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# Communication Channels

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## Abstract

The scope of the chapter is to discuss changes in usage of digital communication channels before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consumers in both industrial and fast-moving consumer goods markets are considered. The chapter comprises a suggestive overview, followed by conclusions on trends expected in digital communication channels usage due to the shifts in consumer behavior caused by the pandemic. Digital communication channels analyzed include websites, sales pages, social media platforms, as well as e-mail marketing, and blogs. Consumers in Generations X, Y and Z, and their preferences for the different communication channels are analyzed. Results indicate an increased interest of all generations for social media, especially following the Covid-19 pandemic. E-mail marketing also remains an important communication channel across all three generations, while the interest in websites and blogs varies. All consumers favor high quality, attractive content displayed irrespective of the communication channel used. Trends identified suggest the interest for online shopping and online engagement with brands will remain sustained after the lift of the various restrictions imposed by the pandemic. It is therefore important that brands ensure a strong online presence and engage with their audiences based on their consumers preferred communication channels.

**Keywords:** communication channels, corona virus, generations X, Y and Z

## 1. Introduction

The intensification of international competition among companies and the brands' interest for engaging in successful market communication determines an increased interest for digital communication channels, compared to the other elements of the communication strategy. Apart from delivering brand and company information, communication channels also play an important role in leveraging consumers' attitudes by creating a favorable image for the company and its products. This can be accomplished nowadays by disseminating information via reliable, independent sources such as user-generated content that is shared on blogs or forum posts, comments on social media platforms, YouTube etc. Such content, shared by ordinary users or influencers, is meant to involve consumers in company decisions, as well as creating interesting and engaging activities for them (i.e. fun events that create positive feelings towards the brand etc.).

Communication channels have a strong impact on the entire value chain. This role was made even more important by the Covid-19 pandemic which has led to communication channels turning into powerful differentiators in the fierce competitive landscape. Digital communication channels became effective tools for companies to position themselves on the market, especially because they allow brands to engage and interact with their consumers directly. Furthermore, online

communication channels are flexible and allow companies to present their consumers with customized information across the different target segments. Finally, costs associated with online communication channels are independent of the amount of information, distance, or dispersion aimed for.

Communication budgets, for both traditional and digital means, have registered a 5% cut across the world after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic [1]. The ratio between traditional and online communication spending has started to favor digital communication beginning 2015, with a difference that has now reached 15%. Some other trends regarding digital communication channels that have been observed globally in the past couple of decades include:

- Commercial advertising has lost in importance because it does not have the cyber qualities of sensitivity, adaptability, flexibility, and ability to capture the market's reaction. Advertisements are considered a monolog devoid of natural feedback, which would bind the company's customers; [2].
- The newest form of communication through advertising has been based on the emotional dimension of the relationship between the company and the client, on dialog, on the active participation of the public. [2, 3] share this view, emphasizing that the role of advertising in the 21st century is to make the public feel involved, to look at the issues that advertising is raising;
- Digital communication channels have witnessed a continuous development since 2015, revealing a budget increase of 2%/year [1];
- The use of noncommercial communication has intensified due to the flexibility of the various channels and their effectiveness. Therefore, the share in communication budgets has increased. Lately, various companies chose to associate brands with events initiated by other organizations or social campaigns (social assistance, medical research etc.). In the context of such associations, companies emphasize how they serve the common good or guarantee the quality and fairness of prices, that they have ethical policies and respect the human dignity of employees, that they build direct and constant relationships with different categories of public etc.
- Companies increased their efforts to support and enhance internal communication. This was mostly because internal communication has been identified as a driver of employee motivation. At the same time, because of the expansion of user-generated content and reviews, companies also allot increased budget to managing crisis situations determined by negative comments.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated these trends and determined new shifts in terms of digital communication channels usage. We therefore propose an overview chapter aimed at providing a synthesis of currently available research regarding online communication channels and their use for reaching marketing objectives following the Covid-19 pandemic. The content proposed is based on secondary data analysis retrieved from scientific articles and various industry reports and analyses. A search in online academic databases (i.e. Springer, Taylor and Francis, Sage) and Google Scholar was conducted between March and April 2021. The keywords used included: online marketing channel, covid-19, generational cohorts, X, Y, Z generation, shifts/trends in online marketing channels usage during the pandemic, social media/website/blog/forum use during the pandemic. Only English language articles published between 2000 and 2021 were

selected. These were then complemented with relevant statistics and industry reports analyzing the use of online communication channels and any shifts and new trends determined by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The focus of this chapter is to analyze and discuss consumers use and preferences for online communication channels before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as identify new trends emerging in this area. The chapter provides valuable insight for marketing professionals, researchers and company executives for SMEs interested in how to best allocate financial resources to maximize online market presence and customer engagement with their brand.

The specific objectives of the chapter are to:

- a. discuss the specific preferences of Generations X, Y and Z in using online communication channels.
- b. analyze shifts in consumer behavior and online communication channels usage determined by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- c. provide a discussion of emerging trends regarding online communication channels usage across different generational cohorts to support marketing professionals and other executives in maximizing market presence and customer engagement with their brand.

## 2. Preferred communication channels across target segments

Digital communication channels refer to means of engaging in the online environment. They include [2, 4]:

- Company websites including a specific landing page (or a microsite),
- Online advertising which includes search advertising, graphic online advertising, as well as interstitial advertising
- User-generated content,
- Social media
- Sponsorship and affiliate marketing, online communities,
- E-mail marketing,
- Mobile marketing,
- Web conference.

We will briefly present the specifics of each channel and then discuss them in connection with the different target segments we chose to analyze.

1. *The website of a company*, as a communication channel, must be adapted to the potential customers' need for information. Most authors agree that every company that intends to build an online presence should start with a website. These are mainly dedicated to public relations, and informative advertising for products, and companies, as well as for developing a personalized relationship with consumers.

The landing page or *the microsite* is an individual website that is connected to the main site. It is useful for call to actions strategies or for companies that need additional efforts to sell products with low demand.

2. *Online advertising* refers to advertisements placed in online environments (e.g. websites, search pages etc.). It includes search advertising, graphic and interstitial advertising.

*Search advertising* refers to paid advertising that appears in search engines (e.g. Google, MSN, Yahoo and others) to guide the customer to the product or service they need. It also encompasses relevant links to company content.

*Graphic advertising* can be an image or a graphic with different shapes (usually a small rectangular box) that incorporate text and/or images. Companies pay for these ads to be placed on websites with good traffic rates, to boost audience. Therefore, if there is a well-known website of an idea, a place, a person or a company, brands are likely to choose it to place their graphic advertising there aiming to increase brand visibility among the target group.

*Interstitial ads* appear between website pages or when the visitor switches to another website. These advertisings can be videos or animations.

3. *User-generated content* refers to specific videos uploaded on platform such as YouTube, MySpace Video, and Google Video. Consumers and advertisers can upload ads and videos that millions of people can then share.
4. *Social media - Studies* reveal that the social media channels have gained popularity during and after the Covid-19 crisis. Mason [5], Samet [6] sustains that social media have become more used by US adults, while Kumar [7] revealed a transformation of this channel towards an electronic marketplace, that also groups (beside integrated marketing promotional messages) consumers networks, opinion leaders and subject matter experts. Emmons [8] sustains that recent years have seen a shift in the approach of social media channels from “us versus them” to a “we” relation.
5. *Online communities - Companies can promote themselves by sponsoring special content on websites with information from certain fields, such as financial news, automotive etc. Also, they can make alliances and affiliate programs or sustain online communities [4]. Many companies sponsor online communities (like blogs or forums) in which their members post beliefs, ideas, feedback, and discussions related to the company's products. Discussions, opinions and engagement in such communities provide valuable information to companies as they occur in neutral environments, where consumers feel safe to express their true opinions on the company, its products etc.*
6. *E-mail marketing refers to personalized marketing communication delivered via e-mail. It is used for a constant communication with an engaged client and can be very efficient, especially for calls to action.*
7. *Mobile marketing refers online marketing deployed via mobile devices. It gives marketers the opportunity to customize messages based on demographics and reveals a continuous growth.*
8. *Web conference -This category of communication channels includes the actions of directly contacting potential customers by the sales agents of a company, to present their offer, to persuade and to close a transaction.*



Studies show digital communication channels are used differently by consumers, based on their demographic data. We will discuss these particularities considering the different generational cohorts which have been described in the literature.

Social generations refer to “communities of people that are born in the same period and share the same cultural experiences” [9]. Six generations have been identified in the literature between 1920 and up to now. The oldest generation is the so-called Silent generation or Traditionalists – they were born between 1920 and 1945. They have lived through the second world war and have a high need for security. They are now all retired, live rather simple lives and have high respect for authority [10]. The next generation is the Baby boomers. Born after the second world war, between 1945 and 1965, they are highly competitive, accept working long hours and have positive traits such as consensus building and effecting change [9, 10]. This cohort is followed by Generation X born between 1966 and 1979. This generation is characterized by strong independence and self-reliance. Both of their parents were generally working so they were trusted to take care of themselves from an early age [11]. They grew up in the age of TV and increasing rates of divorce. They have a high sense of accomplishment and a strong need for social recognition [12]. The next cohort is Generation Y. They are also known as Millennials and were born between 1980 and 1995. They are proficient in multitasking, are self-confident and ask for flexible working hours. They treasure work-life balance and tend to switch jobs more often than previous generations [9]. Millennials are followed by Z Generation. They were then born between 1996 and 2016. Born in the age of internet, they have had access to electronic devices since their early childhood. The last generation known is the Alpha generation. Starting with 2016, they are the first generation to have been born entirely in the 21st century and their traits are yet to be discovered [13].

For our analysis, we will focus on Generations X, Y and Z. We chose these three generations because of their size and purchasing power. At the same time, they are the three generations most actively engaging with digital communication channels. In the following sections, we will discuss the different preferences the three generations have had for digital communication channels, as well as any shifts in preferences that may have occurred because of the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter will conclude with an analysis of the implications such changes may have for companies targeting these consumers.

## **2.1 Generation X**

Born between 1966 and 1979, Generation X represent 32% of the workforce [14]. Having been active on the labour market for a while, they hold higher positions, such as senior-level managers, and find themselves at the peak of their buying power [14, 15]. They are generally busy and focused on juggling children and careers [16]. Family and friends are particularly important for this generation, and they appreciate work-life balance [17]. At the same time, most of them are focused on saving for retirement and old age. Because of this, research indicates representatives of Generation X react positively to bargains, coupons, and sales, as well as free trials [14, 18, 19].

Approximately one quarter of all online shoppers (23%) are from Generation X [14]. Shoppers in this generation have a strong interest in researching sellers, products, and services. They research businesses online, and tend to read more reviews, and visit more opinion sites than any other generation [15, 19]. It is therefore important that companies have up-to-date and easy to navigate through websites, where consumers can find answers to their questions. Studies also recommend websites to contain robust search functionalities to support consumers in

their research, as well as well-managed live chat functions that enable the company to answer any inquiries quickly [15]. Generation X consumers favor websites over blogs and microblogs. Most consumers in this generation indicated they do not use blogs and microblogs at all (42%), or only use them occasionally (43%) [17].

In terms of digital communication channel usage, studies show Generation X consumers “have fully embraced digital media” [19], being almost as present in this environment as Millennials. At the same time, Generation X users remain active e-mail users. In fact, e-mail and Facebook represent their preferred communication channels in the online environment [14, 18]. They check their e-mail frequently, both at home and at work [14, 16, 18]. In terms of social media, approximately 80% of Generation X representatives have a Facebook account which they mostly use for accessing news and for remaining in contact with family and friends [14, 19]. It is also worth noting that these consumers spend more time weekly on all devices than younger generations. Statistics show they tend to spend an average of 21 hours/week using their smartphones, 9 hours/week on their laptops and 4 hours/week on their tablets [15]. Generation X consumers also remain users of the traditional media (radio and TV) much more than any of the two other generations under analysis [19].

These traits and preferences of Generation X have a series of implications for the way brands connect with them. First, because Generation X users have been born in the age of TV, it is important to note they are used to video content. Studies recommend brands to engage with these consumers using highly visual content and videos. Furthermore, research suggests Generation X users are prone to sharing interesting videos across social media, thus increasing a company’s reach [15]. Second, considering their propensity to conduct extensive research before making a purchase, it is important companies invest in well-functioning, attractive websites that include search functions. Furthermore, given that X Generation users spend considerable amounts of time across multiple devices, companies should optimize their websites for tablet and mobile use. Third, considering users communication preferences in the online environment, companies should direct their digital advertising efforts towards e-mail and Facebook. Search engine ads are also a channel that consumers in this generation respond positively to [15], given their inclination towards research conducted via the Internet.

## **2.2 Generation Y**

Born between 1980 and 1995, Millennials have witnessed the rapid advance of information technology and globalization, reaching maturity in the “digital age” [17, 20]. They generally grew up in families with two working parents which ensured good conditions for their personal development. They value independence, creativity, innovation, and development [17]. They are well-educated and tech-savvy, as well as quick to adopt new technologies [19, 21]. They appreciate speedy devices and expect to find information quickly and easily [14]. They are also described as the “most visually sophisticated of any generation” [21].

Generation Y consumers are brand loyal, yet socially conscious and seeking to make ethical buying choices [16]. They prefer buying from companies that help people, communities, and the environment [22].

Millennials are the most targeted demographic in the marketing industry [22]. Yet, they are generally distrustful of commercial advertising and influenced by their peers [19]. Like Generation X consumers, Millennials conduct considerable research and comparison before making a purchase [19]. Generation Y consumers are three times bigger than Generation X [22] and hold 200 billion dollars in buying power [16]. They are the least frequent in-store shoppers, being active users

of e-commerce [16]. They spend approximately 2.000 dollars/year for online purchases [14].

In terms of digital communication channel usage, Millennials are present on most social media networks including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and even TikTok. They use social networking much more often than Generation X [17]. Their favorite social media network is Facebook, followed by Instagram [19]. Because of their extensive social media usage and trust they place in peers' opinions, Millennials tend to respond positively to paid advertisements and promotions on social media, as well as reviews and user-generated content [19, 22]. They enjoy high-quality advertisements containing pleasant graphics [22]. Coupons and side-panel ads are the favorite form of advertisement Millennials respond to [22]. At the same time, they strongly dislike pop-up ads which they consider annoying [22]. Current surveys indicate 51% of Millennials discover a new brand via Facebook, 18% via Twitter and 15% through other social networks [White, M. quoted in 22]. Users also discover new brands through online ads (24%), company websites (30%) and blogs (15%) [White, M. quoted in 22]. At the same time, studies show Millennials are prone to engage in conversations about products and services. Studies conducted previously indicated that 56% of Generation Y consumers discuss products and services via social media networks and use their peers' opinions and comments to assess products and services, with one study pointing out that consumer reviews are trusted up to twelve times more than descriptions provided by the manufacturer [22]. As loyal consumers, Millennials also react positively to rewards and loyalty programs [16].

Regarding company websites, it is important they load quickly and have simple, professional layouts, adapted for mobile use [14, 22]. This is mostly because Millennials value convenience and easy access to information. For the same reason, studies indicate Millennials favor websites and brands that offer customer service features which include texting that they regard as a convenient communication method [14]. At the same time, Millennials are likely to perform repeat website visits if the company offers competitive pricing, coupons, and good shipping rates [22].

Unlike Generation X users, Millennials are not frequent e-mail users and do not watch television. They are however present on streaming platforms such as Netflix, which they consider more appealing than traditional television [19].

The characteristics listed above suggest that when addressing Generation Y consumers, companies ought to focus on meeting them in the online environment where Millennials seem to spend most of their time. When targeting Generation Y it is important companies use honest messages, encourage reviews, and address Millennials' inclination towards loyalty programs and rewards.

### 2.3 Generation Z

Generation Z consumers were born between 1996 and 2016. Their upbringing has occurred in a digital society, a fact that has strongly influenced their preferences in connecting with each other, as well as brands. Generation Z consumers perceive themselves as adaptable and connected to many different people [23]. At the same time, because they grew up in the digital society and they have been exposed to more digital content and information than any generation before, Z Generation consumers seem to have become more selective regarding the content they decide to engage with, than other consumers [24]. Studies indicate Generation Z consumers allocate approximately eight seconds to sort through and assess the various information they are being exposed to [24]. At the same time, these consumers seem to be more concerned about their privacy in the online environment,



as well as more skeptical in terms of the truthfulness and value of the content they are being presented with than Generations Y and X. Studies show they tend to “respond positively to brands that are more relational, and therefore, are perceived as authentic” [23, p. 70].

From the point of view of their buying power, Generation Z accounts for 40% of global consumers with a spending power of 143 billion dollars [23]. Their buying decisions tend to be influenced by friends and family, and they allot more importance to quality, than brand loyalty [19]. They are highly comfortable with online shopping [23].

In terms of communication channels, Generation Z consumers actively favor the online environment. This group spends more time online than any generation before them. In a recent study, Generation Z teenagers indicated they were “almost constantly online” (45%) or they were online “multiple times a day” (44%) [24]. Time spent online is mostly split between social media and e-mail. This is to a certain extent surprising as e-mail is often regarded as a more traditional means of online communication, characteristic of Generation X, rather than Z. Despite this, a recent study shows that most Z Generation users check their e-mail multiple times a day (58%), or at least once a day (81%), mostly when on the go, or to pass the time [18, 24]. Most users (66.9%) receive less than 20 e-mails/day [Campaign Monitor]. These aspects are important from two perspectives. On the one hand, these statistics suggest e-mail remains an attractive means of communication for this generation, including for marketing purposes. On the other hand, the reduced number of e-mails this group receives daily may indicate less competition for their attention than in the case of other media.

As mentioned previously, Z Generation users are very present on social media. A recent study indicated that 90% of respondents use social networks all the time or a few times a day [17]. Unlike Generations X and Y which reported large use of Facebook, Z Generation users are more focused on Instagram, Twitter and TikTok [14], as well as Youtube and Snapchat [24]. This group does not have one preferred online platform as was observed for Generations X and Y, but are multi-channel users. They will consume different type of content across the different platforms they use [24]. For example, studies show they may use Snapchat for capturing real-life moments, use Facebook for information purposes and Instagram to share their aspirations [24]. This means companies should avoid sending the same message across all platforms. Brands should consider a rounded digital marketing campaign, rather than focusing on each channel individually [24].

Regarding brand engagement, Generation Z users favor social media and e-mail, followed by in-person interactions, advertisements, chat features and company blogs and websites [24]. It is important that websites and blogs are adapted for mobile use [18], while e-mails should be relevant to them and not spam [24].

Generation Z consumers are largely influenced by content favoring quality and authenticity over price [18]. They react positively to visually pleasing content including images, Gifs, memes [19, 25] as well as behind the scenes and product demonstration videos [19]. Therefore, Z Generation users enjoy Youtube, Instagram and Snapchat considerably [24]. At the same time, like Generation Y users, Z Generation consumers respond positively to user-generated content, and opportunities to take the lead in creating and sharing content [21, 25]. It is also important to remember Generation Z users filter content rapidly, so it is important that content offered to them is highly engaging from the beginning. This group dislikes “blatant advertising” [19].

The characteristics presented above suggest that companies should develop integrated communication strategies aiming at combining communication channels to increase brand exposure, by building on the specific characteristics and user

interests for each of these channels. At the same time e-mails and in-person interactions should be considered carefully as a means of maximizing connection with Z Generation users.

### **3. Communication channels shifts during the Covid-19 pandemic**

During the Covid-19 pandemic considerable restrictions were imposed across the globe in terms of consumers' mobility and interactions with one another or product and service providers. In this context online communication channels have gained importance by offering consumers a bridge over the restrictions that had been imposed. For example, social media has offered consumers a means to remain connected to each other, as well as brand, and has also transformed itself into a marketplace that offered communities shorter distribution chains and rapid access to information. Many local businesses entered and rapidly adapted this new online marketplace to make themselves known in their community and ensure their survival during the pandemic. Furthermore, companies also identified online communication channels (e.g. websites, e-mail communication etc.) as an important tool to remain connected with their consumers, educate them on crisis management, and contribute to reducing anxieties among their consumers. In the following paragraphs we will analyze the changes that occurred in the usage of the various online channels during the Covid-19 pandemic while also considering the characteristics of each social generation.

A market research with 450 respondents concluded that the Covid-19 crisis triggered the cutting down of communication budgets across most companies [26]. Furthermore, for the US market, traditional communication channels have shrunk by 12% in 2020, online channels grew by the same percentage [27].

In addition, another recent survey indicates many companies reduced their communication budgets, and 61% changed their short-term communication strategy [26]. Experts assert that the lack of a long-term communication strategy may negatively impact companies' growth and development. This is because the lack of such a strategy can affect customer loyalty. Specifically, loyalty depends to a great extent on the company's image, on what the customer believes or knows about it. And this brand image, in turn, is the result of all the communication about the product to which the consumer is exposed. Instead of renouncing strategies, companies should focus on unpaid communication as well and ensuring organic growth by offering multi-channel qualitative content.

In terms of digital communication channels, the greatest change caused by the Covid-19 pandemic was registered for websites. A global research with a sample of 1.000 executives indicated websites registered a 15% increase in December 2020 in comparison with the same period of 2019 [28]. Despite dwindling sales, e-commerce has registered a 14% growth during the pandemic.

A good website must build trust, be up to date and customer friendly. Apart from content related to the products and services offered, the website should also convey companies' objectives, history, products, mission, and vision for different target segments. The main challenge in designing a website is to create an attractive layout that offers interactivity and acts as a vector for building loyalty. Websites should also have a balanced composition and offer an easy-to-understand user experience [29]. These traits were required for a successful website both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

An extensive literature insists on the competitive advantage that a company can obtain through online services that can be made available to buyers through professional websites. This channel supports companies to decrease operating costs, raise

profits, boost customer portfolios, customize services, while also contributing to distribution flexibility, improving the quality of marketing research, and developing complementary businesses [29]. Results of research on website profitability conducted by Nielsen, an expert in websites evaluation, show that improving a website (i.e. content that supports building trust and transparency, interactivity, layout and navigation path) can be 50 times more profitable than in the case of poorly built websites [29]. There are distinct methods for evaluating the functionality, performance, ease of use and accessibility of websites. For each complex variable, the evaluation can be done from the perspective of the software developer and the end user. Functionality and performance are rather technically subjective, while ease of use and accessibility are mostly assessed from the user's perspective.

In terms of paid advertising on social media channels, this has encountered ups and downs, depending on the various sectors of activity. Industries such as travel and hospitality, indoor events (cinema, social activities) retail, events, and conferences, as well as logistics faced strong declines in their activities and consequently, the communication channels were also affected [30]. A higher online presence was registered in the health care and online medicine sector, along with online fast moving consumer goods delivery services, videoconferencing, online streaming, and entertainment (Netflix, HBO go, Spotify) or online outlets.

Online advertising was not a channel that developed during the pandemic more than before [1]. It can be paid or unpaid inserts (because banner exchanges are common) online. Most frequently used online advertisements during the Covid-19 crisis were: sponsorship of a site or sections of a site, insertion of marketing messages in e-mail, and interstitials. It is worth noting that pop-up ads are generally considered annoying, and users block them. During the pandemic, 46% of users declared they found them boring and did not watch them [31].

Other globally conducted research [28] reveal a change in the main scope of communication campaigns during the pandemic. Therefore, communication executives prioritized the following *objectives*:

- Gaining new interested customers (especially when the competition was faced with a digital weaknesses);
- Retaining existing customers and make them loyal;
- Driving sales;
- Maintain engagement with internal and external audience;
- Building and reinforcing brand awareness and brand attitude;
- Remaining top of the mind for existing and potential clients.

We can conclude that channels which provide brand consolidation in the mind of prospective clients and a better exposure for existing clients represent the winners for companies in time of crises.

Regarding B2B communication, web conference channels remained an important tool both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was due to its specific features that allow for personal relationship and interaction between people. By practicing direct marketing, a company can have an important competitive advantage, which allows it to better understand customer expectations and thus customize its offers. The company's online documents are basic tools used by these channels because they enforce trust in the company and strengthen its credibility.

Participation in trade events, specialized communities, and exhibitions allow the company to engage the existing and potential customers.

Executives stress out a shift in digital channels importance, due to their profitability. Another research [26, 28] suggests that the channels preferred during and after Covid-19 times were:

- Social media (organic and paid)
- Websites with content marketing
- Webinars
- Advertising on retail webs/apps
- Advertising on publishers' webs
- Paid search
- E-mail marketing
- Online video (organic and paid)

Brands adopted more helpful and human approaches in their online communication, being sensitive to the clients' state of mind. Most effective communication is mainly oriented towards engaging actors in social content, leadership thought, direct customer outreach, corporate social responsibilities [26].

Although digital communication channels became more useful for companies, there are still concerns related to cybersecurity and personal information security.

#### **4. Changes in communication channel preferences across target segments following the COVID-19 pandemic**

During the Covid-19 pandemic various restrictions on circulation and lockdowns were imposed across the globe. This led to people remaining isolated in their homes, with limited contact with their families, friends and loved ones [26]. Furthermore, the restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of the virus also affected the way in which people conducted their daily activities including work, education, entertainment, healthcare, shopping etc. Faced with this situation, consumers have responded to the pandemic by altering their daily behavior and routines [32]. When dealing with limited mobility, consumers turned increasingly to the online environment. This has taken the form of remote work and education, increased use of e-commerce, delivery applications, social media, streaming and gaming platforms, to name just a few. We will discuss in the paragraphs to come, the changes that occurred across Generations X, Y and Z in terms of communication channel usage during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As argued in the previous section, the three generations are active users of the online environment, including websites and blogs, e-mail, and social media. The onset of the pandemic with the restrictions that this triggered has led to an increase in social media usage for all three generations. A research conducted in Italy [26], indicated that social media usage during the first lockdown increased by 110% for Generation Y users, and up to 114% for Generation X consumers. At the same time, Generation Z users have continued to rely on social media as their main form of



communication [23]. The most used social media, regardless of age, education, and gender during the pandemic has been Youtube, followed by Whatsapp, Instagram, Facebook and Messenger [26]. At the same time, Generation X used media such as LinkedIn, Whatsapp Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype more often than Generations Y and Z. This may be caused by the fact that X generation consumers are older and hold higher professional positions thus favoring media that have longer market presence (i.e. Skype) or focus on professional networks (i.e. LinkedIn) [26]. Generation Z users favored Instagram, TikTok, Youtube, Messenger, Snapchat, and Pinterest [26, 33].

The use of Instagram and TikTok registered a 45% increase for Generations Y and Z. X Generation consumers also used these platforms, although the increase was smaller (33%) [26].

In terms of buying behavior, consumers across all generations turned towards online shopping, especially due to its contactless process [34]. E-commerce increased between April–June 2020 from 16 to 27% of retail in the US and from 18 to 30% in the UK [32]. This shift was more pronounced among Z and Y Generations where 33% of consumers increased their online spending vs. 23% in Generation X [32]. In general, consumers shopped online to ensure the required products for house consumption and other personal needs, but also as a distraction or leisure activity [35]. The same research [35] indicates these hedonic motives have been more present in the case of Z Generation consumers than Generation Y. Another study indicates that 13% of Z Generation consumers made their first online purchase during the pandemic [36]. Consumers across all generations also tried new brands in the context of the pandemic (66% in the case of Y and Z generations and 43% in the case of Generation X) [35].

When deciding where to shop online during the pandemic, research suggests social media remains an important channel for targeting shoppers [36]. At the same time, word of mouth and referrals continue to remain important across Generations Y and X, especially given the fact that online shopping does not allow product testing and the two generations' inclination towards extensive research before making a buying decision [36]. At the same time, discounts and rewards for loyalty and referrals remain important for both X and Y Generations [36]. Social media also plays an important role among Z Generation users. Advertisements on social media have influenced the buying decision during Covid-19 for 60% of Generation Z users compared to 25% for Generations X and Y [33]. Users across all three generations continue to prefer high quality video ads, and product offers which feel genuine and authentically fit the platforms where they are presented [33, 36].

## **5. Discussion of trends that affect communication channels**

The Pandemic set some immovable rules regarding digital communication channels. Businesses must remain more than ever connected with the customers through miscellaneous means to products and distribution channels.

Also, the communication channels strategy must be pragmatic and performant, by driving important outputs. Businesses must adapt to find the customers, wherever they are and in the manner that they want to be approached. Furthermore, companies need to offer a “consumer-centric” experience on the navigation journey and facilitate omni-channel engagement. This also means that customers expect to choose their one channel. Additionally, the customers participate to communicate the companies positioning [37].

The quick rise of efficiency analytics tool available for digital channels, determine that programmatic advertising will be used not only by media agencies, but

smaller brands executives too. The real time bidder will be deployed in a greater extent, being a way to auction for an advertising space [9].

Innovation became crucial element in digital channels strategies by making the communication creative to keep brands relevant. Emotional communications, society involvement, and struggles to create an inclusive and more equitable future can bring recognition to a brand during a time of crisis. For example, a study on 25.000 persons reveals the clients' need to be informed under uncertainty condition and to be educated to diminish the effects of the crisis [38].

Artificial intelligence will bring more benefits for customers as well as for communication executives. The first advantage can be by facilitating the built or consolidation of a CRM (customer relationship management) through collection the users' information from different platforms. If companies can easily process big data about customer' behavior, strategies for communication channels can also be rapidly adapted to the needs of the audience. Secondly, in combination with virtual reality or augmented reality receptors can interact in a more complex manner with the brand, creating at the same time extraordinary experiences along with a greater sense of loyalty [39, 40]. Thirdly, chatbots can improve customer service by offering answers simultaneously, regardless the time zones. They can also enable customization of messages for e-mail marketing or how and where an advertisement is displayed based on clients' profiles. The content displayed for each communication channel can also be adapted based on the data available, thus leading to increased user engagement.

## 6. Conclusion

The chapter provides an overview of current data available regarding consumer preferences for digital communication channels before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the impact of such preferences for companies' marketing efforts.

The Covid-19 crisis affected communication channels irrevocably, with lasting effects. First and foremost, the pandemic has determined an increase in consumers' expectations of trust from the companies they choose to purchase from. While the pandemic has determined a considerable increase in e-commerce, it has also led to a rising importance of electronic word-of-mouth and referrals as a means of consumers researching brands and products. Consumers require honest information and trustworthy processes. Secondly, the pandemic has determined an increase in the importance attributed to some digital communication channels such as websites, social media, web conferences, and videos. This was mostly because these channels were the ones to bridge the gap which emerged between consumers, their peers, brands, and companies due to the various restrictions imposed to counteract the spread of the Covid-19 virus. The pandemic has brought an increase in social media and e-commerce usage across all three consumer generational cohorts that we analyzed. Consumers expect high quality and visually pleasing websites, graphics, and advertising, which is delivered using the digital communication channels that each generation cohort utilizes. Brand messages should be adapted to the specifics of each digital communication channel used and speak the language of the generational cohort they are being addressed to.

Another important consequence of the sanitary crisis was the companies' acknowledgement of the importance of digital marketing and communication to engage consumers, build trust relationships and loyalty, even in times of crises. This has led to digital communication budgets being revitalized after the first wave of the pandemic. Focus was directed towards increasing customer loyalty by offering various possibilities for interaction with the brands. The pandemic has also revealed a radical movement towards the digitalization of digital communication channels

by integrating artificial intelligence in providing relevant and customized information. Furthermore, the process of interchanging channels can benefit from artificial intelligence and machine learning techniques to ensure growth in the efficiency and effectiveness of communication. Chatbots and virtual reality deliver more added value and a pleasant experience for receivers.

Lastly, results show companies should continue to strive for creativity and innovation when conveying their brand's values to consumers, while also engage in emotional communication, promote social engagement, and strive for an inclusive and more equitable future.

Some limitations were encountered when developing the chapter. Access to data and statistics regarding digital communication channels during the Covid-19 pandemic was to a certain extent limited due to the novelty of this sanitary crisis and its impact on consumer behavior. Most data available focused on the use of websites and social media, while information regarding online advertising, blogs, sponsorships, and affiliated marketing during this period remains limited. We believe further research should be conducted on how the pandemic affected consumers use of online communication channels during the pandemic. Further studies should also approach the trends that emerged for digital communication during the Covid-19 pandemic and assess the extent to which these trends will continue as life starts to resemble the pre-pandemic period, as well as the impact they will have on companies' marketing presence and consumer engagement.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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