

Does social media marketing increase the sales of organic food?

Ahmad Durbul^{1*}, Peter Osiako¹, Firas Alarawi² and Ayman Alshaabani³

¹ Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Doctoral School in Management and Organizational Sciences, H-7400 Kaposvár, Hungary

² Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Institute of Food Science and Technology, Department of Bioengineering and Alcoholic Drink Technology, H-1118 Budapest, Hungary

³ Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Doctoral School in Economic and Regional Sciences, H-2100 Gödöllő, Hungary

*Corresponding author: Ahmaddrbol22@gmail.com

Abstract

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Overcoming the involved constraints, such as high prices, a lack of awareness, and a limited number of sales points, is one way to increase consumers' willingness to buy organic food. Social networks, with their massive number of active users, can be used to introduce, promote, and sell organic food. Not much research was found on social media nor its role in marketing organic food. Scant research has been conducted to understand the role of social media in increasing organic food sales. To bridge this academic gap, this paper explores the related literature to find whether marketing on social media can increase the sales of organic food. The findings refer to a common emphasis on the substantial role of social media in supporting buyer-seller relationships, advertisements, electronic word-of-mouth, and all phases of the organic food sales process, which in turn have an influence on escalating the sales volume of organic food.

Keywords: social networks; marketing; organic food; sales

Introduction

The organic food market is characterized by low demand and limited sales compared to the conventional food market (Mozas-Moral et al., 2016). The significant obstacles include high prices, a lack of awareness of the competitive features of organic food, and a limited number of sales points (Mozas-Moral et al., 2016). One solution is to use social networks. The development of intensified interactions between firms and customers through social network platforms is remarkable, especially over the past few decades. Social networks allow firms to reach more buyers regardless of their geographical regions, to establish stronger relationships, to promote their brands, and to achieve superior performance and competitive advantage (Li et al., 2021). Therefore, so-

cial media marketing on various platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Google+ is used to drive traffic, spread brand awareness, and generate leads (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020). This is because, on social networks, consumers have become participants in the marketing process by commenting, collaborating, and creating messages (Hamilton et al., 2016). For the organic food sector, social media provides marketers with inexpensive tools for exchanging information and supporting interpersonal relationships (Guha et al., 2018), stimulating consumer purchasing behaviour (Mozas-Moral et al., 2016), and increasing sales (Lu & Miller, 2019). There is a little bit of research on social media and organic food. For example, Tariq et al. (2019) studied how social media forums, ratings, and reviews influence buying behaviour. Sobhanifard & Es-

htiaghi (2020) explored the importance of trust factors in social media posts. Lu & Miller (2019) evaluated the influence of interactive communication on customer loyalty and sales of organic food; and Yue et al. (2017) assessed how online presentation of organic food helps in boosting trust among consumers. In fact, little research has been conducted to understand the role of social media in supporting each phase of the organic food sales process. To bridge this academic gap, this paper explores the related literature to find whether marketing on social media can increase the sales of organic food.

Social Media

In its definition, social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media refers to the “activities, practices, and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media which are web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios” (Mohammadian & Mohammadreza, 2012). The first definition perceives social media as online tools and applications that facilitate communication and interaction in real-time settings. The second definition perceives social media as information-sharing activities. The mutual aspects between the two definitions are sharing and communication. Social media are characterized by dynamism, openness, and interconnection. These features enable businesses and customers to interact and influence one another through passive observations and/or explicit communications, allowing for better customer relationship management and an improved decision-making process (Libai et al., 2020). Social media data are described by the 3Vs (i.e., volume, velocity, and variety). A huge amount of data is generated from various social media channels, including blogs, websites, forums, and social networks in different formats including videos, texts, and images. To extract and analyse this type of data, contemporary technologies are used (Li et al., 2021; Moe & Schweidel, 2017). Social media exist in different forms. For example, social networking sites (Facebook & LinkedIn), blogs, micro-blogs (Twitter), video-sharing sites, wikis, photo-sharing sites, instant messaging, widgets, podcasts, virtual worlds, and more (Whiting & Deshpande, 2016). Another classification categorizes social media platforms into three categories. First, text-based applications, such as those found on collaborative platforms like Wikipedia and blogs, can only exchange a limited amount of information. Second, text, photos, and videos can be shared on sites such as YouTube and social networking sites such as

Facebook. The third category is composed of platforms for virtual environments, e.g., virtual games and social worlds, e.g., Second Life and World of Warcraft (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Facebook, with 2936 million users, is the most popular social media application; YouTube comes in second with 2476; Instagram is third with 1440; TikTok has 1023; Snapchat has 617; Twitter has 486; and Pinterest has 433 million users (Chaffey, 2022).

Social media marketing is a concept that indicates mixing sociology and technology to advance and shift marketing strategies from a monologue to a dialogue (Alameddine, 2013). SMM is basically an online advertising that relies on social communities and cultural context to accomplish business objectives (Kabukcu, 2017).

Social media marketing involves upsides and downsides. The upsides include reduced marketing costs, more effective promotion, faster and more authentic responses, and better communication. Social media marketing also allow businesses to spread their brand image faster and build better business credibility, and reputation. Regarding the downsides, SMM is time- and effort-consuming and entails innovation, for creating compelling content. Regular updates are necessary to keep customers. Without update, consumers forget and leave. Additionally, negative comments influence the business widely if not managed appropriately and any trivial mistake goes viral. One more downward comes from competitors, who can effortlessly replicate creative ideas and strategies. Reaching the perfect followers is not an easy task and miscommunication can happen due to the lack of physical communication (Soelaiman & Ekawati, 2022).

Organic Food Demand and Challenges

Several factors have contributed to the rapid growth in demand for organic food around the world. The announced food scares boosted the concern about food safety, increased awareness of health and healthy foods, the trend of environmentally friendly products, and the argument over genetic modification of food (Gunasekaran & Murugan, 2020). The growing trend of organic food consumption was also a reaction to the inclination to include pesticides, fertilizers, antibiotics, and growth hormones in conventional agricultural practice, causing detrimental effects on human health and the environment (Dimitri, 2010). The production of organic food is free of any pesticides and synthetic fertilizers, genetically modified organisms, industrial solvents, and irradiation (Sobhanifard & Eshtiaghi, 2020). Therefore, organic foods are healthy, nutritious, environmentally friendly, and safe (Teng & Wang, 2015). The consumption of this type of food is powered by several psychosocial factors, such as awareness of health and animal welfare, as well as social and

environmental concerns (Jose & Kuriakose, 2021; Kose & Kircova, 2021). Thus, the growing demand for organic products is mainly driven by consumer interest in health and nutrition as well as environmental issues (Nandi et al., 2016). However, the organic food market faces several challenges.

The first challenge is the lack of awareness among consumers; they are unaware of the associated health benefits. Even worse, the difference between conventional and organic food is not clear. For example, consumers are confused between naturally labelled foods and organic foods (Kuchler et al., 2020). Organic foods are developed by different methods away from fertilizers, chemicals, and pesticides (Kumar et al., 2022). All the production, manufacturing, and handling processes are organic and defined by certifying bodies (Gunasekaran & Murugan, 2020). Natural foods refer to food items that have not gone through any chemical alteration or synthesis action with any means (Kuchler et al., 2020). An additional challenge is related to the supply chain. Organic food involves high costs not only of production, but also of collection, transportation, and storage. The low volumes of organic food pose relatively high costs of marketing and distribution (Bhattarai et al., 2013). The high cost of organic food is also a prominent challenge. The high cost of organic food results from the increased cost of training farmers, processing, packaging, inventory control, distribution, and logistics (Prasertwattanukul & Ongkunaruk, 2018).

Social Media and Organic Food Sales

Marketers and manufacturers of organic food seek to increase consumers' willingness to buy organic food. Social networks are new channels through which this type of chemical-free food can be introduced, promoted, and sold. These platforms help marketers to create and stabilize the value of organic foods and boost consumption and consumer loyalty (Sobhanifard & Eshtiaghi, 2020; Tariq et al., 2019). Social media grants businesses agility when interacting with customers and the market. In the business context, agility is translated into increased sales, which is translated into higher profits (Andzulis et al., 2012). Adopting social media substantially and considerably escalates business performance because businesses engage with customers more powerfully and manage market requirements proactively, resulting in increased sales volume. Social-media adoption was proven to positively support the performance of business, customer service, sales, and finance (Andzulis et al., 2012; Trainor et al., 2014). Social media tools such as Facebook brand pages have a significant role in generating more organic food sales. Posts related to health, environment, and price stimulate consumers to purchase (Lu & Miller, 2019). Ratings, forums, and reviews on social media have been shown to positively

influence consumers' attitudes toward organic food (Tariq et al., 2019). A better overall rating and a great number of reviews promote net sales (Kim et al., 2016).

Websites are, in fact, a type of social media platform, and maintaining their features is critical for disseminating various organic food information. Therefore, information-rich webpages that educate consumers about, quality and certification have a higher moderating influence on purchase. In particular, information related to nutrition, processing and production methods, and environmental benefits has influence on customers' attitudes and thus stimulates purchasing decisions (Tariq et al., 2019). As discussed, posts are a great tool on social media that accelerate sales; however, these posts should reflect trust (Sobhanifard & Eshtiaghi, 2020). In social media shopping environments, trust is a crucial issue due to the salient nature of peer-generated posts (Hajli et al., 2017). The market size and sales of organic food can be increased by increasing consumers' trust. Trust in organic food items can be boosted in several ways, such as by increasing posts about benefits, valid experiences, certificates, and guarantees (Sobhanifard & Eshtiaghi, 2020). From the same perspective of trust, the richness of media has a substantial positive influence on online product presentation and thus on consumers' trust (Yue et al., 2017). Trust in social media escalates information, which leads to increased familiarity with products, which in turn increases purchase intentions (Hajli et al., 2017). Accordingly, participating on social media and utilising their technology-based tools allows marketers to increase awareness of organic food and its important features for health and the environment, resulting in increased purchase intentions and sales.

Social Media and Buyer-Seller Relationships

It is essential to understand why and how utilizing various social media tools can escalate sales. Social media support customer-relationship management, reflecting on the buyer-seller relationship (Itani et al., 2020). To identify the social media implications on the buyer-seller relationship, interactions have long been perceived as an integral part of the sales process, and they are essential for establishing trust. In-person interaction is not the only way salespeople establish and keep relationships with customers. Sales reps are increasingly utilizing social media to reach out to prospects, who are increasingly using social media (Marshall et al., 2012).

Social media allows consumers and marketers to connect faster and provide feedback at a lower cost (Si, 2015). Buyer and seller are two mutual parties in the sales process (Viio & Grönroos, 2016). Adopting social media has developed the buyer-seller relationship, influencing the sales process

directly. Numerous researchers have documented this fact. For example, social media adoption and CRM technologies were found to cultivate information exchange between the two parties, which in turn supports the salesforce (Itani et al., 2020). An additional example, sales managers were found to extensively employ technological-based social media tools to build connectivity and relationships. Adoption of social media has been shown to support the buyer-seller relationship and influence the salesforce (Marshall et al., 2012).

Role of Social Media in Advertising

In the first half of 2022, about 1.96 billion active users will use Facebook daily (Statista, 2022). The key role of social media in advertising and promoting various products and services is well-known (Alalwan et al., 2017). This tremendous number of active users who engage in real-time context represent prospects for various brands, where they can develop rich marketing campaigns based on their demographics and interests (Ertemel & Ammoura, 2016; Hansson et al., 2013). Twitter and Snapchat are effective applications in terms of promotion and advertisements (Gangadharbatla, 2019). Social media advertisements represent favourable tools for reaching current and potential customers (Vinerean, 2017). Social media advertisements have a remarkable impact on increasing sales (Ge et al., 2021). Increasing YouTube-based advertisements has increased the sales volume (Subha, 2020). As a result, social media provide effective marketing opportunities for increasing sales.

Role of Social Media in Word-of-Mouth

When current customers publish posts or comments about their purchase experience, they in fact influence others. Thus, it is an effective approach to adjust the current business marketing strategies based on these published talks and discussions; listening to such talks provides a chance to recalibrate marketing strategies. In the marketing context, published opinions represent the so-called word of mouth word-of-mouth. Using social media, with its massive active user base, has a significant impact on word-of-mouth, which has a direct impact on purchase decisions and customer perceptions (Vinerean, 2017).

When compared to traditional marketing tools, social media electronic word-of-mouth (WOM) was found to have a more significant effect (Alalwan et al., 2017). Additionally, electronic word-of-mouth allowed social media advertisements to outperform traditional advertisements through banners (Barreto, 2013). The key role of social media in enhancing word-of-mouth is due to the rich interactions not only between marketers and customers but also between customers themselves (Cowden, 2014). Accordingly, it is essen-

tial for businesses to focus on and share the endorsements created by customers. That is, user-created contents are important resources that can be emphasized, redirected, and transformed into campaigns of promotion (Vinerean, 2017). In short, social media, with its massive audience, supports word-of-mouth, which is a powerful spontaneous tool created by customers themselves, providing high authenticity.

Role of Social Media in the Sales Process

Social media, including social networks, blogs, and video-sharing applications, are user-centered technologies through which users contribute by generating content such as opinions, feedback, and comments (Chaffey & Smith, 2013). Such authentic content revolutionises the sales sector. In fact, social media has flourished at each step in the sales process by enlarging sales representatives' networks (Andzulis et al., 2012). The sales process phases include prospecting, approaching, needing discovery, presenting, closing, and following up. Each phase entails a set of skills and abilities, and social media adoption has a role in each plan or strategy (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010).

The first phase of the sales process is prospecting or identifying customers. Social media are very effective in generating leads. Salespersons identify and locate customers who need and are willing to interact with and respond to the offers (Dubinsky, 1981). Social media allow sales representatives to search for possible customers and gather information. In this way, they obtain leads and then choose the best communication method while considering potential buying risks. Representatives can use social media to exchange information with customers; each of them can see the other's profile (Enyinda et al., 2021). Businesses can explore customers' inquiries, complaints, and even experiences by exploring their posts and comments. Then, businesses may opt to either interact actively by replying and commenting or collect this information in a passive way. The collected feedback can be shared with the responsible department to plan for better marketing campaigns that are customized to suit not only the current concerns but also respond to future needs (Andzulis et al., 2012). This phase is all about understanding the potential customers and shaping the approach phase.

The second phase is approaching. It is essential for salespersons to start attracting the attention of possible consumers and showing credibility to introduce themselves and establish rapport (Dubinsky, 1981; Rippe & Campbell, 2017). In this phase, social media has a significant role. The information collected from social media supports the performance of customer relationship management (CRM). This can be exemplified by holding a business event and sending invitations on a social media platform. During this event, sales-

persons talk to users who are or may be customers. This approach helps in collecting more information about prospects, such as their contacts, school, and other information that can be stored in the organization's CRM software (Andzulis et al., 2012). Another example is developing an app such as "Faceconnector." By allowing prospects to join this app, it will be easier to build and maintain relationships.

The needling discovery phase is where interaction starts. To discover the motives, needs, and desires of a prospect, salespersons ask questions and carefully listen to the answers. On social media, the cycle of questions and answers can be reduced because they can be posted to everyone. In the future, similar concerns can be covered. The process on social media is a form of combined learning, where consumers not only obtain a reply to their current concerns but also find replies to their future concerns. Customers find answers to their questions and to the questions that have not yet come to their mind (Andzulis et al., 2012). The third phase is presentation, showing solutions. Various product offers are created, each with its own set of benefits and ways in which consumers can benefit from it. It is the role of the salesperson to trigger the desire and let consumers build a strong belief in the introduced options (Dubinsky, 1981). The ability to find and introduce suitable solutions is a skill that reflects how professional the salesperson is. With all its visual aid capabilities, social media supports the presentation phase and makes it easier and more professional. Social media supports and enriches the presentation process because any presentation is built on engagement and collaboration, which each partner can contribute from their side (Andzulis et al., 2012).

The pre-final phase is the close. After asking for the closing of a deal, the prospect places an order to close the sale and becomes a customer. At this stage, all types of objections and hesitations should be covered in a professional manner (Rippe & Campbell, 2017). The role of social media in supporting the close phase is well known in terms of testimonials that help in averting objections. Testimonials that are published for everyone are effective tools; they are references from prior sales. When customers publish their opinions faithfully and openly, they encourage other users to get involved in this business. Another approach is to establish a dedicated forum for questions and answers. Such forums are useful in removing spam (Andzulis et al., 2012).

The final stage is the follow-up. Resolving after-sales issues is vital for keeping customers satisfied so that the probability of repeat purchases in the future increases (Dubinsky, 1981). The activities at this phase revolve around customer referral, customer satisfaction, and customer service (Dubinsky, 1981). As two-way communication platforms, social media support such activities. It is the salesperson's job to

keep communication smooth and successful and find chances for collecting referrals. Publishing success stories on social media is an effective approach for obtaining referrals. Establishing groups and forums on social media reduces e-mails, supports collaboration, enhances communication, and keeps customers updated with any new innovations and products (Andzulis et al., 2012).

Results and Discussion

This study enriches the body of knowledge about social media and organic food. The current study explores very few studies have been found that focus on the role of social media in marketing and selling organic food, but almost no study has studied how social media play a role in advancing the sales process in all its phases or how social media are helpful in increasing organic food sales. This study filled this academic gap. The current study has explored the literature from three perspectives. First, it has demonstrated that organic food demand has expanded quickly, and the consumption is driven mainly by awareness of health and animal welfare, as well as social and environmental concerns. These factors have been studied extensively in various studies (Mohammed, 2021; Rana & Paul, 2017; Saleki et al., 2020). Though the organic food market still faces several challenges, especially the lack of consumer awareness and the high prices and low volumes of organic items, these challenges exist and may differ from country to country. For example, regulations and laws (Price & GOH, 2020), the lower output of organic agriculture, which suppresses the sustainability concept (Niggli, 2015), and the high prices and availability issues of organic food in stores (Jarczok-Guzy, 2018). The role of social media in supporting sales in general has attracted many researchers. However, the role of social media in boosting organic food sales has been emphasized, and not much research has been found with a focus on this point.

Conclusion

This paper aims to explore the role of social media in supporting each phase of the organic food sales process and to find out whether social media has a role in increasing the sales of organic food. By reviewing the related literature on social media and organic food, the current findings refer to a common emphasis on the substantial role of social media in supporting buyer-seller relationships, advertisements, electronic word-of-mouth, and all phases of the organic food sales process, which in turn has an influence on escalating the sales volume of organic food. The findings of this paper encourage marketers to use social media for advertising and

quickly and extensively spreading reputable word-of-mouth and to develop social media marketing strategies for increasing organic food sales. This study represents a nucleus for future empirical research.

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