

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE STRATEGY OF POLISH ENTERPRISES. SURVEY RESULTS FROM THE YEARS 2020-2021

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Purpose: The article aims to present the results of research on the activity of Polish micro-small and medium-sized enterprises in social media during the pandemic. The authors have hypothesized that social media has become an important tool in corporate strategy, facilitating reaching customers and supporting sales.

Design/methodology/approach: The survey covered a group of 333 Polish enterprises from the MSME sector. Statistical methods were used to discover the specificity of using social media by companies according to selected grouping criteria.

Findings: The presented research results allow for positive verification of the hypothesis that Social media become an important element of companies' strategies during pandemic periods.

Research limitations/implications: The research was limited to Polish companies; thus, conclusions may not be relevant for other countries with different economic systems and digital transformation levels.

Practical implications: The study explains selected aspects of using social media in the MSME sector. The results may be helpful for building a digital transformation strategy in Poland. The study also highlights some drawbacks of social media as a sales channel, which can be beneficial to improve companies' sales strategies.

Originality/value: A novelty is the study of the perceived role of social media in Polish companies' strategies in light of the pandemic crisis. The research was conducted on a representative sample of 333 enterprises. The paper is addressed to researchers and entrepreneurs interested in the digital transformation of companies and the phenomenon of social media.

Keywords: Social Media, enterprise strategy, pandemic.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting limitations have contributed to significant changes in the functioning of societies and businesses worldwide. The introduction of quarantine forced the necessity to implement remote solutions at work, teaching, healthcare, and everyday activities such as shopping or interpersonal contacts. This situation has increased the importance of various online platforms supporting main and auxiliary processes in a virtual space. As noted by Beaunoyer et al. (2020), during forced isolation, the status of digital space has changed from convenience to necessity, and technology has become an integral part of everyday life.

This article presents a slice of large-scale research on the role of digital transformation in enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the study concerned innovative IT solutions implemented by enterprises at this challenging time. The periods of crisis are a specific time that, on the one hand, force enterprises to innovate to survive and, on the other hand, limit their profits and the possibilities of investing in innovation. In the face of all the difficulties, it is, therefore, necessary to find quick, effective, and low-cost forms of reaching the customer and ensuring non-traditional channels of communication. The Internet and social media have been gaining importance in recent years. Every day, millions of users publish, read or comment on information posted thanks to Social Media. They actively make new friends and maintain constant relationships with other users and, with the companies they like.

While monitoring Social Media, we notice that more companies appreciate their vast potential and use their marketing power. Companies set up so-called fan pages, i.e., business social media accounts representing a company or organization. When Facebook first launched business-oriented pages, they were called Fan Pages, and people who liked them became fans. While this terminology is still used by many today, Fan Pages are usually called "Official" or business pages (Duermyer, 2018).

The article aims to present the results of research on the activity of Polish micro-small and medium-sized enterprises in social media during the pandemic. The authors have hypothesized that social media has become an important tool in corporate strategy, facilitating reaching customers and supporting sales. The hypotheses were verified based on the analysis of the results of a survey conducted among 333 Polish enterprises from the MSME (micro, small and medium enterprises) sector.

2. Literature background

Social media refers to a set of computer-network-based tools that support social interaction between users. The term is often used to contrast with more traditional media, such as television, newspapers, and books, that deliver content to mass populations but do not facilitate the creation or sharing of content by users (Hansen et al., 2020). The topic of social media after the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic was often discussed in scientific publications in many contexts. Social media occupies the leading position in the ranking of platforms used during the lockdown phase (Galhotra, Dewan, 2020).

Considering the lockdown restrictions, social media performs many economic and communal functions. On the one hand, online platforms bind people together, build a sense of security, and provide up-to-date information; on the other hand, companies use social media for commercial purposes such as branding, selling, and marketing their business. Its analytical application is a more unobvious and challenging application of social media in business. Companies are analyzing existing communities to discover what strategies and design decisions lead to success and avoid social problems (Hansen et al., 2020). Delivering fast, accurate and reliable information addressing critical infection control issues is of crucial importance (Sahni, Sharma 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, people started to use social media more extensively to search for health information for themselves and their loved ones (Abbas et al., 2021).

Social media has the ability to reach the recipient in real time. The most popular form of access is applications for mobile devices (Statista, 2022), which send notifications about new content. In addition, social media allows live streaming of events and viewers commenting on them in real-time. As the research shows, live videos are gaining increasing engagement rates in recent years (Chaffey, 2022). The ability to access important, current and exciting information drives the so-called network effect – the term describes a situation in which the value of a product or service increases as its user base expands (Beens, 2021). The lack of fees for using social websites additionally attracts users, which generates no costs but increases the network's value for other users (Sasse, 2016).

The element that distinguishes social media applications from traditional media is interactivity. Users participate in the life of virtual communities by publishing content, commenting, and sharing information. However, interactivity is challenging for businesses as followers and commenters expect feedback. The message from customers is not always positive, and the company running a fan page must face it in a way that will not jeopardize the brand's image. There are also known cases of withdrawal of well-known brands from social media (Popko, 2021).

During the pandemic, social media has become a tool that has allowed many businesses to be closer to their customers. As research shows, currently, Social Media has a stronger impact on the recipient than traditional media.

The phenomenon of social media has been of interest to researchers for a long time, already research from 10 years ago indicates a stronger positive influence on brand image (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, Schäfer, 2012). Also, today's young generation is more attracted to brands having a solid social media presence (Jain, 2021). Therefore, business activities carried out with the use of multiple channels of communication can bring the desired effect. Due to its ease of use and low cost, social media can be a simple and quick way to access a broad audience. Low entry barriers are an opportunity, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises with little capital for advertising. Results from the data analysis demonstrate the positive and significant relationship between social media use and performance in SMEs (Tajvidi, Karami, 2021). The popularity metrics in social media also create the value of human and relational capital (Lardo et al., 2017). The simplest way to measure the effectiveness of activities on social networks is the number of people who follow the fan page and add comments and reactions (such as likes).

However, these effects are insignificant only after a critical mass of followers is attained (Paniagua, Sapena, 2014). Popular ways to use social media in the company's strategy include influencer marketing, selling via social media, product presentation, customer contact and looking for new business partners, and posting paid advertising. The extensive usage of social media naturally includes large amounts of information regarding users' feelings and thoughts (Chew, Gunasekeran, 2021), which allows for advanced profiling and adaptation of advertisements to the recipients' preferences.

However, just because social media is available to everyone free of charge does not mean immediate and effortless success. As research shows, building a compelling presentation of an image or product in social relationships requires advanced knowledge and technical skills, as well as the charisma we see in many successful influencers.

The role of online sales channels is becoming increasingly important as pandemic customer habits are likely to continue. Customers appreciated the convenience and numerous benefits of changing regulations, such as the possibility of returning goods purchased online within two weeks from the date of purchase, convenient forms of delivery to a parcel locker, free returns, and cashless payments. Therefore, social media seems to be an excellent alternative to other communication channels, advertising, and sales, especially gaining importance in the face of restrictions on personal contact resulting from the pandemic.

The digital transformation in Poland is at a high level (Kowalska, 2022). Internet access and the use of mobile devices in Poland are very common phenomena (Statista, 2022a). The question is whether the pandemic prompted Polish enterprises to become active in social media. To answer this question, the following sections present the research procedure and the results of surveys conducted among Polish enterprises.

3. Research scope and methodology

The subject of research is the micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) sector. There is no globally agreed definition of SMEs. According to OECD, small and medium-sized enterprises are non-subsiary, independently owned, and operated companies that employ fewer than a given number of employees. This number varies across countries (OECD, 2022).

For this study, we adopted the following classification:

- micro – fewer than ten employees,
- small – 10 to 49 employees,
- medium – 50 to 249 employees.

Another classification considered in this study is the area of the company's activity. The following groups were distinguished:

- regional,
- national,
- international.

The structure of the surveyed enterprises in terms of the above-mentioned criteria is presented in figure 1.

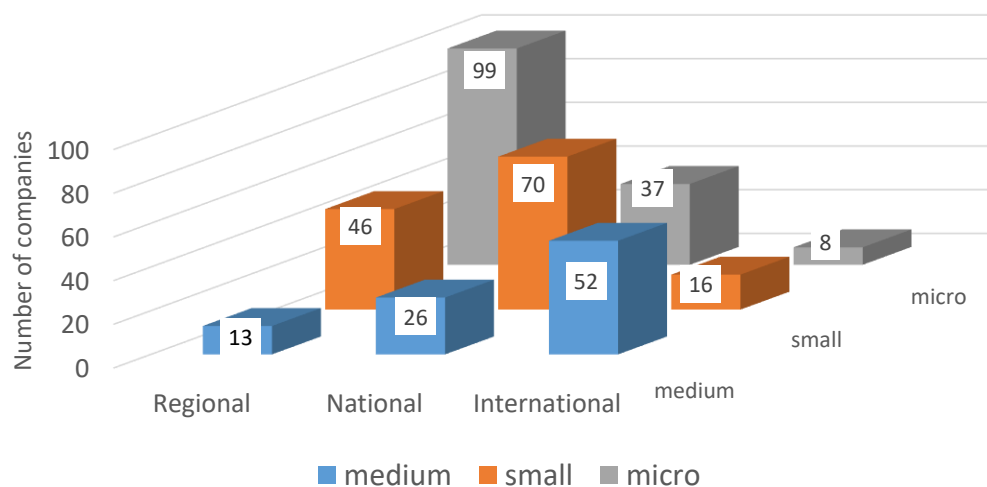


Figure 1. Surveyed enterprises in the division by size and area of operation.

Source: Own study.

The research focuses on the years of pandemics. Thus, all questions asked to respondents related to their activities in 2020-2021. The study aimed to identify the role of social media in the strategies of companies in the SME sector during these challenging times. The factor that seems to be of great importance in the aspect of using social media is online sales. In the research sample, 84.68% of enterprises declared that they sell online.

To explore the topic in detail, the following research hypotheses were posed:

- H1 Social media has become an important element of companies' strategies during pandemic periods.
- H2 Companies that sell via the Internet much more often have profiles on social media.
- H3 Selling on social media has become popular among businesses in the pandemic era.

The conducted research included the following stages:

1. Research questionnaire development - the final form of the questionnaire took the form of a survey consisting of a total of 22 questions. The nature of the answers to individual questions took the form of a single-choice, multiple-choice, and 5-step Likert scale, which is a bipolar interval scale. The scale used in the study consists of 5 categories of answers (1 "strongly disagree", 2 "rather disagree", 3 "hard to say", 4 "agree", and 5 "strongly agree").
2. The research procedure involved surveying randomly selected Polish companies from the micro, small and medium sector. When choosing the study using the representative method, efforts were made to minimize the sample size while maintaining the required certainty and accuracy of further inference. The minimum sample size when estimating the probability of success p in the general population was calculated based on the sample size formula for a very large population:

$$N_{min} = \frac{N_p (\alpha^2 * f(1-f))}{N_p * e^2 + \alpha^2 * f(1-f)} \quad (1)$$

where:

N_{min} = minimum sample size,

N_p = population size,

α^2 = level of significance,

e^2 = accepted level of the highest error,

f = the structure index.

The calculations show that the minimum sample size, with an acceptable confidence level of 0.93 and the maximum estimation error $e = 10\%$, should be 328 questionnaires. Because 333 questionnaires were qualified for the research, this condition has been met, and the sample is representative of the target population. The study was conducted from September 2021 – to February 2022, using the CAWI method.

3. After qualifying the received questionnaires, an integrated response database was developed containing all the answers, and raw data coding was carried out using Excel 2019. Then we used Statistica 13 software to perform statistical analysis.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first was to collect information that would allow describing the respondents and dividing the surveyed companies into groups according to various characteristics, such as size, age of the company, and industry. The second part included questions about the use of IT tools during the pandemic.

The survey covered many aspects related to the digital transformation of enterprises in the pandemic era (years 2020-2021). The five questions selected for this study concerned the application of social media. Table 1 presents selected questions analyzed in this study.

Table 1.

Questions selected for the study

Question	Answer type
Q1. Does the company have an official social media page?	a. Yes, the profile created during the pandemic. b. Yes, the profile existing for many years. c. No, but we are going to create it. d. No and we do not plan it.
Q3. Does social media help in the implementation of the company's strategy?	Five-point Likert scale; (1 "strongly disagree", 2 "rather disagree", 3 "hard to say", 4 "agree", and 5 "strongly agree").
Q2. Does the company sell via Internet?	Yes/No
Q4. Does the company sell via social media?	Yes/No
Q5. Has the company changed its strategy due to the pandemic restrictions?	Yes/No

Source: Own study.

4. Research results

To verify the hypotheses, responses to selected questions of the questionnaire were analyzed. First, the percentage share of enterprises with social media pages was examined, then the enterprises' opinion on the role of social media in their strategy in 2020-2021. Another aspect examined was the use of social media as a sales channel. To better understand the role of social media in corporate strategies, the responses were analyzed by groups according to the following criteria:

- having a profile on social media,
- running an online sales,
- the size of the enterprise,
- working area.

The first of the analyzed variables is "having a fan page on social media". When asked, "Q1 Does the company have a social media profile?" two hundred fifty-one enterprises gave a positive answer, which is 75% of the research sample. In this group of enterprises, 23%

created their profiles during the pandemic. The structure of the answer to question Q1 is presented in Figure 2.

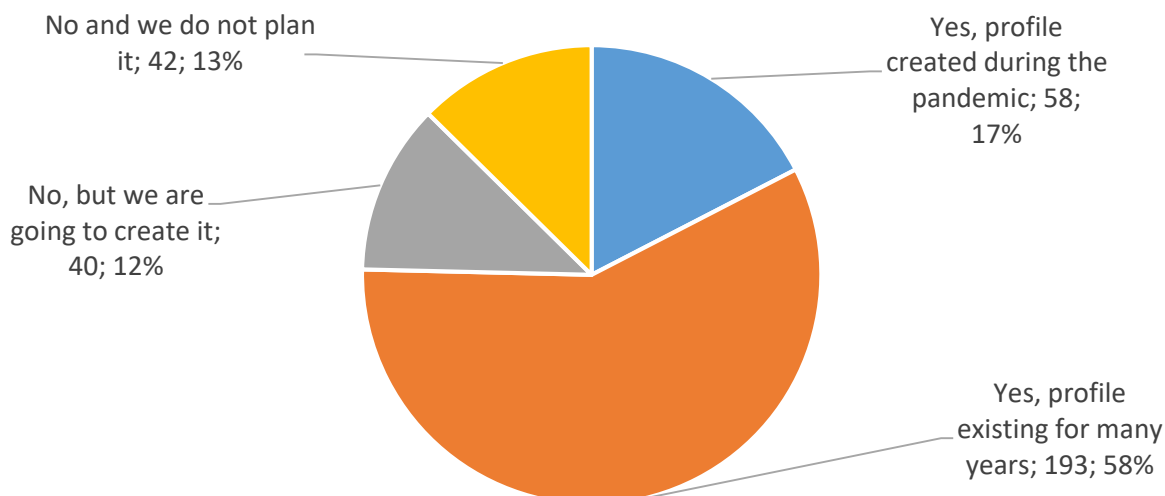


Figure 2. The percentage structure of answers to question Q1 Does the company have a social media profile?

Source: Own study.

It can therefore be concluded that fan pages were a favored tool also before the pandemic.

The Chi-square test was used when comparing the results for different groups of enterprises. The test's assumptions are met because each of the analyzed subgroups is at least 5 in size. The obtained values confirm that the differences are statistically significant.

The analysis results using the Chi-square test, broken down by online sales, the size of the enterprise, and the area of its operation, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Chi-square test results according to three grouping criteria

Grouping criteria	Chi-square	Degrees of freedom	p
Internet sale	42,52007	3	0.00000
Company's size	19,45134	6	0.00347
Area of operation	16,31984	6	0.01214

Source: Own study.

The analysis showed that there are statistically significant differences among the groups of enterprises, as evidenced by the p-value <0.05 and the value of the chi-square statistic, which is greater than the reference value for a given number of degrees of freedom.

A more detailed insight into the collected data made it possible to establish the correctness that enterprises that sell via the Internet much more often have social profiles. Statistics of answers to questions about the social profile (Q1) and conducting online sales (Q2) are presented in Figure 3.

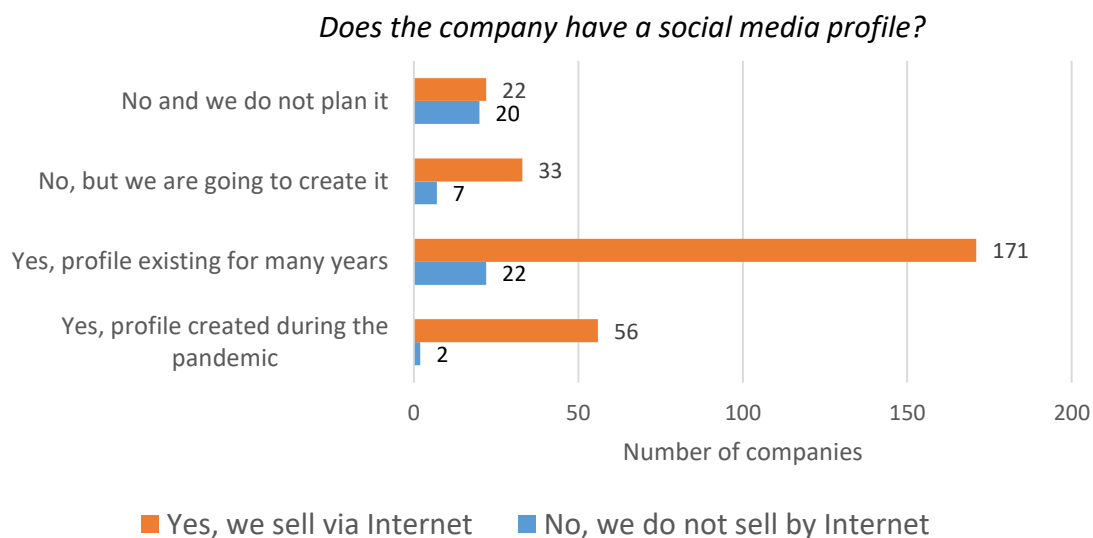


Figure 3. Structure of answers to the question about having a profile on social media, broken down into companies selling and not selling via the Internet.

Source: Own study.

The percentage of enterprises that sell via the Internet but do not have a fan page is 19%; however, 60% of the companies in this group plan to create such a profile. It can therefore be concluded that online sales are significantly related to having a social media profile.

The next studied phenomenon was the dependence of having a social media profile on the company's size. Figure 4 shows the percentage share of individual responses in the groups. In this case, the results were less mixed.

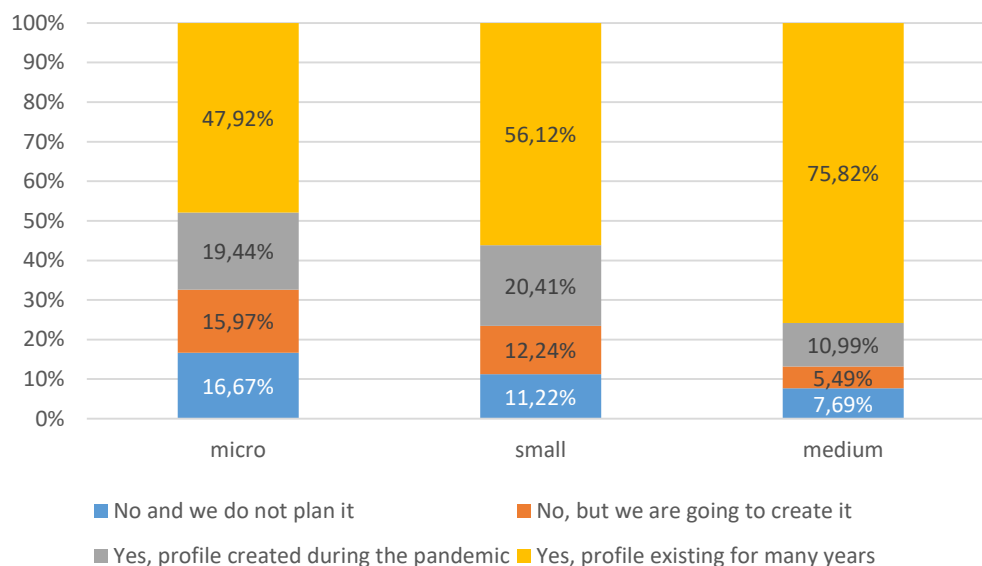


Figure 4. Social media approaches by enterprise size.

Source: Own study.

The group that differs most from the rest are medium-sized enterprises. Over 75% of enterprises in this group have had social media profiles for many years. Diversification of the phenomenon of activity in social media was also observed in the division of enterprises into groups according to the area of operation.

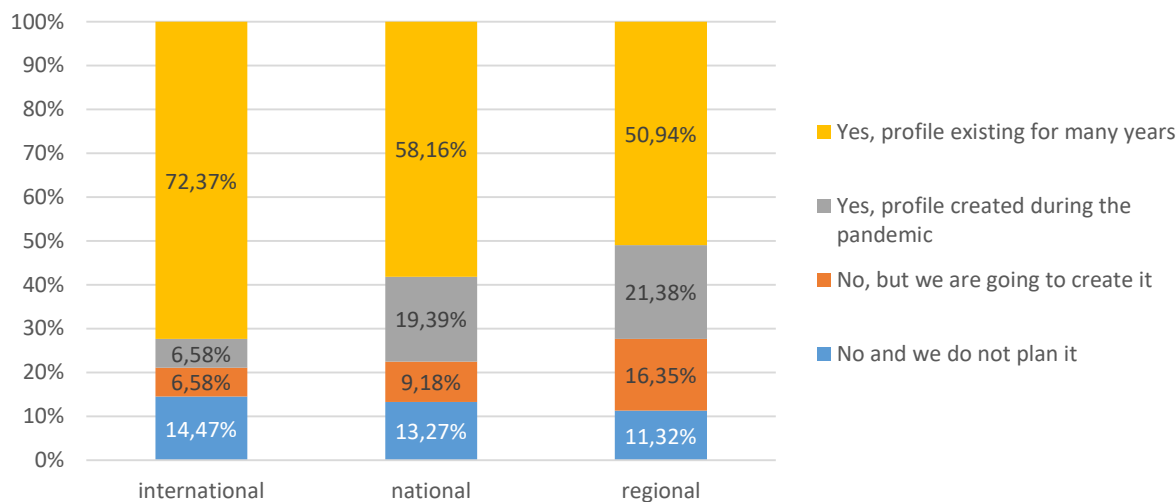


Figure 5. Social media approaches by area of company operation.

Source: Own study.

Most companies that operate internationally have profiles on social media (Figure 5). In this group, 78.95% declare that they are active on social media. Among them, only 6.58% of enterprises report that they set up a profile during a pandemic. The results are not surprising as most of the enterprises operating internationally are medium-sized enterprises, which, as previously shown, use social media much more often than medium and micro-enterprises.

Thus, the analysis clearly shows that participation in social media is positively correlated with the size and area of the company's operations. However, the above statistics do not say what role social media play in the company's strategy. In order to investigate this issue, question Q3 (social media helps in the implementation of the company's strategy) was analyzed, to which the respondents answered on a 5-point scale, where 5 meant complete agreement with the given statement and 1 meant complete disagreement. To investigate whether there are significant differences in the perception of the role of social media in the company's strategy, an analysis was carried out with statistical tests, divided into groups according to internet sales, size, and area of operation. As the distribution of responses in the groups did not meet the assumption of compliance with the normal distribution, non-parametric tests were applied. In the case of division into two groups according to the conduct of online sales, the Mann-Whitney U test was used, while in the remaining cases, the Kruskal-Willis test.

By analyzing the differences between the groups of enterprises that sell and do not sell online, the values of the Mann-Whitney U test parameters ($U = 4125.500$, $Z = 4.845171$, $P = 0.000001$) were obtained, proving that there are statistically significant differences. The boxplot in Figure 6 shows the difference in responses.



Figure 6. To what extent do you agree with the statement "Social media helps in the implementation of my company's strategy" grouped in terms of internet sales.

Source: Own study.

The companies that sell online perceive the role of social media as much more important in their strategy than the enterprises that do not practice online selling. The Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test was used to examine the differences between the groups according to the size of the enterprise and the area of operation. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test results, the differences between the groups according to the size of the enterprise and the area of operation

Grouping variable	H	p
Company's size	1,264380	0,5314
Area of operation	2,847322	0,2408

The p-value is much higher than the threshold value of 0.05, so it can be assumed that there are no statistically significant differences between the groups in the perception of the role of social media in the company's strategy. In order to assess the importance of the discussed issue for the population of the surveyed enterprises, the response statistics for the entire research sample were analyzed. Figure 7 presents the percentage share of individual responses.

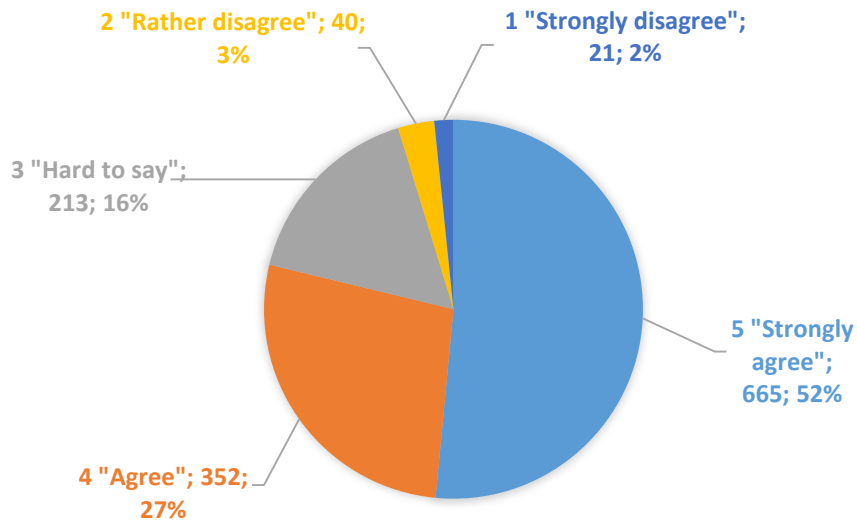


Figure 7. Percentage share of the answers to the question *To what extent do you agree with the statement "Social media helps in the implementation of my company's strategy"*

Source: Own study.

The purposes of using social media may vary according to the industry and profile of the enterprise activities. The companies that choose 4 and 5 on the Likert scale highly value social media as part of their strategy. This group accounted for 66 percent of the research sample. Among 282 surveyed enterprises that sell their products on the Internet, 122 (43%) use social media as their sales channels. More than half of this group (66 companies) declared social media as their only sales channel however, only 14 of them created their SM profiles during the pandemic.

As our survey shows, 63% of enterprises declare that they have changed their business strategy due to the coronavirus pandemic. Since the change of strategy in this specific period was based mainly on the use of information technology, the authors decided to check whether companies that declare a shift in strategy more often implemented social media. Figure 8 presents the percentage structure of the respondents' answers.

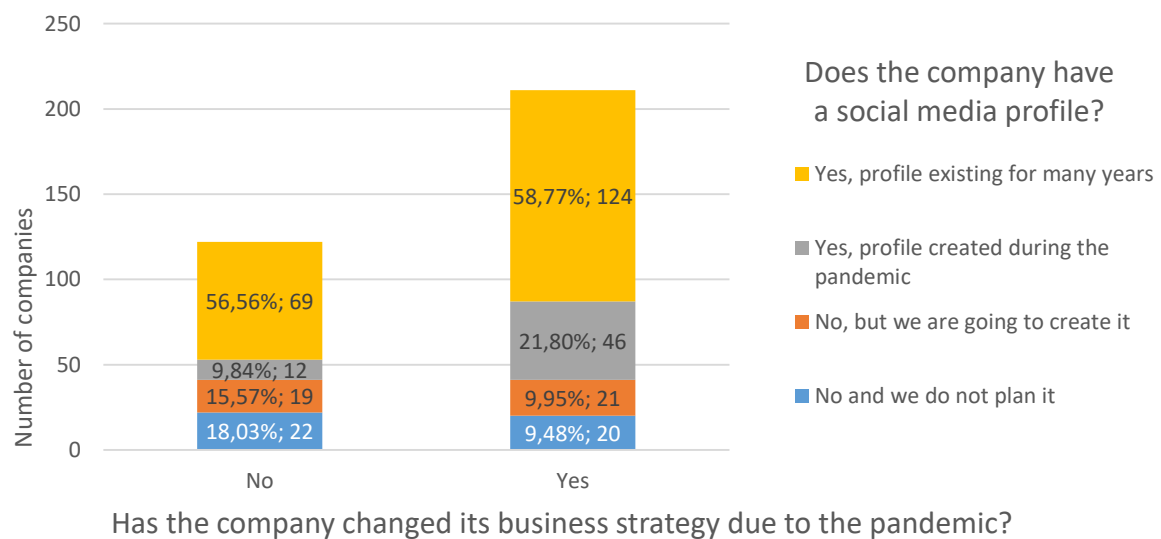


Figure 8. Social media presence and strategy change of the surveyed companies.

Source: Own study.

Analyzing the structure of the answers, it is clear that companies that declare strategy change because of the coronavirus more often created their social media fan pages during the pandemic. This group is of particular interest for the purpose of the study to investigate the role of social media in a pandemic. Of the 333 companies surveyed, 58 created a fan page during the pandemic. The table shows the structure of this group in terms of changing the strategy and selling through social media. Exactly half of them (29) started using social media for sales. Most of them (22) declare a change in their business strategy due to the pandemic. On the other hand, seven companies that created their profiles and started to sell on social media do not perceive it as a strategic change.

Although medium-sized enterprises most often have social media profiles, they are the least likely to use this channel for sales purposes. The results of the survey analyzing social media sales according to the enterprise's size and area of operation are presented in Figure 9.

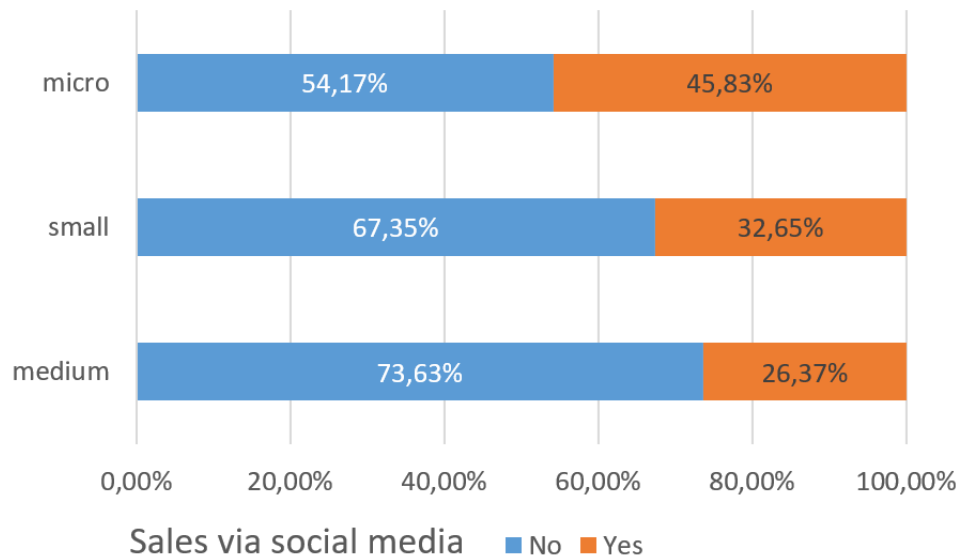


Figure 9. Sales via social media by companies' size.

Source: Own study.

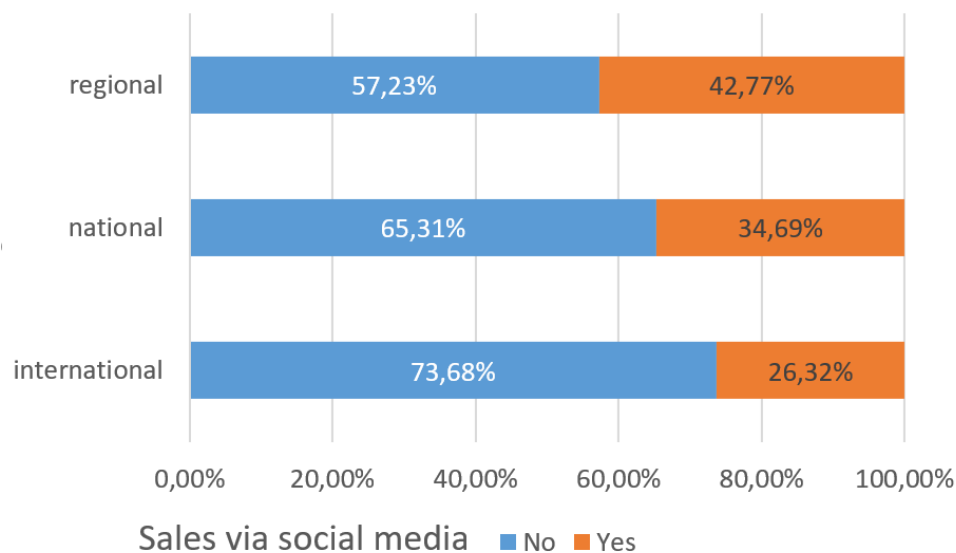


Figure 10. Sales via social media by area of companies' operation.

Source: Own study.

Among 282 companies that sell online, 23% use only social media for this purpose. The analysis revealed that the social media sales channel is most often used by micro-enterprises with a regional nature of their activity (Figure 10).

5. Discussion

All enterprises were affected by the pandemic crisis of 2020-2021. However, companies from the MSMEs sector suffered the most. As our survey shows, 63% of enterprises declare that they have changed their business strategy due to the coronavirus pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates both the limitations and opportunities for ICT use. Enterprises with a budget limited by the effects of the pandemic are looking for low-cost and quick solutions that will effectively help to stay in the market. Social media is an easily available and low-cost solution to support marketing, sales, and customer relations. Therefore, it was expected that they would be widely used in business during the crisis and the sanitary regime. Taking into account the various size and characteristics of the activities of the surveyed companies, the use of social media may be more or less justified.

The presented research results constitute the first prerequisite for positive verification of hypothesis H1 *Social media become an important element of companies' strategies during pandemic periods*. However, the authors expected that the most significant use of SM would be in micro and small enterprises operating in the local market. But this assumption was not confirmed by the research. On the other hand, medium-sized enterprises most often use SM. It can be assumed that running a professional fan page requires a lot of commitment and qualified staff. This condition may not always be met in enterprises employing few people. In the breakdown of enterprises by size, medium-sized enterprises stand out as they much more often have fan pages. The strategy of operating in social media is also the most well-established among medium-sized enterprises; as many as 75% of them had fan pages before the pandemic.

The pandemic has undoubtedly motivated some businesses to start an online business, and social media is the fastest and cheapest way to establish a brand in the digital space.

The second hypothesis of H2 *Companies that sell via the Internet much more often have profiles on social media* was also positively verified. The percentage of enterprises that sell via the Internet but do not have a fan page is 19%. In the case of companies that do not sell online, 52% do not have media pages.

H3 hypothesis *"Selling on social media has become popular among businesses in the era of the pandemic"* has been partially confirmed. Research has shown that selling via social media is less popular than other selling forms. This is because of some disadvantages that distinguish this type of sale from classic e-commerce websites such as Polish Allegro, Amazon, or E-bay. First, there is a lack of fraud protection, convenient payment systems, and seller evaluation. Buyers communicate directly with the seller via chat, so this form of sale requires constant monitoring and is suitable for a small number of items. The lack of costs of listing offers attracts micro-enterprises with small capital and local area of operation. Marketplaces in social media are best for local sales, with the option of picking up the purchased items in person. This form of selling was not always possible during a pandemic.

6. Conclusions

The conducted research allows for determining the participation of Polish enterprises in social media and the perception of their role in the business strategy. The research proves that Polish enterprises from the MSME sector mostly perceive and use the potential of social media. A large group of companies decided to set up a fan page during the pandemic. The analysis of the answers shows that the majority of Polish enterprises from the MSME sector are aware of the benefits of being present in social media and actively participate in them.

However, this study has several limitations, which determine further research directions. First of all, the research was limited to Polish companies; thus, conclusions may not be relevant for other countries with different economic systems and digital transformation levels. Therefore, a further direction of studies may be conducting similar research on a sample of respondents from other countries, allowing a comparative analysis on a larger scale. Future works may also concentrate on specific technologies and IT solutions to help companies maintain business continuity in difficult times. In the following publications, we plan to consider barriers to adopting new technologies in business.

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