# THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITIES ON RAISING BRAND AWARENESS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF FASHION INDUSTRY IN KOSOVO

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## Abstract

The aim of this research is to identify social media activities that affect the increase of brand awareness in the fashion industry in Kosovo. The research considers five different social media activities (advertising, influencers, sharing, entertainment, and interaction), and to the best knowledge of the authors, this is the first experiment to consider these factors all together, as well as the first one addressing brand awareness in Kosovo. Quantitative methods were used on a sample of 224 respondents, including confirmatory factor analysis and regression analysis. The analysis was conducted by using the AMOS statistical software. The findings indicate that activities, such as interaction and advertising, have a significant impact on brand awareness, unlike entertainment, sharing, and influencers' behaviour. The findings provide marketers with recommendations regarding social media activities and the challenges that must be considered before they are implemented.

**Keywords:** brand awareness, advertising, entertainment, interaction, sharing, influence

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has strongly affected people's lives in different ways. Various restrictions imposed by the authorities and governments have affected people's health, social, and economic situations, as well as their behaviour and attitudes. Consumers have been isolated and in minimal physical contact with others due to various governments' restrictions and lockdowns (Taha et al., 2021), which has resulted in the largest drop in in-store purchases (Grashuis et al., 2020). Faced with this challenge, new marketing channels have opened and the importance of e-commerce has increased significantly, placing it as the first choice of consumers because it offered them more security than shopping in physical stores (Lv et al., 2020). However, besides e-commerce, both marketers and consumers have discovered and used many activities on social media during the pandemic (Ramnarain & Govender, 2013). Taha et al. (2021) underlined the

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importance of using social media during the pandemic, emphasizing their significant impact in various spheres of life. These changes in the marketing environment affected Kosovo as well. Jashari and Rrustemi (2017) added that, as in the rest of the world, the use of the Internet in Kosovo increased radically. Based on the report by Kemp (2021), the number of social media users in Kosovo increased by 21 000 between 2019 and 2020, and social media penetration in Kosovo was at the level of 61% in January 2020. While the number of Internet users in Kosovo increased by 9.7% between 2020 and 2021, the Internet penetration rate in Kosovo increased to 30% from January 2020 to January 2021.

Social media trends raise fundamentally different challenges due to the importance of and opportunity for customer interactions (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010). According to Khobzi et al. (2019), social media allows companies to engage in a dialogue with their customers and solicit feedback from consumers. However, according to Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014), companies have to define, implement, and follow up on specific social media activities before deciding to get involved with social media. Primary motive for companies to engage in social media is to raise brand awareness. Brand awareness refers to a consumer's familiarity with a brand and their ability to recall certain aspects of the brand (Asif et al., 2015). Similarly, Shojaee and Azman (2013) concluded that marketers should use social media to influence brand creation and awareness. Other researchers (Bilgin, 2018; Barri et al., 2017; Clark et al., 2009; Dân & Lê, 2018; Godey et al., 2016; Jamali & Khan, 2018; Jayasuriya & Azam, 2017; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020; Sawant, 2012) have proven that social media activities have an impact on increasing brand awareness.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Brand awareness

Brand awareness is an integral part of the business and a valuable component of brand equity. It refers to the buyer's ability to recognize or recall the brand of a particular product or service (Aaker, 1991). The first step is brand recognition, which is responsible for communicating the product's features until a brand name is established (Hawley & Tong, 2009). Consumers' ability to recognize or remember a brand's name is known as "recall" (Melati & Febianty, 2016). In other words, brand awareness is about the consumer remembering the name of a brand, especially during the buying process (Keller, 1993). Huang and Sarigöllü (2012) added that brand awareness is essential during the decision-making process, as during this process, consumers use awareness to remember a particular brand. Keller (1993) emphasizes three elements of brand awareness during the consumer decision-making. Firstly, consumers must bear in mind a certain brand when choosing a product from a certain category. Secondly, brand awareness influences the shape and power of brand associations in the brand image. Therefore, crucial factors towards attaining this objective are social media activities that can increase brand awareness and can be used by companies to inform and remind consumers of their brands, products, or services and convince them to purchase them.

### 2.2. Social media

The pandemic has had an impact on companies in practically each industry, which has paved the path for companies, particularly in the fashion industry, to concentrate their activities on social media (Deraman et al., 2020). While the pandemic is still present, social media are an

important means to share experiences, col-laborate, and participate in various dis-cussions (Tsui et al., 2020). In addition, if companies want to survive in a highly com-petitive environment, their presence on so-cial media is very important. If used effec-tively, it can increase brand awareness (Bîja & Balas, 2014). Akbar and Özgul (2018) also emphasize the importance of social media because the more consumers are in-volved in these media, the more they are informed about brands. As a result, adopt-ing integrated marketing communications to create a brand in the minds of consum-ers begins the process of raising custom-er awareness of the company's products (Kartikasari, 2014). Thus, communication through social media can increase the pro-pensity to shop online (Taha et al., 2021). However, according to Lv et al. (2020), so-cial media communication affects not only individuals' online purchasing preferences but also their friends' preferences through the transmission of information, which can subsequently be transmitted through-out the shopping network. Furthermore, Shojaee et al. (2013); Tritama & Tarigan (2016); Melati et al. (2016); and Jayasuriya et al. (2017) found that social media activi-ties have a strong correlation with brand awareness.

### 2.2.1. Advertising

From the standpoints of marketing and communication, advertising may be viewed from two angles. If we consider advertising from a marketing point of view, it refers to the presentation and promotion of products or services by a particular sponsor, which corresponds to the paid form. On the other hand, from a communication point of view, advertising conveys knowledge through various mass media (Ho et al., 2015). Advertising encompasses the activity of presenting products and services in order to

increase the existing demand while also at-tracting new customers (Durmaz, 2011). To achieve this, advertising should be attrac-tive and creative. In this way, companies try to attract new customers while connect-ing with their current customers (Alhaddad, 2015). In addition, Yavisha and Govender (2013) highlighted the importance of ad-vertising on social platforms when attract-ing consumers. They concluded that ad-vertising, to succeed and reach the right audience, should be constructed carefully and differently. In other words, it should be interactive, engaging, and participatory. On the other hand, Astuti and Risqiani (2020) emphasized the importance of the process of attention and motivation for advertis-ers to attract more consumers. Moreover, based on the findings of Ahmad Khan et al. (2016), Clark et al. (2009), and Sawant (2012), advertising has a significant impact on creating and raising brand awareness. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H1: Advertising has a positive influence on brand awareness.*

### 2.2.2. Entertainment

Entertaining content is the content post-ed by various sites to entertain the audience, or in other words, to make customers' faces smile through humorous content (Gaber & Tiu, 2014). In most cases, the audience likes and shares the entertainment con-tent with others. So, not all of this content is related to the products or services that a company offers, but it displays a different side of the company brand, and we are thus likely to see more engagement. According to Bilgin (2018), entertainment is a factor that makes people follow your page and an element that offers valuable opportuni-ties to create and improve brand awareness. Entertainment tends to convey relaxation, emotional release, and escape from rou-tine through messages or other forms of

providing entertainment (Muntinga et al., 2011). Therefore, the messages conveyed by companies to the audience should be more exciting to make customers happy and stimulate their creative imagination (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H2: Entertainment has a positive influence on brand awareness.*

### 2.2.3. Influencers

Technological development and the widespread use of social media, especially in the last decade, have changed the traditional sale-purchase process. Social media offers much better opportunities for targeting and finding the right audience for certain products and services (Negi & Pabalkar, 2020). Nowadays, companies also use social media as their main channel of communication with consumers. In addition, companies use influencers to advertise their goods and services (Topalova, 2021). According to Pratt (2018), the viral spread and widespread use of social platforms by consumers has prejudiced the emergence of influencers on social media, thus inducing the shaping of people's attitudes. Hence, influencers have become a sensation nowadays, which means that they can influence consumer behaviour through social media. One of the major purposes of influencers is to boost sales (Kavaliauskien & Haroldas, 2019). Freberg et al. (2011) also concluded that influencers are a new sort of independent third-party endorsers who can affect consumers' attitudes through social media. However, according to Astuti et al. (2020), it is crucial to choose appropriate influencers to attract consumers' buying interest in the product. Therefore, companies have to consider the components that make consumers interested in the product being advertised because messages through influencers on social media are more credible and trustworthy (Deraman et al., 2020). More importantly, companies can use influencers to deliver messages to enhance brand awareness (Dân & Lê, 2018). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H3: Influencers have a positive influence on brand awareness.*

### 2.2.4. Interaction

Social media has radically changed the way companies interact with their customers. Social media has created more favourable and appropriate conditions to interact and communicate with customers (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010). Social media has a large user base and encourages interaction between users in various ways, such as exchanging likes, comments, events, tagging, sending messages, and chatting online (Ma & Chan, 2014). These interactions, in such forms, can have a positive effect on the word of mouth, including fashion and trend features (Kim & Ko, 2011). According to Išoraitė (2016), this can increase brand loyalty, thus connecting with your audience and getting consumers acquainted with the brand and products a company offers. Consequently, through reviews and interaction with customers, it provides companies with a better access to customers' demands and desires (Ansari et al., 2019). Jamali et al. (2018) concluded that consumer interaction leads to higher brand awareness. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H4: Interaction has a positive influence on brand awareness.*

### 2.2.5. Sharing

Sharing is the form through which customers deliver, use, and obtain content. Social media users are linked by shared content, e.g., an image, video, location, text, sound, or a link. Consequently, sharing is a

way to interact on social media. Therefore, depending on the functional purpose of social media platforms, they separate users if they want to chat, build a relationship with each other, or do something else on social media (Kietzmann et al., 2011). There are different cases when consumers are satisfied or dissatisfied with a certain product or a service, which are often shared with others on social media. Therefore, companies consistently encourage consumers to share their experiences with products or services on social media (Kang & Schuett, 2013). Compared to other forms of digital marketing, sharing is an organic form created by the consumers themselves. Sharing images, products, and videos on their sites can have a more powerful impact on family members and society more than the sharing done by the companies themselves. Social media enable companies to understand more easily which messages, images, and shared campaigns have created greater engagement with the audience and have raised brand awareness. The use of social media has a positive and significant impact on creating brand awareness (Barri et al., 2017). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H5: Sharing has a positive influence on brand awareness.*

## 3. METHODS

This research was conducted using two types of data: primary and secondary. Secondary data were collected from the literature to understand better how businesses use social media and how important brand awareness is. On the other hand, the research mostly focuses on the primary data collected during the survey.

### 3.1. Proposed conceptual framework

The main aim of our research is to investigate the relationships between social media activities and brand awareness. Various empirical studies have been conducted on the effect of social media activities on brand awareness, which have showed that social media activities have an impact on brand awareness (Akbar et al., 2018; Melati et al., 2016; Shojaee et al., 2013; Tritama et al., 2016). Our research aims to demonstrate social activities and their importance for brand awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this is the first research investigating these activities in a pandemic period. The components that have been developed and that the research is based on are presented in Figure 1. The model shows the independent variable, i.e., brand awareness, and the dependent variable, i.e., social media activities consisting of the following components: entertainment, advertising, sharing, influencers, and interaction. Therefore, the research aims to understand whether these components or variables affect brand awareness or not. The assumptions for the hypotheses are made based on previous research, which has been presented in the literature review.
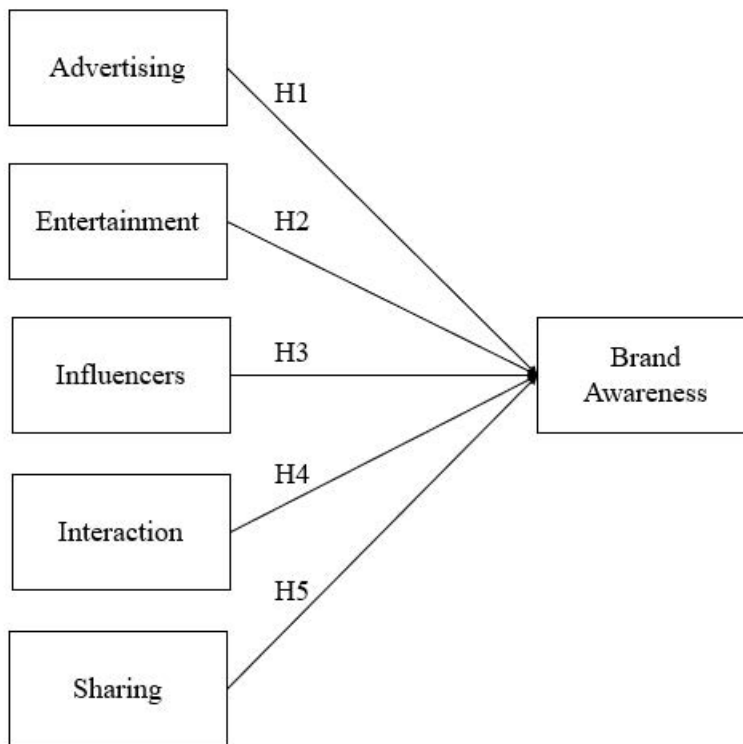
**Figure 1**. The proposed conceptual framework

## 3.2. Research participants

Responses from 244 respondents were received and a total of 224 were considered valid for the research. The majority of respondents were female (125, or 55.8%) and male (99, or 44.2%). The respondents were predominantly young, with 58.5 % being between the ages of 18 and 25, 26.8 % between the ages of 26 and 30, 12.9 % between the ages of 31 and 40, 0.9% between the ages of 41 and 50, and 0.9% were 51 or older. The majority of the respondents, i.e. 49.6% of them, had completed basic bachelor studies, and 44.6 % had a master's degree, only 3.6% had a high school degree, and only 2.2% had a PhD. The sampling was done in part at random using social media to distribute the questionnaire. Participation was entirely voluntary.

## 3.3. Measures

Excluding demographic questions, the questionnaire consisted of a total of 19 questions. The brand awareness questionnaire was adapted from Yoo, Donthu, & Lee (2000). The same questionnaire was used by other authors to measure brand awareness: Alhaddad et al. (2015), α =0.930; Hawley and Tong (2009), α =0.68; Yapa (2017), α =0.915. The items for advertising were also adapted from Yoo et al. (2000). Likewise, Bilgin (2018) α =0.912 used the same questionnaire to measure advertising. Tsang et al.'s (2004) questionnaire was used to measure entertainment. The same questionnaire was also used by Bilgin (2018), α =0.912; Godey et al. (2016); Kim et al. (2011), α =0.94; Okoe and Boateng (2015). To measure sharing,

Tresna and Wijaya's (2015) questionnaire was used, α =0.7. Finally, Bruns's (2018) questionnaire was used for the variable influencers. Cronbach alfa in our case is as follows: Brand Awareness .947, Advertising .914, Entertainment .922, Sharing .931, Interaction .971, and Influencers .986. All questions were measured on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating strongly disagree, 2 indicating disagree, 3 indicating neutral, 4 indicating agree, and indicating 5 strongly agree.

## 3.4. Research procedure

Due to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, the questionnaires were administered electronically using Google Forms and were distributed through social networks. The questionnaire required an average of 8 minutes to complete. After the answers were collected, they were input into the statistical package for social sciences, AMOS, to perform confirmatory factor analysis and regression. At the beginning of the questionnaire, the respondents were informed of the research objective, thanked for their help and time, and given the instructions needed to complete the questionnaires. Finally, complete anonymity was ensured, and they were provided with the official email for any additional questions, ambiguities, or explanations.

## 4. RESULTS

The aim of the research was to determine whether social media activities (advertising, sharing, influencers, entertainment, and interaction) affect brand awareness and see how these variables interact with one another. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and regression analysis were employed to examine the relationships between variables, hypotheses, and the impact of social media activities on brand awareness.

## 4.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to confirm or reject the measurement theory (Suhr, 2006). In this research, we tried to establish the suitability of the data with the presented model. For the suitability of factor analysis, necessary modifications to the items were made. The six-factor model for CFA is presented in Figure 2. The model fit indicators were: GFI = 0.911, AGFI = 0.877, NFI = 0.963, TLI = 0.983, CFI = 0.986, and RMSEA = 0.05
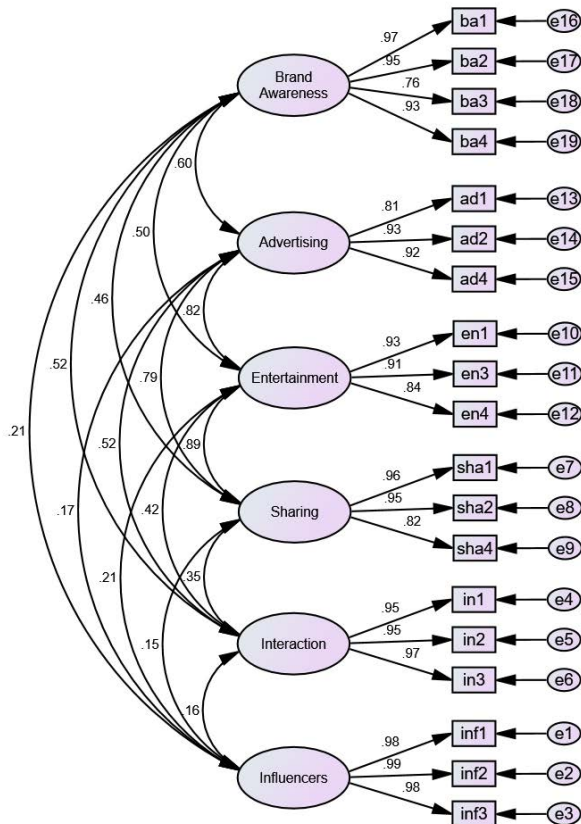
**Figure 2.** Results of the confirmatory analysis

## 4.2. Regression analysis

Regression analysis was used to test if social media activities have an effect on raising brand awareness. The results of the regression indicated that advertising has a significant impact on raising brand awareness ($p < 0.05$) and that interaction also has an impact on brand awareness ($p < 0.05$), whereas entertainment ($p > 0.05$), influencers ($p > 0.05$), and sharing ($p > 0.05$) have no impact on raising brand awareness. The data from the regression analysis are presented in table 2. Thus, it can be concluded that hypotheses for advertising and interaction were accepted, whilst the hypotheses for sharing, influencers, and entertainment were not accepted.

**Table 1.** Regression weights (Group 1 - default model)

| | | | Estimate | S.E. | C.R. | P | Label |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Brand Awareness** | ← | **Advertising** | .475 | .070 | 6.785 | *** | |
| **Brand Awareness** | ← | **Entertainment** | .046 | .069 | .666 | .505 | |
| **Brand Awareness** | ← | **Interaction** | .464 | .085 | 5.433 | *** | |
| **Brand Awareness** | ← | **Sharing** | .058 | .067 | .874 | .382 | |
| **Brand Awareness** | ← | **Influencers** | .054 | .038 | 1.415 | .157 | |

## 5. DISCUSSION

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to see if the factor structure could be repeated in the dataset from 224 contributors. The goodness-of-fit of the model was analysed, by using a variety of model fit indices and their concepts. Results of the regression analysis show that advertising has a meaningful effect on increasing brand awareness. The outcomes of this research are in line with other findings (Clark et al., 2009; Ahmad Khan et al., 2016; Sawant, 2012). Due to government measures during the pandemic, the total closure of the country, fashion businesses, in particular, used social media as a very important component in raising brand awareness and as an opportunity to switch to e-commerce. Creating ads on social media is a far simpler process than on traditional media, and the costs are lower. Fashion businesses consistently created various advertisements on social media to make consumers aware of their brand. Advertising enables companies to make clients aware of the presence and availability of their products. Our research shows that advertising has a clear effect on raising brand awareness (p <0.05). Hypothesis 1 is accepted.

According to the current research, entertainment has no effect on brand awareness (p > 0.05). The conclusions of this research do not match the findings of previous studies (Bilgin, 2018; Godey et al. 2016; Nguyen et al. 2020). This can be explained by the fact that companies mostly used the Tik Tok platform due to the nature of the content and the short duration of use (less than 15 seconds). Tok-Tok has been directing the future path of content creation and of the approach to the audience. In Kosovo, during the pandemic and lockdown period, most corporations produced videos lasting up to two minutes although on average people watch videos 3 to 8 seconds. If you cannot get your message across to the audience and keep them interested in a limited amount of time, you have failed. As the analysed business in Kosovo, responded in this manner, they were not able to increase brand awareness. Hypothesis 2 is not accepted.

During the pandemic, fashion businesses have tried to make the most of the opportunity to increase brand awareness, one of the ways being through influencers. The main reasons influencers were chosen were lower costs and high engagement rate. In most cases, fashion businesses selected girls to play the role of influencers, mainly those who had more followers. However, this approach was not successful. The findings of this research are not in line with the outcomes of other studies (Dân et al. 2018; Dhanesh et al. 2019; Nguyen et al.

2020). Thus, influencers have no impact on increasing brand awareness (p > 0.05). There were several reasons why this did not happen. Influencers use their fame on social media to promote the products and services of various companies. In other words, influencers in Kosovo do not have a specific product category in mind, but rather use their celebrity status to promote products from a wide range of categories. Fashion companies chose influencers based on the number of their followers, thus selecting influencers with the most followers for their campaigns, which did not achieve success. Another reason for limited success were unreal followers of the influencers, i.e., many followers were not from Kosovo but from other countries, and they were not interested in the fashion sector in Kosovo. Hypothesis 3 is not accepted. It can be concluded that interaction has a significant impact on increasing brand awareness (p < 0.05). The findings of this research are in line with other research (Godey et al., 2016; Hutter et al., 2013; Jamali et al., 2018; Jayasuriya et al., 2017). Online interaction intensified due to the situation created during the pandemic and lockdown. Individuals spent much more time on their phones and were active online. In this way, various companies, especially the fashion ones, hired employees to deal with customer care and support, starting from replying to customers' messages on social media, following customers' online shopping journey and dealing with customer complaints and requests. Thus, companies have been opening their doors to customers and presenting themselves as companies that care about them. Moreover, companies were quite engaged on social platforms, answering questions that consumers asked in the comments of various posts, providing resources, and showing that they care about their followers. Hypothesis 4 is accepted

Results of this research suggest that sharing has no substantial impact on raising brand awareness, which is inconsistent with the results of other studies (see Barri et al., 2017). Based on our results (p > 0.05), as for the sharing part, what was mostly shared during the pandemic in Kosovo was fake news. There has been a lot of sharing of fake news, political news, memes, and the like. Although fashion businesses also shared their news, they were not successful in this regard. Fashion news were also modestly distributed around the world, so this has not managed to have an impact on increasing brand awareness. Hypothesis 5 is not accepted.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS

Research findings have several practical implications. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to look at the entire set of social media activities (advertising, entertainment, influencers, sharing, and interaction), as well as the first study to look at social media activities and their impact on brand awareness in Kosovo. The findings underscored the relevance of social media in generating brand awareness. However, it is critical for companies to conduct preliminary research into their target audiences' interests and determine which types of activities they like to do or what platforms they like to use on social media. Furthermore, companies must communicate with their customers about everything that occurs in the environment in which they operate.

Furthermore, the pandemic has had a negative impact on a wide range of sectors and aspects of life. It has had a favourable impact on the marketing sector. As the audience was so active online during the government's closure and strict controls, they

could converse, connect, buy, and make practically all payments online. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic has informed many businesses that going online is not a choice but a must. External variables have an impact on organizations that desire to survive in such circumstances and that must then adjust to the new conditions and function online. The majority of companies have been working to raise brand awareness. Companies, which have effectively used social media, have accomplished their goal. Our research has shown that only a few activities appear to have increased brand awareness. Companies in Kosovo's fashion industry have employed various social media initiatives to boost brand awareness. However, advertising and interaction are the only activities that have had an impact on this element; influencers, entertainment, and sharing have had no impact. This research will help marketers use social media to enhance brand awareness through recommendations. However, marketers and organizations can create successful marketing promotions via social media activities aimed at raising brand awareness.

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# UTJECAJ AKTIVNOSTI NA DRUŠTVENIM MEDIJIMA NA POVEĆANJE SVIJESTI O TRŽIŠNIM MARKAMA TIJEKOM PANDEMIJE COVIDA-19: SLUČAJ MODNE INDUSTRIJE NA KOSOVU

## Sažetak

*Cilj ovog istraživanja je identificirati aktivnosti na društvenim medijima, koje djeluju na povećanje svijesti o tržišnim markama u modnoj industriji na Kosovu. Istraživanje uzima u obzir pet različitih aktivnosti na društvenim medijima (oglašavanje, utjecanje, podjelu sadržaja, zabavu i interakciju), a koliko su autori upućeni, ovaj rad predstavlja prvi eksperiment, u kojem se navedeni čimbenici zajedno analiziraju, kao i prvi rad, koji se odnosi na svijest o tržišnim markama na Kosovu. U radu se koriste kvantitativne metode, na uzorku od 224 ispitanika, uz primjenu konfirmatorne faktorske analize i regresije. Analiza je obavljena uz pomoć programskog paketa za statistiku AMOS. Rezultati ukazuju da aktivnosti, kao što su interakcija i oglašavanje, imaju utjecaj na svijest o tržišnim markama, što nije slučaj sa zabavom, dijeljenjem i utjecanjem. Dobiveni zaključci pružaju marketinškim stručnjacima preporuke, vezane uz aktivnosti na društvenim medijima, kao i izazove, koji se moraju uzeti u obzir prije njihove provedbe.*

*Ključne riječi: svijest o tržišnim markama, oglašavanje, zabava, interakcija, dijeljenje sadržaja, utjecanje*