, about the products and services of these firms. These opinions are important for firms because they are an indicator of consumer satisfaction. Positive feedback from consumers on social media enhances not only consumer satisfaction but also the prestige and reputation of the firm that manufactures or offers those products. In other words, firms must be very careful in their activities on social media because consumers from the Western Balkan countries are constantly following their activities. It therefore is critical for businesses to develop digital marketing strategies, where social media is the focal point of commercial activities. In conclusion, all firms need to intensify their social media marketing activities if they want to expand their clientele.

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