

THE POWER OF SOCIAL NETWORKS - HOW DOES DIGITAL COMMUNICATION SHAPE THE REPUTATION OR NOTORIETY OF BUSINESSES?

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Abstract

The present study aims to analyze the effects of digital communication on brand notoriety using a methodology that combines a descriptive approach and an analytical approach in order to better understand the relationship between digital communication and brand reputation. It also attempts to highlight the essential role of digital communication in the segmentation, targeting, and differentiation of brands. The analysis carried out in this study also suggests that digitalization is crucial for the sustainability of Algerian companies, particularly in times of crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, this research aims to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges of digital communication for the notoriety and resilience of companies.

Keywords: Social networks, Digital communication, Notoriety, Brand, Benson Shoes Algeria.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Following the measures taken by the authorities during the Coronavirus pandemic, i.e. confinement, closure of stores, schools, and businesses, and the partial or total shutdown of economic activities, etc., the majority of companies have become aware of the necessity to completely rethink the way of working and to digitalize all their activities. Digital transformation consists of incorporating computer-based technologies in the products, processes and strategies of a company, in addition to adopting digital approaches and tools for the purpose of achieving strategic business objectives. It is widely acknowledged

that digital marketing became essential and even unavoidable after the pandemic. Digitizing company tools and processes is now at the center of discussions. In the current context, digital transformation is not an immediate priority for many companies which must realize that this transformation is a matter of survival. Companies have understood the benefit of using new means of communication, particularly those targeting a large audience. They ought to apply a new type of communication that is commonly called digital communication.

It is worth emphasizing that today digital communication has become the ideal means of ensuring the promotion and sale of products and services offered by companies on a digital platform (Berssoles, (Grégory.I., 2020).

Nowadays, companies must take into consideration the notion of the brand, because consumers do not only buy the product, they also look for the brand (Simpson, 2007); (Blend, 2021). In a busy market, the biggest challenge is to create a brand name to build colossal brand equity around awareness (Blend, 2021).

A quick reference to the literature review on digital communication (Aksakalli.v, 2012); (Bloch ., 2012); (Florès., 2012); (Gayet. & Marie., 2020) allows noticing that the majority of researchers have revealed that digital communication has a significant effect on the notoriety and profitability of businesses.

It is widely admitted that American and French companies are pioneers in digital communication. However, Algerian companies are still at an early stage of development. Moreover, Algeria has recorded a blatant delay in the digitalization of businesses. According to McKinsey (France, 2014), this is primarily due to the following four (04) main causes:

- 1-Deficit in digital skills
- 2- Organizational rigidity, which penalizes digital transformation
- 3- Lack of financial capacity, which can be an obstacle to launching of a digital transformation project for Algerian companies
- 4- Lack of visibility of the leaders, which negatively impacts the cultural change that is necessary for the adoption of digital transformation in Algerian companies.

Based on the above, it was decided to investigate this important topic which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been sufficiently explored so far. This study seeks to clear up any confusion around the practice of digital marketing in Algeria. For the purpose of fully understanding and defining this process, it was deemed interesting to consider the research works previously carried out in Western countries where an increasingly rich literature on this subject is available. It has been revealed that companies must implement a digital communications strategy that allows them to communicate, share, publish, listen, and monitor everything that concerns their businesses. Unfortunately, many Algerian companies neglect the importance of digital communication and its role in improving their notoriety.

The above findings then led us to address the following question:

What is the effect of digital communication on a company's notoriety?

In order to address this issue, it was deemed important to consider the following hypothesis:

H1: *The levers of digital communication are important supports that help improve brand awareness.*

The objectives of choosing this subject are to:

- Seek to determine the presence of digital communication in the Algerian company despite the fact that it is a fairly recent theme.
- Examine the real impacts of digital communication on the reputation of a company.

It is worth noting that this research study aims to:

- Raise awareness among Algerian Managers that digital technologies represent real sources competitiveness sources that allow them to improve the growth of their companies.
- Provide a richer understanding of the relationship between digital communication and the company's notoriety.

2. SOCIAL NETWORKS

Nowadays, the number of individuals active on social networks throughout the world is estimated at around 3.5 billion (Kemp, 2023), which clearly reveals the enthusiasm for this new means of communication, both from individuals and businesses. Thanks to their integrated communications, social media has proven to be an extremely effective channel for promoting products and services. Social networking sites are defined as online services that allow individuals to build a public or semi-public profile within a limited system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and browse the list of their connections and those established by other users in the system (Boyd .D.M., 2007). Regarding the online social networks, they refer to websites and mobile applications that allow users to build a network of friends or relationships. They can promote social interactions between individuals, groups of individuals, or organizations. Social networks belong to the social media family. As for social networking, it is an expression that refers to the use of social networks (Baynast, Lendervie., & .Leavy.J, 2017). Over the past few decades, social media have undergone rapid and constant evolution since its inception, thus allowing users to connect and communicate online with people around the world. This growing popularity was possible due to the enormous progress made in the field of new information and communication technologies (NICT) which have enabled increased connectivity between individuals. It should be noted that Web 2.0 also played an important role in this development as it offered more interactive platforms and enabled more active user participation in creating and sharing content online. These advances have significantly changed the way people communicate, interact, and exchange information online.

2.1 Digital communication

Effective digital communication has become an important issue for the company. Indeed, thanks to digital communication, companies can now increase their notoriety, their visibility on the internet, and their turnover (Varadarajen.R., 2009); (Tsimonis G., 2014). The increased accessibility to the Internet, the popularity of social networks, and the digitization of many administrative and commercial procedures, all have largely contributed to changing and shaping consumer behavior. Therefore, every business aspiring to succeed and to become competitive should ensure its presence on the web because this is the only way billions of Internet users can see it. Consequently, every company should now use the different digital communication tools that are actually available. The company's contact details as well as information relating to products and services must be provided to Internet users through the website, social networks, etc. In short, being present on the Web guarantees minimal digital contact between the company and many potential customers.

3. DIGITAL BRAND NOTORIETY

The reputation of a company is an important strategic asset (Bertolini Alessandra., 2023). It allows it to stand out in a saturated market by attracting the attention and trust of consumers. A well-known company has the ability to make an impression and arouse positive emotions and, therefore, helps to create an emotional connection with its customers (Edelman, 2015). This often results in greater customer loyalty with durable competitive advantage. However, brands must use various online tools to develop their visibility on websites, social networks, etc. They must also adapt their strategies to the current situation in order to develop their notoriety (Kannan, 2017).

4. STUDY METHODOLOGY

As part of this research, it was deemed more valuable to examine in detail the Facebook page of Benson Shoes Company. This approach aims to study the effects of digital communication on both the company's notoriety and customers' perception.

4.1 Benson Shoes company overview

Benson Shoes, the Moroccan leader in luxury shoes, is a men's shoe brand that started in 1963 in the field of entirely hand-sewn shoes. The company uses exclusively high quality leathers and raw materials from the Du Puy, Annonay, and Stead tanneries. Today, this brand owes its success to the excellent quality-to-price ratio it offers.

4.2 Company history

Benson Shoes is a family business that was originally created in the 1960s. Its first models, which were handmade military shoes, were made in Morocco. In the 90s, when the founder's son took over the reins of the company, the factory decided to start manufacturing high-end luxury shoes. In 1998, he launched his own brand, Benson Shoes. The name of the brand consists of two distinct parts, namely BEN, referring to the name of the founder (Benamour) and SON, referring to himself, as he is the son of the founder of the company.

Afterwards, the brand continued its expansion by entering new markets, and developing and imposing its presence in several countries such as Algeria, France, Ivory Coast, Belgium, Japan, Italy and Spain. Its strategy relies on a relatively old know-how and experience that were accumulated over half a century. The company adopted manufacturing techniques that remained largely artisanal, while performing excellent manual work, with a real desire to select good quality materials. Its shoes are all *made* by the traditional *Goodyear Welted* construction method. The Benson Shoes brand has succeeded in promoting the unique style of its shoe models which are made with exceptional materials.

Today, Benson Shoes Algeria aims primarily to:

- Increase sales and turnover,
- Establish the brand on the national territory,
- Increase the notoriety of the company and promote its brand,
- Make Algerians aware of the Hand Made concept and the value of craftsmanship.

4.3 The Benson Shoes vision

The perspective of Benson Shoes is to offer a range of refined products of excellent quality, ranging from classic shoes to sneakers.

4.3.1 Products offered

The collection of products offered by this company consists of about sixty models, including the traditional Richelieu, Derby, Boucle, high and mid-high Boots, Mocassins, Belgha, Trappeurs and Sneakers. Most models are available in half sizes ranging from 39 to 46. Suede and leather (smooth or grained) can be combined with leather or rubber soles. In addition, the Patinas, which come in different colors and are hand-made for some models, make these shoes particularly elegant and unique.



FIGURE 1. COLLECTION OF SOME BENSON SHOES MODELS

Source: https://www.facebook.com/benson.dz/?view_public_for=1014910465329548

4.3.2 Analysis of digital communication in Benson Shoes Algeria Company

Before analyzing the company's Facebook page, it should be noted that the Benson Shoes Company is present on various digital communication networks. This company considered it important to set up a website that primarily aims at reaching the widest clientele possible and gaining visibility with a large audience as well. The approach adopted by the company mainly seeks to achieve its managers' vision and objectives. First of all, the presence of Benson Shoes on social networks was necessary because their target audience is strongly present on Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, but mainly on Facebook. Then, the brand's website is there to respond to the customer's concerns, such as finding a unique classic shoe for a special event. Finally, this company saw fit to work on local marketing via Google My Business, and to be visible on search engines, especially on Google Map, in order to facilitate the location and the visit of its stores. The company integrated digital communication into its strategy five years ago, more precisely on April 17, 2018. Over the past few years, it has been working with the communication agency Orbit Coworking& Training Space (Training / Communication / Marketing).

4.3.3 Benson Shoes' digital communication

The Benson Shoes digital communication strategy embodies a carefully orchestrated approach that aims to achieve key objectives, target a specific audience, and implement relevant actions in order to promote brand notoriety and growth.

The objectives of Benson Shoes' digital communication are to:

- Increase the image and notoriety of Benson Shoes,
- Support commercial actions and sales,
- Arouse interest and provoke the desire to obtain a Benson shoe,
- Build sympathy capital on social networks around Benson Shoes,
- Understand the target clientele and their consumption habits,

- Highlight the expertise of Benson Shoes,
- Highlight the exceptional quality of their shoes and make known the wide variety of the company's product line.

4.3.4 The company's target

Benson Shoes has divided its market into two target segments:

- Men between the ages of 24 and 54, with a salary above 80 000 Dinars and working as company executives or managers, who like to dress in classic or semi-classic clothes.
- Men between 24 and 44 years old with a salary of 45 000 Dinars, looking for a classic shoe for an important occasion (wedding, defense of thesis or dissertation, etc.).

4.3.5 Actions to take for Benson Shoes' digital communication

- Collaboration with influencers,
- Development of social media content,
- Distribution of flyers,
- Commercial collaboration,
- Sharing social networks with potential collaborators and developing the Benson Shoes address book,
- Sponsoring publications in order to recruit interested fans,
- Organizing games and competitions, promotions, and one-day commercial events such as the Black Friday.

Benson Shoes websites

Benson Shoes.dz is the website of the company; it was launched on August 14, 2019. It specializes in the online sale of handmade shoes, and offers a wide variety of models as well as shoe collections such as ankle boots, moccasins, brogue, sneakers, and others.

This is a showcase website that was adapted for e-commerce while being responsive. It allows adapting the display of site elements to different screen widths of PCs, mobile phones and tablets. The Benson Shoes website consists of seven rubrics, namely Home, About, Shoes, Accessory, Service, Blog, and Contact.

Furthermore, Google Analytics, which is a tool for measuring audience and website traffic, offers the possibility of acquiring exhaustive reports and information on a website regarding the number of visits, the pages consulted, origin of visitors, etc. Before starting the data analysis, it is necessary to clarify certain key performance indicators (KPIs).

It is widely acknowledged that social media plays a very important role in acquiring traffic, visibility and improving brand awareness as well. Some of the social media platforms employed by Benson Shoes include LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. However, the company attaches greater importance to the most widely used social network, namely Facebook.

4.4 Analysis of Benson Shoes Algeria's Facebook page

The company uses the Facebook social network to stay closer to customers, supervise and disseminate news, while monitoring other competitors. This network allows the company to better manage its e-reputation, while improving its notoriety and image. It is worth reminding that its primary objective is to be the benchmark for classic men's shoes in Algeria. The statistics available on the Facebook Page provide valuable data to assess the effectiveness of actions on Facebook. This helps the pages to obtain comprehensive figures on the reach, engagement and audience and its evolution, and also to identify the most popular content and determine the topics most conducive to interactions. Benson Shoes Algeria created its Facebook page on May 27, 2018.



FIGURE 2. BENSON SHOES FACEBOOK PAGE

Source: https://www.facebook.com/benson.dz/?view_public_for=1014910465329548

Benson Shoes subscribers are mostly men (82%), between 25 and 34 years old. Almost all Benson Shoes fans reside in Algeria, mainly Algiers, where the French language is dominant.

The indicator considered gives the days and times of visit of the page by the subscribers. This should help the company to know when to publish and offer content in order to reach more subscribers. According to the figure below, Benson Shoes fans are online on Tuesday and Friday, between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m.

THE POWER OF SOCIAL NETWORKS - HOW DOES DIGITAL COMMUNICATION SHAPE THE REPUTATION OR NOTORIETY OF BUSINESSES?

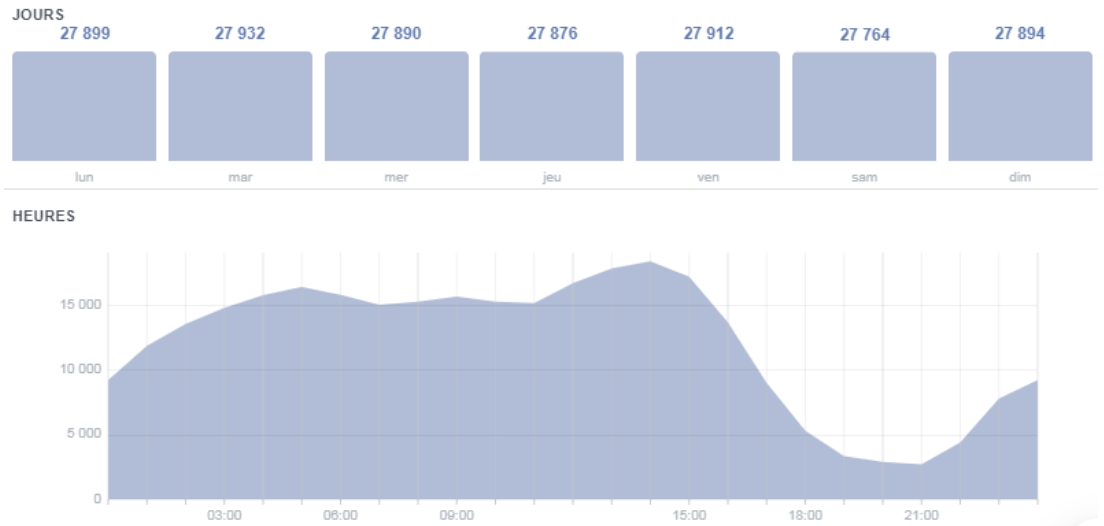


FIGURE 3. DAYS AND TIMES OF VISIT OF THE FOLLOWERS OF THE FACEBOOK PAGE OF BENSON SHOES ALGERIA

Source: <http://www.bensonshoes.dz>

The number of subscribers corresponds to the number of people who expressed an interest in the company and wished to follow its news. The figure given below clearly shows that the number of fans has continuously increased throughout the period from 2019 to 2020, which suggests that the content offered by Benson Shoes was successful in generating enough interest and satisfaction to attract new customers.



FIGURE 4. EVOLUTION OF THE NUMBER OF SUBSCRIBERS OF THE FACEBOOK PAGE

Source: <http://www.bensonshoes.dz>

It is clearly seen that the growth rate increased by 7.23% between November (2019) and January (2020), then decreased between February and April (2020), and then increased by 5.50% between April and July (2020).

The growth rate of the number of subscribers increased twice during the period from January to June (2020), firstly due to the winter sales and then to the competition organized on the company's Facebook page.

4.4.1 Page views

Page views give the number of times the page was viewed during a given time. This is a good indicator of notoriety. The curve indicates that the number of views (250) was stable until February (2020). Then, in March (2020), the concave curve decreases to 100, and then a peak of 500 views is observed in May (2020). It is clearly noticed that the views of the Benson Shoes Facebook page have increased sufficiently, which proves that people are expressing an interest in going to the company's home page.

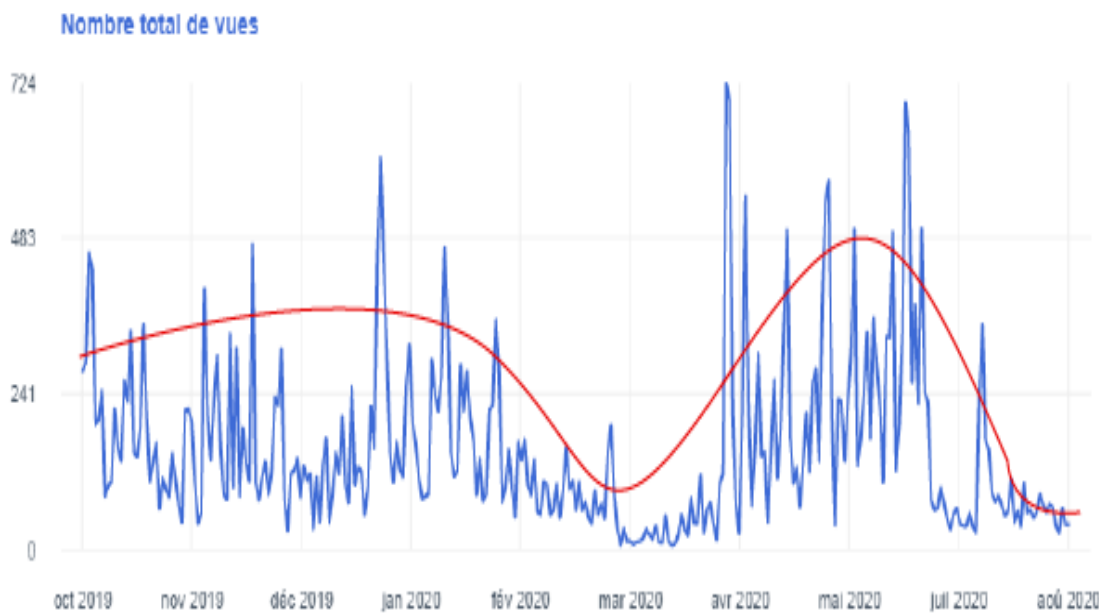


FIGURE 5. EVOLUTION OF THE TOTAL NUMBER OF VIEWS OF THE FACEBOOK PAGE
Source: https://www.facebook.com/benson.dz/?view_public_for=1014910465329548

4.4.2 Facebook page cover

Post reach statistics help to determine the number of people who saw the posts or content of the page. They allow knowing the level of page visibility. Therefore, the page coverage is an essential notoriety indicator.

This indicator gives an idea about the number of people who have seen all the publications and information over a specific period of time. It plays an essential role in measuring the visibility of posts on Facebook and the audience reached. The visibility of posts is segmented as follows:

- Organic reach which refers to people who saw the publication naturally,
- Paid reach which refers to people who saw the posts through an advertisement (Sponsored Post).

The figure below shows that the first peak (32 000 views) lasted from October (2019) to February (2020). The cover experienced a drop (2 000 views) in April (2020), with another smaller peak (15000 views) between June and July (2020).

BESSOUH, N., IZNASNI, A., HADDADA, S.
THE POWER OF SOCIAL NETWORKS - HOW DOES DIGITAL COMMUNICATION SHAPE THE REPUTATION OR NOTORIETY OF BUSINESSES?

It is easily seen that the paid coverage is more interesting than the organic coverage since the average number of sponsored posts per month is 10 publications.



FIGURE 6. EVOLUTION OF FACEBOOK PUBLICATION COVERAGE
Source: https://www.facebook.com/benson.dz/?view_public_for=1014910465329548

4.4.3 Page engagement

Engagement represents the percentage of people who liked, commented, or shared a post, or who clicked on it after seeing it. Generally speaking, it can be considered that 5% is the percentage to achieve. A percentage beyond 7% can be viewed as a very good engagement rate. This indicator is certainly of paramount importance as it allows knowing whether the publications captivate the target audience or not.

TABLE 1. EVOLUTION OF FACEBOOK PAGE ENGAGEMENT

Month	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June
Engagement rate	9.5%	7%	9.5%	4.5%	7.5%	6%	9.5%	8.5%	7%

Source: <http://www.bensonshoes.dz>

The table above, which presents the engagement rate of the page during the past 9 months, allows noticing that this rate is rather high, which subsequently resulted in the increase in the degree of the company's reputation and notoriety. According to the statistics previously analyzed, the Benson Shoes Facebook page has significantly improved its notoriety and image, and has also managed its traffic quite well. In general, the previous statistics show the presence of two peaks. The first peak, between December (2019) and January (2020), was due to some marketing actions carried out by Benson Shoes (Black Friday and winter sales). However, during the months of March and April (2020), the curves show a

downward trend, mainly because the brand did not choose to sponsor content on its Facebook page due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 home confinement. This approach was consistent with the context of the COVID-19 pandemic which did not encourage the engagement of buyers in such activities. The second peak, observed in June (2020), was due to the competition launched by the company and also to the confinement during which consumers understood the importance of digital communication which allowed a large number of customers to receive the products of the Benson Shoes brand via delivery that is assured to all 48 Wilayas (Provinces) of the country.

5. CONCLUSION

This study, which was carried out on Benson Shoes Algeria Company, allowed identifying the advantages, issues, avenues to follow in order to improve the general situation of the company. The findings suggested that the company is highly recommended to implement a good digital communication strategy. In addition, it is widely acknowledged that the Covid health crisis has had significant economic and social consequences throughout the world. Fortunately, digital marketing was there and provided many opportunities to communicate and interact with a huge audience.

Furthermore, Benson Shoes Algeria, which understood the virtues of digital communication, decided to use social media and websites to promote its products and services. Thus, the company chose to use digital communication but with an investment smaller than that of traditional companies.

Moreover, it should be emphasized that the company is well aware of the fact that digital communication is a real transmission belt and an essential link for its success. Nevertheless, the challenge for any company is to know how to optimize the use of digital communication tools, to stand out from the competition, to build notable brand capital, and to create a particular image of the brand and its products in the minds of consumers by building itself strong notoriety. In fact, this research theme attempts to focus on the power of social networks and the way in which digital communication can shape the notoriety of companies. It is worth noting that, throughout this research, the role of digital communication is explicitly highlighted in the overall strategy of the company. In addition, the concepts relating to the brand and notoriety of the company were discussed as well.

Likewise, analysis of the company's Facebook page confirms that Benson Shoes attaches great importance to digital communication and to the levers of digital strategy. Moreover, the company adopted digital communication using social media supports, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Youtube, etc., as soon as it was launched in Algeria in 2018.

The synthesis of results of the interview that was held with the company manager suggests that digital communication has strongly contributed to improving the notoriety of Benson Shoes Company. It is useful

to specify that this is a very young company that started in 2018. Its brand is well known throughout all 48 Wilayas (Provinces) of the country.

Analysis of the key performance indicators (KPIs) linked to notoriety has clearly validated the positive effect of digital communication on notoriety.

As a conclusion to the present work, a certain number of suggestions could be put forward. Some of them can play a highly determinative role in the improvement of the Benson Shoes Algeria brand. It is therefore suggested to:

- Develop continuous and regular surveys in order to better understand the customer's expectations in terms of digital communication,
- Enhance the feedback speed,
- Give greater importance to Internet users' complaints,
- Set up a monitoring system for the social networks,
- Deliver simple and specific messages about the Benson Shoes brand in a consistent and repeated manner in order to create a lasting and strong relationship with the target audience.

Nevertheless, despite the rich information provided by the results of this study, it is necessary to note that certain limitations still exist. These are:

- The qualitative study proved incapable of scientifically confirming or refuting the hypothesis suggested above,
- The study was carried out on a single company. It would therefore be more interesting to broaden the scope of this research by considering a larger number of Algerian companies, manufacturing various products (household appliances, food products, tourist destinations, cultural products, etc.), and belonging to various activity sectors.

Nevertheless, the above-mentioned limitations may open new research avenues to researchers in the field of marketing.

Research perspectives

- A study could be carried out on the combination between traditional media and digital media, which could open up interesting avenues for improving the perception of the brand.
- It would also be highly relevant to identify and analyze the different digital communication strategies that could contribute to customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.
- It would also be appropriate to determine the parameters that could contribute to the success of digital communication from the point of view of effectiveness and efficiency.

Finally, it would be wiser to fully understand the way digital communication is deployed within the company.

In conclusion, given the attributes of the new environment and the challenges that arise, it is imperative today that companies attach particular importance to the advantages that digital communication can provide.

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