

THE DIGITAL MARKETING AS A MARKETING COMMUNICATION TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE PROMOTION OF PAID SERVICES OF HEALTHCARE INSTITUTIONS IN LATVIA



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Abstract. The article highlights the importance of digital marketing in consumer behaviour choosing paid health services. The promotion of health care and paid services is complicated, dependent on several ethical, legal etc. factors. Digital marketing enables healthcare specialists to demonstrate their competence to potential patients, expand their professional domain, and improve the image of the healthcare industry. But we must not forget about sustainability - ensuring a healthy life and promoting well-being for all society. The aim of the study is to identify digital marketing tools that positively influence consumer choices in the purchase process of paid health services. To achieve the goal, the following research methods were used - monographic, secondary data analysis and quantitative research (survey) methods. The consumption of digital tool changes depending on level of education – higher educated respondents use more tools than lower educated respondents. Irrespective of gender, income and education, respondents aged between 18 and 27 are more affected by digital tools than other age groups. In contrast, respondents aged over 65 are practically unaffected by digital tools, except some cases at a certain level of education and income or depending on gender. The article deals with UN Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDGs 3 (Good health and well-being). The results of the study have both theoretical and practical significance.

Key words: consumer behaviour, digital marketing, healthcare, marketing communication, service promotion, sustainability, wellbeing.

JEL code: M31; M10

Introduction

The digital environment continues its development, and digital marketing appears on a daily basis in an increasing variety of ways. The digital technologies and software applications of next generations will transform the market and the daily life of people even further (Rindfleisch A., Malter A. J., 2019). One of the main factors of its influence is the extensive development of information and communication technologies in the private and public sector which has given rise to a new digital marketing environment. Around 90% of the available global data have been created within the last two years (Miklosik A. et al., 2019), which proves the rapidity of the changes. The COVID-19 pandemic, too, has unexpectedly become a digital accelerator worldwide. Businesses and markets were forced to adapt to the limited mobility and therefore relied much on the digital technology (Kotler P. et al., 2021). This also served as an impetus for businesses to stop hesitating with the implementation of digitalisation. Although the Internet is already part of the daily life, some groups of people are still excluded from the digital world due to the lack of digital skills and knowledge (Hetman O., Schaefer M., 2019). The number of Internet users keeps increasing worldwide. In January 2022 it was 4.95 billion – 6.2% more than the year before, the sharpest increase since 2019 (Oberlo, 2022a). The number of social media users is increasing as well. According to the latest data, there are now estimated to be 3.96 billion social media users in the world, 4.8% more than the year before, and researchers predict a further increase going forward. Between 2023 and 2025, an average increase of 3.7% per year is expected. Social media will also remain a part of the consumers' daily life because of smartphones being their main driver. According to the current social media usage statistics, more than nine out of ten (91%) social media users use mobile devices to access social media (Oberlo, 2022b). Importantly, as regards digitalisation, there is no one approach that fits all. Each industry and each player are at a different stage of digital maturity. An organisation ready for digital

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operation assesses the digital readiness of the customer base they compete for. Also, important is the organisation's self-assessment of digital capabilities. Depending on the readiness assessment, businesses need to develop and implement various strategies that may include customer migration as well as digital transformation strategies (Kotler P. et al., 2021). Using digital marketing, it is now possible for healthcare institutions to advertise their services to people worldwide, not just in their immediate vicinity. Digital marketing enables healthcare specialists to demonstrate their competence to potential patients, expand their professional domain, and improve the image of the healthcare industry. With the help of digital marketing, one can access a variety of professional tools and technologies that can help develop the strategy, achieve maximum efficiency, and give an outlook of high quality to healthcare institutions. The topicality of the research topic is related to the growing advantages of using digital marketing, which allows to reach consumers more conveniently and quickly, including regarding paid healthcare services. The goal of the research is to identify which digital marketing tools positively influence consumer choice and promote the purchase of paid healthcare services. The main research question is: Which digital marketing tools resonate the most with consumers? The main tasks of the research are: to analyse theoretical aspects and scientific literature on digital marketing as a marketing communication tool and to conduct a consumer survey on the impact of digital marketing tools on decision-making regarding paid health care services. The research used the monographic method, the secondary data analysis method, the quantitative analysis method by surveying respondents online. A total of 27 sources of information have been used, including literature, scientific papers, laws, internet resources. The research data were analysed in four cross-sections – by age, gender, education and income level. The limitation of the study is the age of the respondents, only respondents aged 18 years or older took part in the study, when they have the opportunity to independently make decisions related to their health. The study is still in progress. Based on the opinion given by the respondents so far (sample set n=793), it is possible to determine a trend and formulate a hypothesis for further research. The consumption of digital tools changes as the respondents' level of education increases, respondents with a higher education choose more tools than respondents with a lower level of education. Regardless of gender, income and education, respondents in the 18-27 age group are more influenced by digital tools than other age groups.

Research results and discussion

The authors have analysed theoretical aspects of digital marketing as a marketing communication tool and advantages of using digital marketing. As technologies become available to a larger number of people, digital marketing has changed the consumers' buying habits, giving them the following benefits. (1) Staying up to date. The digital marketing technologies allow consumers to follow a company's information. (2) Higher involvement. Thanks to digital marketing, consumers can engage in various activities of a company – for instance, visit the company's website, read information about products or services, make purchases online, provide feedback etc. (3) Clear information about products and services. Using digital marketing, consumers obtain clear information about products and services. The Internet provides comprehensive product information that consumers can rely on in making their buying decision. (4) Easier product comparison. Many businesses try to advertise their products or services using digital marketing to the greatest benefit for customers as they can compare different suppliers' products or services in a cost- and time-effective way (Bala M., Verma D., 2018). Customers do not need to visit multiple retail outlets to learn about products or services. As the digital marketing environment rapidly changes and develops, previous research related to this topic becomes irrelevant (Nikunen T., 2017). Unlike digital marketing, other types of marketing activities do not allow posting as much textual, analytical, graphical and visual

information about a company, its products or services in one place as necessary for building a positive image (Rosokhata A. et al., 2020).

The Internet as a means of communication is the best way to exchange information with consumers in a full-fledged way, generate demand, and set up a data exchange system – hence, the digitalisation of the business world has resulted in the emergence of digital marketing which is a key component in the adaptation of businesses to these changes. The purpose of using digital marketing is to respond to changes quickly and flexibly in the market and in the consumer needs through digital channels and tools. (Peter M. K., Vecchia M. D., 2021) Specifically, digital marketing communication deals with what is needed by or what needs to be advertised to the audience, and where the people to be addressed are (Wynne P., 2011).

Digital marketing communication has emerged as a natural response of businesses to take advantage of the dense concentration of consumers on the Internet. Some businesses are also able to use their own e-commerce platform but for the most part they use the Internet as a channel/environment within the framework of their communication strategy (Miklosik A. et al., 2019). Digital marketing makes it easier to make an educated, informed choice, as decisions are taken based on information (Tamal M. et al., 2021). For instance, one in every twenty Google search queries is information about health services, such as tips for health and wellbeing, symptoms of illnesses, nutrition tips etc. In order to appear on the first page of the Google search, one uses effective search engine optimisation (Cuomo M. T. et al., 2020).

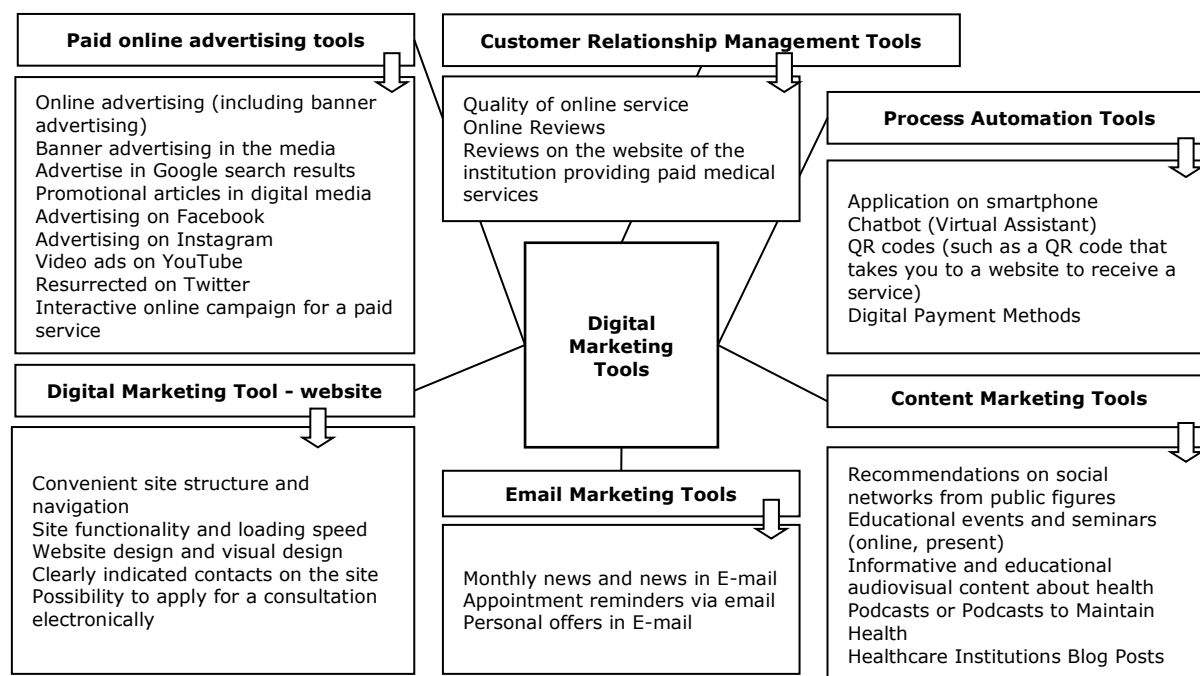
Nowadays, various organisations, including enterprises, hospitals, schools, professional associations, councils, and NGOs, use digital marketing as part of their marketing strategies and implementation programmes. Previous research shows that digital marketing gives businesses benefits and each digital marketing tool positively correlates with a sales increase (Yasmin A. et al., 2015). This indicates that all digital marketing tools contribute to an increase in the company's sales. Online advertising, e-mail marketing, social media and search engine optimisation (SEO) correlates very positively with a sales increase, whereas messages, branch marketing and pay-per-click (PPC) shows little positive correlation with a sales increase (Yasmin A. et al., 2015). While digital marketing has numerous advantages, there is a vast variety of digital marketing tools and, in order to choose the most appropriate digital marketing tools for a company, one needs to familiarise oneself with their classification and characteristics. The division of digital tools is extensive nowadays. Some authors divide them by content into paid and proactive, believing that marketing tools that create paid digital content (such as search engines, e-mail communication etc.) are currently more influential than those that create proactive content (such as social media) (Ercan T., Cizmeci F., 2015).

For marketing communication tools that create paid digital content, as with traditional marketing communication tools (television, radio, newspaper, magazine etc.), a certain space in the digital environment is rented for a certain period at a certain fee. For digital marketing tools that create proactive content, there is a relatively high degree of interaction between businesses and consumers (Ercan T., Cizmeci F., 2015). These tools generate an environment where users can post their comments, criticism, or suggestions regarding specific issues. For this reason, it is necessary to continuously manage and check the proactive content.

The main benefits of social media for healthcare institutions are: 1) the possibility to give prompt answers to patients' questions; 2) a better understanding of patients, the problems they face in daily activities, their concerns, and outstanding needs; 3) the possibility to reach a large audience potentially interested in the organisation's services (Alma P. et al., 2015). In this context, most healthcare companies

have Facebook pages where tips for a healthy lifestyle, studies on new treatment methods or even interactive games are posted.

As Figure 1 shows, the review of scientific literature yielded a total of 29 digital marketing tools which were split into 6 groups (paid online advertising tools, website, customer relationship management tools, process automation tools, e-mail marketing, content marketing) (Bormane S., Putans R., 2022; Bormane S., Batraga A., 2018) by applicability to healthcare institutions for the promotion of paid services.



Source: authors' created based on theoretical findings

Fig. 1. Distribution of the identified digital marketing tools into groups according to the possibility of their use in health care institutions

Materials and methods

Use of digital marketing tools in promoting paid healthcare services. Trends of consumer behaviour. Next, based on the digital marketing tools identified in scientific literature, the study used the quantitative research method – a survey run online. The goal of the survey was to find out what digital marketing tools would substantially affect the patient's choice in regard to paid healthcare services, what communication channels would be the most convenient to patients for receiving information, and by what criteria patients choose paid healthcare services. The survey data were analysed in four cross-sections – age, gender, monthly income level (net), education, with a particular attention paid to generational differences, assuming that the preferred digital tools vary among generations: 1) Generation Z – aged 18-27 (starting from 18 because that is the age of majority when one can independently make decisions related to one's health); 2) Generation Y – aged 28-42; 3) Generation X – aged 43-64; 4) aged over 65 (the current age of retirement in the country) (Klauss K., 2020; Beresford Research, 2022; Youth Law, 2009; Law On State Pensions, 1996).

Income level was categorised on the basis that: 1) the minimum wage in the country in January 2021 is 500 EUR gross for normal working hours (Darzina L., 2020); 2) the median wage in the country as at 2021 is 940 EUR net (CV-online.lv, 2022); 3) the average wage (gross) is 1,280 EUR (LV portals [LV portal], 2021); 4) the minimum retirement pension is 149.60 EUR (VSAA, 2021). The respondents are working-age inhabitants of the Latvian capital Riga which, according to Riga city economic profile in January 2021 (Riga.lv, 2021), consist of 388,614 persons (the population). The sample with a confidence

level of 95% and a confidence interval 5% is 384 respondents whose opinion in the further research can be based on to find out the trends of consumer behaviour in terms of choosing paid health services.

The study is still in progress. Based on the opinion given by the respondents so far (sample set $n=793$), it is possible to determine a trend and formulate a hypothesis for further research; 59% women and 41% men took part in the survey. More than a half of the respondents have higher education (bachelor's and/or master's degree) and an income level above the minimum wage in Latvia, i.e. is in the ranges of 501-1,000 EUR and 1,001-1,499 EUR.

The study reveals that 94% of the respondents have received paid healthcare services at least once in their life, which means that paid healthcare services are in demand, mostly based on the recommendation and availability of a certain specialist doctor. Price, too, affects the choice, but, according to the respondents, it is only the second most important criterion behind the specialist doctor who provides the service.

The results as to the impact of digital marketing tools on the choice of paid healthcare services show differences among respondent groups. For instance, for consumers aged 65 and above, the choice of paid health services is mostly unaffected by digital marketing tools.

Paid online advertising does not affect most respondents whereas, for instance, interactive online campaigns on paid health services positively affect respondents aged 18-27 and respondents with elementary education and higher education. It should be added that a cross-sectional analysis of the data by level of education shows that respondents with elementary education are affected by online advertisements, advertising banners in mass media, advertisements on social media (Facebook and Instagram). Furthermore, men are attracted by the aforementioned digital marketing tools more than women.

The results of the study indicate a trend that some respondent groups are affected negatively, deterred and dissuaded from purchasing paid healthcare services by digital marketing tools. For instance, within the digital marketing tool subgroup of paid online advertising tools, advertising banners negatively affect respondents aged 43-64 with income above 1,500 EUR, while advertising banners in mass media negatively affect respondents aged 18-27 with income below 500 EUR, and those aged 18-27 with income between 501 and 1,000 EUR are negatively affected by advertising on Google, and advertising articles in mass media. Interestingly, those of the same age group (18-27 years) but with higher income (over 1,500 EUR) are deterred in their choice of paid healthcare services by advertising on Instagram, online advertising etc. It should be added that online advertising tools – advertising banners, advertising on Google, advertising articles, and advertising on YouTube – particularly deter the purchase of paid health services for women aged 18-27 with income above 1,500 EUR.

In contrast, e-mail marketing tools and reminders of appointment positively affect the choice of the respondents as regards paid healthcare services. It can be concluded from the study that personalised offers and monthly newsletters by e-mail encourage the purchase of paid healthcare services for respondents with secondary and higher education and those aged 28-42, especially men. Older women with higher education, in turn, are affected positively in their choice of paid health services by reminders of appointment and personalised offers. Overall, for women of all ages regardless of income level, the choice of paid healthcare services is positively affected by reminders of appointment by e-mail. Online service quality and online reviews particularly encourage the purchase of paid healthcare services for respondents with higher education. Customer relationship management tools affect the choice of paid healthcare services for men aged 18-27 with income between 1,001 and 1,499 EUR, and online service quality encourages men aged 43-64 with income above 1,500 EUR. Overall, regardless of gender, online

reviews positively affect the respondents more than reviews on the institution's website. The study identified the option to book appointment online, website functionality/loading speed and convenient website structure and navigation as the most conducive to the choice of paid healthcare services. As concerns process automation tools, the respondents (especially those with secondary and higher education) have indicated mobile application, QR codes and digital payment options as tools conducive to the choice of paid health services. The respondents (especially men with higher income across all age groups) are sceptical towards the impact of chatbots or virtual assistants on their choice. Women, in turn, see the impact of process automation tools as neutral and rather positive.

The overall trend is that as the channel through which it is most convenient to receive information about paid health care services, respondents choose the website of the health care institution, e-mail and social networks, while the least respondents choose such channels as text messages, online advertising, incl. on various websites, etc., as well as in the mass media. Some respondents indicated that they do not like to be bothered unnecessarily, and if necessary, they search for the information of interest on paid health care services themselves.

The most important criteria for respondents when choosing paid health care services are a specific doctor-specialist who performs paid health care services, the price of the paid health care service and a recommendation from a doctor-specialist. As the least important criteria, the respondents indicated advertising (TV, radio, newspapers, outdoor advertising), health care facility environment, online reviews, online reviews of a paid service.

Mainly, the trend shows that the use of digital tools does not negatively affect the choice of paid services offered by the hospital – the usage of digital tools improves the choice of paid healthcare services, so the use of various digital tools in the digital marketing activities of healthcare institutions is evaluated positively. It can be concluded that the influence of digital tools on the choice of paid healthcare services for men and women varies in different age groups, which should be taken into account when promoting a particular paid healthcare service using digital marketing tools. The consumption of digital tools changes as the respondents' level of education increases, respondents with a higher education choose more tools than respondents with a lower level of education. Regardless of gender, income and education, respondents in the 18-27 age group are more influenced by digital tools than other age groups.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

- 1) The results of the study show that the respondents are least affected in their choice by paid online advertising tools, followed by process automation tools and content marketing tools, and most affected by website, followed by customer relationship management tools and e-mail marketing tools. Importantly, across the four respondent groups (gender, age, education, income), there are differences as to the impact of digital tools on the choice of paid healthcare.
- 2) Digital marketing continues to develop and expand its presence in the daily life of people. Specifically, one of the main impact factors is the extensive development of information and communication technologies in the private and public sector. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has unexpectedly become a digital accelerator, as businesses and markets were forced to adapt to the limited mobility. In the course of time, the concept of digital marketing has evolved and developed. Currently, digital marketing is a complex of philosophy, strategies and tools for marketing activities and interaction with computer networks that allows to conduct market survey as well as transport, sell and purchase goods and ideas. The use of digital marketing enables businesses to be flexible and adapt to

changes in the external environment, build effective relationships with their consumers, and respond more to their needs and understanding.

3) It has been identified that businesses use such digital marketing tools as search engine optimisation (SEO), content marketing, process automation, e-commerce marketing, campaign marketing and social media marketing, social media optimisation, direct marketing by e-mail, e-books, QR codes, applications, optical discs and games etc., and those were split into six groups – online advertising, content marketing, website, e-mail marketing, customer management tools, and process automation tools.

4) The use of digital tools does not negatively affect the choice of services offered by hospitals – digital tools are rather neutral or conducive to the choice of paid healthcare services. Thus, their use in digital marketing activities of a hospital is rated positively. Most healthcare institutions actively use their website, much fewer of them pursue communication in the digital environment. Private clinics, especially health centres, use much more digital tools than municipal and state healthcare institutions – paid online advertising, podcasts.

5) The most important criteria for the respondents when choosing paid healthcare services is the specialist doctor who provides the paid healthcare service, the price of the paid healthcare service, and recommendation from a specialist doctor. The criteria indicated as the least important are advertising (TV, radio, newspapers, outdoor advertising), healthcare institution environment, online reviews. 94% of the respondents have at least once used paid healthcare services. 36% of those have visited a specialist doctor for a consultation, 31% have had a medical examination (RTG, USG etc.), 20% have used rehabilitation services, 10% have had operations, and 2% have used other services, such as dentistry, laboratory tests, obstetrics.

6) The consumption of digital tool changes depending on level of education – higher educated respondents use more tools than lower educated respondents. Irrespective of gender, income and education, respondents aged between 18 and 27 are more affected by digital tools than other age groups. In contrast, respondents aged over 65 are practically unaffected by digital tools, except some cases at a certain level of education and income or depending on gender.

7) The impact of digital tools on the choice of paid healthcare services varies for men and women of different age groups. For men, the choice of positively affected by content marketing tools, whereas women are more affected by paid online advertising tools. The respondents' choice of paid healthcare services is positively affected the most by clearly indicated contact details, the option to book an appointment on the website, online service quality, and website functionality and speed, and the least by such tools as advertising on Twitter and advertising banners in mass media.

8) The most preferred channel for receiving information about paid healthcare services is the healthcare institution website, e-mail, and social media, while channels like messages, online advertising (including various websites etc.) and advertising in mass media are the least preferred. Some respondents indicate that they prefer not to be disturbed and look for information about paid healthcare services themselves when necessary.

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