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COMMUNICATION OF LOCAL FARMERS' PRODUCTS THROUGH FACEBOOK: THE CASE STUDY OF NAŠE-VAŠE

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ABSTRACT:

Social media are currently not only used for communication between individuals but an increasing number of companies use these means as simple and fast sales and communication channels. The importance of communication with consumers through social networks, such as *Facebook*, is essential in today's marketplace for small businesses, for which this tool is one of the cheapest alternatives to communicating and selling products. This trend did not escape agriculture-specific local farmers who process fresh local products. The study's objective is to highlight the importance of social media communication in the agri-food sector, specifically in the sub-sector of local fresh products, as well as to determine which consumers are most interested in local products from farmers communicated through *Facebook*. We conducted the research using our *Facebook* page called *Ours-Yours* (in Slovak *Naše-Vaše*). This account was created for research purposes and has a clearly defined objective of supporting and promoting local fresh products from small Slovak farmers. Research involved 42 small farms that sell fresh local dairy products. From these farmers we discovered what form of marketing communication they had used in the past. Afterwards, we visited eight selected farms, took professional photos of their products, and promoted them under one brand using our *Facebook* page *Ours-Yours* (*Naše-Vaše*). The methodology of the research was based on an analysis of *Facebook* posts, which were visualised, uniformly graphically processed photographs of the products. Contributions were advertised on radio located 50 kilometres from the farms to ensure local marketing of the products. We measured demographic factors (gender and age) and users' interaction with individual posts. Research has shown that women between the ages of 45 – 64, who follow *Facebook* mostly from their mobile phones, are most interested in *Facebook* posts with local fresh products (and information about them).

KEY WORDS:

dairy products, Facebook, local products, marketing communication, social media

Introduction

Social media (SM) have become a significant part of daily life in postmodern society. According to Kaplan and Haenlein, SM are defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological foundations

of Web 2.0, allowing user-generated content to be created and exchanged".¹ These media have established new platforms of communication as separate channels,² where businesses and customers interact.³ However, online channels do not allow users only to communicate but to socialise as well.⁴ Most of the interactions are through virtual applications (like *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *LinkedIn*, *Twitter*), which in many cases create a positive perception and attitude to the use of online technologies.⁵ In this new environment, social media are allowing entrepreneurs to disseminate products or services via various platforms, which brings advantages in their minimal costs over traditional marketing processes.⁶ Based on many studies, social media are more noticed in B2C, rather than in B2B markets.⁷ Accordingly, it may be noted that recently, numerous articles have been dealing with brand management, advertising or customer relationship management.

Social media put the power of negotiation into the hands of customers while putting pressure on companies to fulfil their commitments. Customers take advantage of information available on social networks in order to make a decision. More and more companies adopt specific technologies that are able to create more efficient customer communication.⁸ Nowadays, if enterprises want to operate efficiently, they should develop social media presence as a tool for advertising and marketing campaigns, build strong and long-lasting relationships with customers, share information, educate and communicate on the network with their audience.⁹

Effectiveness of Social Media as a Tool of Online Communication

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are demanded in economies of all countries,¹⁰ since they represent a diverse selection of industries which play a significant role in most world economies. SMEs are characterised by their flexibility, power to generate income and ability to innovate.¹¹ However, in contrast with large companies, SMEs differ in several important aspects such as balanced strategic and operational activities, day-to-day asset management and long-term strategic planning, a lack of financial resources, a lack of expertise in knowledge management, a lack of human resources and a lack of marketing knowledge.¹² Even though there are the mentioned disadvantages, SMEs are obliged to face these challenges and approach them

more innovatively and firmly.¹³ Social media are particularly suitable for SMEs because of several benefits, including low costs and minimal technical requirements. Digital and social platforms provide opportunities for small businesses to become more visible, sustainable and viable.¹⁴ Additionally, social platforms (SPs) increase products' visibility, which raises their sales.¹⁵ These SPs serve as an ideal place to support negotiation between users and brands,¹⁶ generating content¹⁷ and innovation created by customers.¹⁸

Apart from this, the presence on social media such as *Facebook* could reach and engage consumers with brands.¹⁹ News shared by *We Are Social and Hootsuite* reveals a persistent positive trend in the Internet usage, which represents online more than half of the world's population. It is important to note that the growth of the trend results in a more accessible market for smartphones and data packages. The recent trend is that the average person uses social media for more than 2 hours a day and the average teenager for 9 hours a day.²⁰

The report also states that 9 out of 10 users sign in to their social media accounts via their smartphones. The results show 7 times longer usage of mobile applications than through standard mobile browsers. *Facebook* continues to hold the global leadership amongst social media platforms with a user growth of 15% per year. By summarising the aforementioned report and deeper analysis, key trends should be directed towards direct messenger marketing, social commerce, social search, hyper-transparency and consumers as contributors.²¹ *Facebook's* features enable SMEs to get an idea of each metric (traffic, interest, sales and reach, engage), and thus to analyse and develop their marketing efforts to utilise them on social media.²²

However, social media may not ensure marketing success and desired results in case of poor implementation of strategies. Hence, it is important to follow trends, which are not focused on the BE LOCAL trend. Integration of local marketing strategies utilised by social media may be the most influencing strategy for the present generation. Businesses may build traditional street-side strategies and even improve SEO efforts to increase rankings in web search results leading to their e-shops and social accounts. Foundation of local marketing is very simple – raise awareness of your brand, offer your product in a place you can reach and business success will follow. Many small businesses and successful entrepreneurs have made a huge fortune by focusing almost exclusively on the local.²³ Generally, consumer decisions on food market are influenced by a number of different factors that change under the influence of new trends.²⁴

Linking local farmers and consumers is the first step toward establishing a successful food market. The closer relationship between the farmer and the consumer brings great added value, which essentially creates a direct distribution channel from the producer to the local customer or short geographical distances between them.²⁵ However, it is necessary to notice that the rise of social media has led to changes in farmers' daily

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decisions and activities.²⁶ Social media have proved to be an invaluable tool for farmers who want to connect with their customers. These challenges are not present only in the case of the Slovak Republic but also have become a European issue. New theoretical and practical knowledge could bring new methods and approaches which may help us to solve the problem with a short supply chain. The European Commission believes that a short supply chain is applicable for the broad diversity of production, processing, marketing and distribution systems affiliated with local food across the EU-27 Member States.²⁷ Agricultural research and innovation have a crucial influence on the role of farmers and their impact on addressing sustainability challenges. Hence, we can conclude that EU programmes include suggestions for supporting local farmers which help to combine modern technology and maintain knowledge transfer.²⁸ New legislation should eliminate the disadvantaged position of EU farmers and food producers by restoring the proper functions of the food supply chain across the EU.²⁹

Methodology

The research aims to identify, on the business side, what communication channels are used by small-scale farmers on the Slovak market and then, on the side of consumers, to determine which categories of users show the highest level of interest in local fresh products on social networks, namely on *Facebook*. Based on primary research using a questionnaire, which involved 42 small-scale farms, we identified the most used way of communicating with customers primarily in the online environment, but also in the offline environment. Subsequently, we organised a road trip, visiting eight farms that regularly use *Facebook* for communication.

During the farm visits we conducted personal interviews and made photographs of the entire range of fresh products, which we processed under a recognisable identity. Each product photograph contained the product's name, type of processing, price, address and contact details of the farmer. We published the processed photographs on the research-related *Facebook* page *Ours-Yours (Naše-Vaše)*. This account had a clear goal – to support and promote the products of involved farmers. *Facebook* offers many more metrics to measure the success of posts, but in our research, we analysed only one selected metric – engagement (interaction) with the post. This metric is crucial, because it proves the user's real action in relation to the post, counting comments, shares and likes.

The *Facebook* posts of the entire product portfolio were published every 3 days and were sponsored based on the following targeting:

Age: 18 – 65. We targeted only economically active users.

Location targeting: within 50 km of the farms. We identified this targeting based on the products' location definition that speaks of local products as of those manufactured and processed within a 50 kilometres range.

Interests: Local food, agriculture and fresh food.

Posting: The *Facebook* algorithm automatically posts a post based on a defined targeted group and displays it in accordance with one's user habits. All *Facebook* posts were sponsored by the same amount of money – 6 euros. In order to fulfil the research goal, we have formulated the research hypotheses as follows:

26 DONG, J. Q., YANG, C. H.: Business Value of Big Data Analytics: A Systems-theoretic Approach and Empirical Test. In *Information & Management*, 2020, Vol. 57, No. 1. [online]. [2020-02-02]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2018.11.001>.

27 Local Food and Short Supply Chains. In *EU Rural Review*, 2012, No. 12, p. 4-11 [online]. [2019-10-11]. Available at: <https://cnrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/cnrd/files/E8F24E08-0A45-F272-33FB-A6309E3AD601.pdf>.

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29 *Ministri EÚ pre poľnohospodárstvo rokovali o podpore vidieckych oblastí a výroby kvalitných potravín*. [online]. [2019-10-11]. Available at: <http://mpsr.sk/sk/index.php?navID=1&id=13411>.

H1: The most frequent interaction with *Facebook* content occurs via mobile phones.

H2: Women aged 25 – 34 are most interested in posts involving fresh local products.

H3: Women interact with these *Facebook* posts more frequently than men.

Findings

Importance of Local Products

Recent trends in food shopping indicate an increasing demand for local food, which presents new marketing opportunities for small agricultural producers. It is important for economic, environmental and environmental well-being as well as for the health of citizens. For smaller local farms, direct sales to the consumer yield a higher percentage of sales than in case of large farms.³⁰ A local food system is a system, in which food is produced, processed and marketed within a defined geographical area. Examples of local food systems are:

- farmers' markets,
- farm sales,
- box delivery schemes,
- community-supported agricultural systems.³¹

Products that are exchanged under local food systems are usually those that are traceable to a particular place of origin and have distinctive characteristics.³² The research carried out by Kneafsey et al. defines two ways of understanding the term "local":

1. Defined as a radius of 50 km from the market.
2. Relationship to recognised borders, such as country, county, national park or other specific geographical area.³³

Safety and quality of food belong to the most important factors of building the brand and image of the product on the local, regional or global markets.³⁴ Recent trends in food shopping indicate an increasing demand for local products, which represents new marketing opportunities for small agricultural producers.³⁵ Local production represents a small, but growing share of the total sales of agricultural and food products in the United States.³⁶ One of the reasons that knowledge of trends in consumer behaviour is inevitable today is

30 MARTINEZ, S. et al.: *Local Food Systems; Concepts, Impacts, and Issues*. Washington, D.C. : U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2010. [online]. [2019-10-04]. Available at: https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/46393/7054_err97_1_1.pdf?v=42265.

31 *Innovation in Short Food Supply Chains: Creating Value Together*. [online]. [2019-03-15]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/sites/agri-cip/files/cip-agri_brochure_short_food_supply_chains_2019_en_web.pdf?fbclid=IwAR12yIMOREeSKq2ov8H9Pi02gYepWvu3ay1gLBYP91nTQsAFyiZj8LEkt9o.

32 NEWERLI-GUZ, J., RYBOWSKA, A.: Traditional and Regional Product – Luxury Only on Special Occasions or Every Day? In *Handel Wewnętrzny*, 2015, Vol. 355, No. 2, p. 287.

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the increase in global communication. Raising awareness has made most consumers rely more on their own judgment and opinion. Customers are increasingly turning to the Internet to get the information and advice they need; an example of this is the increase in online business. Due to the increase in the informatisation of society, a conscious consumption trend is currently preferred, in which consumers are more concerned about the environmental and social consequences of their consumption.³⁷

Offline and Online Communication of Small-scale Farmers

In our research, we focused on small-scale farmers (with up to 50 employees) who produce raw milk that they process into dairy products. We sent a questionnaire directly to these farmers and by completing the questionnaire, they were automatically included into the *Ours-Yours (Naše-Vaše)* research project whose aim was to promote sales and fresh farmers' products. 42 farmers from all regions of Slovakia participated in the research. We analysed their use of communication tools in the offline and online environment. The main goal was to identify how many farmers are engaged in *Facebook* communication.

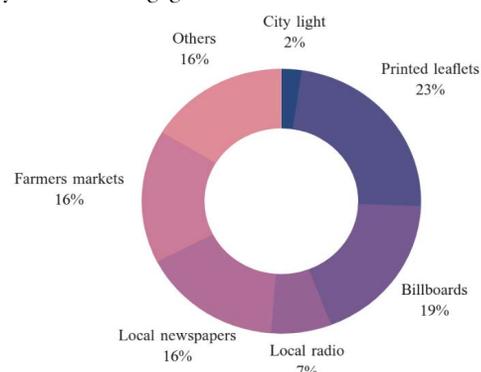


Figure 1: Offline communication of small-scale farmers

Source: Own processing

Based on the data shown in Figure 1, we identified that most farmers use printed brochures (23%) that are sent to mailboxes of potential customers in the region in which the farm is located, or that are located in their own company stores. Also, very popular is the use of billboards where the farmers present navigation to their farms or promote their fresh farm products.

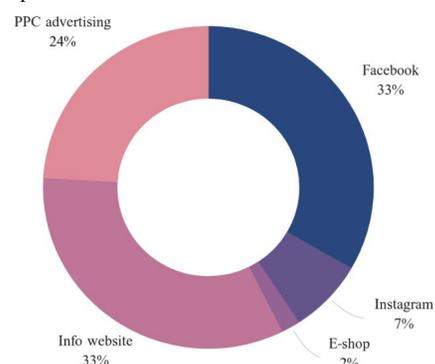


Figure 2: Online communication of small-scale farmers

Source: Own processing

Although *Facebook* is now considered to be the most stable social network, in Q1 2019 it even had an upward trend. *Facebook* was visited by 2.27 billion active users per month, up 55 million from Q4 2018. Despite this global trend of using the *Facebook* platform, by consumers or businesses, this is not very apparent in the field of Slovak agriculture, especially for small farmers who produce local fresh products. Only 1/3 of farmers (33%) use this platform to communicate with their customers.

Based on the personal interviews with farmers, we have identified potential reasons for not using this platform. Small farmers mostly employ a small number of employees who are primarily employed directly in the production or processing of products. Farmers themselves are responsible for everything from plant production to the processing and marketing of products. They do not employ sales specialists who focus on selling products, including marketing and customer communications. These are the reasons why they do not communicate at all using the *Facebook* platform or do not communicate regularly. But some farms have become aware of the importance of communication in the online environment and have therefore become interested in social media. They have even received guidance from marketing agency experts in order to improve their communication with customers and increase their sales.

Farm Visits (the Road Trip)

During the research we made road trip visits to eight selected farms that regularly use *Facebook* to communicate. During these visits, we conducted interviews with farmers about how they use marketing tools and what are their needs in the agricultural sector. Farmers expressed awareness of the need to use communication in the online environment, but most of them are still looking for a way to use it regularly. Four farms we visited use *Facebook* communication regularly, i.e. more often than the other four. The farms active on *Facebook* have younger family members who are more strongly connected to these technologies and are aware of the need to present their business on social networks. The other four farms, that do not regularly use *Facebook*, are owned by older-generation farmers who do not possess the knowledge of using the platform as a communication channel with their customers, so they do not use it at all or use it very inefficiently and at irregular intervals, which is of no significance.

United Identity in Local Product Communication via Facebook

The partial research findings have shown that farmers find it difficult to communicate their quality, fresh and local dairy products. During the field research on farms, we made product photographs that were processed with identical graphic design.



37 PETR, Š.: *Event marketing: Jak využít emoce v marketingové komunikaci*. Prague: Grada Publishing, 2003, p. 236.



Figure 3: Selected promoted products made on a farm in Horné Srnie
Source: Own processing

Communication Evaluation (the Facebook page *Naše-Vaše*)

Based on the obtained materials, we promoted local products from eight individual farmers using the Facebook page *Ours-Yours (Naše-Vaše)*. The page was created for the research aiming to promote and raise awareness of local food manufacturers through a consistent brand identity. The farms were promoted during the period between 1st August 2019 and 1st September 2019 at 3-day intervals.

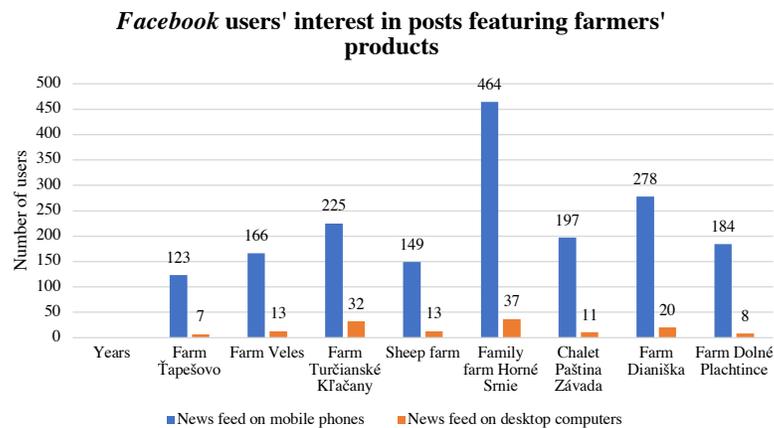


Figure 4: Numbers of interactions on devices
Source: Own processing

By evaluating where the interactions occurred, we can clearly conclude that users were browsing news feeds on their mobile devices in almost all cases. Each post had a different number of interactions, which could be due to targeting; the user's geographic location was supposed to be within a radius of 50 kilometres from the farm. Nevertheless, in all cases, most interactions took place on mobile phones and only a few on desktop devices. This confirms our first hypothesis (H1). It also means that farms, businesses, agencies or marketers themselves must place particular emphasis on creating content tailored to mobile devices.

Social media platforms' reports confirm the dominant trend of using social networking sites via mobile devices, as data for 2019 presents the number of active users on social networks as 3.484 billion (45% of the

world's total population) and the total number of active social media users using mobile phones is up to 3.256 billion (42% of total population).³⁸ Also, the Facebook report shows the proportion of active users according to the use of the device – 96% via smartphones and tablets and only 25% via laptops and desktop computers.³⁹ The results of our research confirm the global trend also in case of the Slovak market.

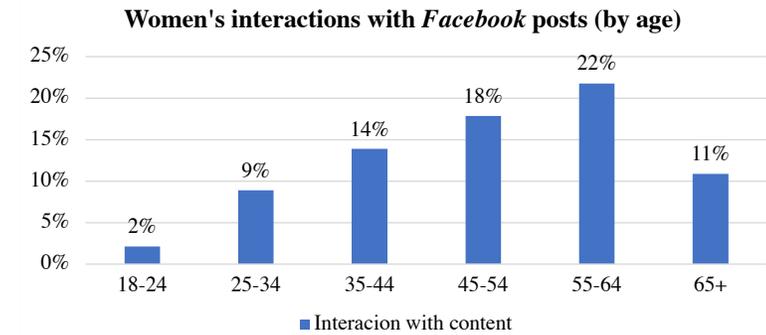


Figure 5: Women's interactions with Facebook posts (by age)
Source: Own processing

Figure 5 shows that the average values of women's interactions in each age category are higher than in case of men. The 45 – 54 and 55 – 64 age groups express the highest interest. The role and relative influence of the husband or wife on purchasing decisions associated with various products and services has a different character. The influence of men and women varies by product type. Sometimes it can have a decisive influence. Based on the results of the analysis, we can confirm that women in the family are more interested in everyday products – such as food and groceries. We can deduce that women aged 45 – 64 have families in which they decide what food to buy, and therefore they are more interested in fresh products also on social networks.

This summary of women's interactions rejects our hypothesis (H2) that women aged 25 – 34 are most interested in fresh local products. The analysis shows that 14% of women belonging to this age group are interested in these products. It is not the lowest value reached, but it is added to the group below 15%. The youngest generation of users (people aged 18 – 24) has the least interest in fresh local products; in all cases, the interest was not higher than 2%. The share of Facebook global advertising audience by age group and gender from July 2019 describes individual categories, which confirm the leading position of the young generation. The largest share is the category of women aged 25 – 34 with a 19% share and men in the same age category with a 13% share. This is also implied by our H2, which has not been confirmed by our research. Both women and men over 45 do not exceed 5.2% and with increasing age this trend decreases.⁴⁰ Given the global facts and our results, we can see the differences. However, our analysis focuses on a specific segment, namely local products, which raise higher interest in case of older people.

38 DATAREPORTAL: *Digital 2019 Global Digital Overview (January 2019) v01*. [online]. [2019-03-15]. Available at: <<https://www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2019-global-digital-overview-january-2019-v01?ref=https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-global-digital-overview>>.

39 KEMP, S.: *Succeeding with Social: Essential Advice for Making More Strategic Use of Social Media*. [online]. [2019-09-11]. Available at: <https://www.employerbrandingsummit.asia/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/1_Simon-Kemp-Keipos-Employer-Branding-2019-Presentation-v01.pdf>.

40 *Digital 2019. Essential Insights into How People Around the World Use the Internet, Mobile Devices, Social Media, and E-commerce*. [online]. [2019-09-11]. Available at: <<https://www.juancmejia.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Digital-2019-WeAreSocialy-HootSuite.pdf>>.

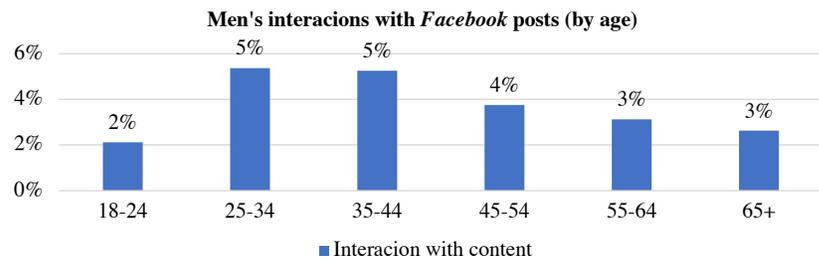


Figure 6: Men's interactions with Facebook posts (by age)

Source: Own processing

The results in Figure 6 show that younger men aged 25 – 34 and 35 – 44 are most interested in fresh local products, with an average of around 5%, which is a very low percentage compared to women's interactions. Only in two cases (men aged 25 – 35 and 35 – 44) men's interest exceeded in average 5%. This result may indicate men's lack of interest in *Facebook* posts and social media content advertising fresh products. Some of them rather watch the technical information that appears in the news feed. The result of the analysis, which shows the low interest of men in fresh food presented on social networks, only confirms that men generally express their interest in advertisements promoting areas such as environment, car sales, media devices and other technical matters.⁴¹

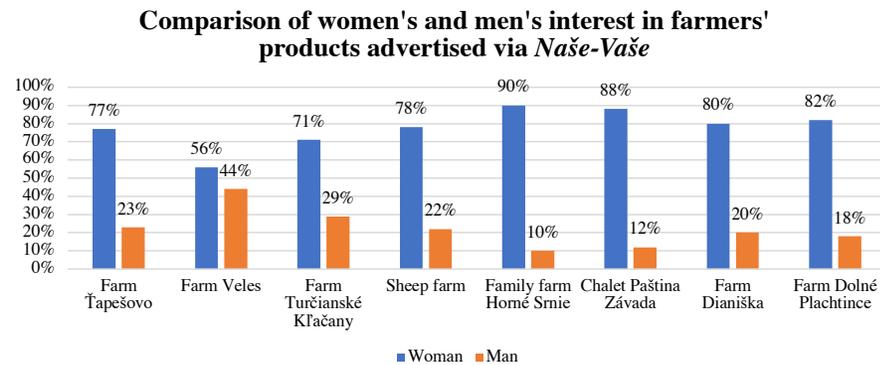


Figure 7: Comparison of women's and men's interest in farmers' products advertised via Naše-Vaše

Source: Own processing

As we can see in Figure 7, the third hypothesis that women interact with *Naše-Vaše's* posts on *Facebook* more frequently than men, has been confirmed in each age group. In all but one case, women's interest reached more than 70%. In case of the Veles farm contribution, men achieved the highest interaction of 44% and women only 56%. According to the research, women are the target group for *Facebook* communication on local fresh products. This result may also indicate that in Slovak families, women are still the ones who take care of buying groceries for their families, and this habit is also manifested in their activities on social networks where these products attract women much more than men.

Conclusion

Nowadays, communication of small- and medium-sized enterprises through social networks is an inevitable marketing activity, because it maintains the relationship with the existing customer and can reach potential customers. The results of the research on small-scale farmers offering local fresh products we carried out shows that these farmers most often use information websites and also social media, specifically *Facebook*, in the online space. Despite this trend in marketing communication, only 1/3 of surveyed Slovak small-scale farmers selling value-added products use this communication platform. This results from a lack of workforce, a lack of marketing skills and rapidly changing online platform conditions. The research shows that consumer behaviour in the online space is changing rapidly, as evidenced by the older generation, which shows increased activity in relation to *Facebook*.

We will continue to study the behaviour of different consumer generations in the online environment. Our field research has shown that if SMEs, in particular farmers selling fresh local products, use content that is visually processed, identical and interesting, they can attract a certain audience of users who can become their paying customers. Despite our assumptions that *Facebook* posts involving local products are particularly interesting for the young people aged 25 – 34, the research has shown that the greatest interest in these products is expressed by older women aged 45 – 64. The consequence may be that many younger users do not have their own families with children yet, and are more career-oriented and busy. The use of mobile phones to interact with the posts is universally dominant in case of all age groups and both genders. Based on these results, we recommend small farmers seeking to be competitive to enhance their skills in communication via social networks, where, as our research has shown, older generations of consumers are becoming more and more active.

The tendency to achieve increased knowledge about the possibilities and tools related to *Facebook* communication must be nationwide. The state or institutions involved in the support of rural development and the support of the domestic market and domestic food should also support this area of interest in the form of providing professional services (setting marketing and communication strategies, assisting in their implementation). Another recommendation is to create a platform that will help associate and link individual farmers and promote farmers in each region. The farmers must be aware of the importance of communication with their customers through social networks such as *Facebook*. Social media communication is also an essential part of reshaping today's market for small businessmen, such as farmers, for whom this tool is one of the cheapest alternatives able to improve both communication and product sales.

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