

**MARKETING RESEARCH OF GENERAL
DETERMINANTS OF THE CHOICE OF THE STUDY
PROGRAMME DIGITAL MARKETING BY
ACADEMIC STUDIES STUDENTS**

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Abstract: *Digital marketing is becoming increasingly relevant in business practice. At the same time, there is a growing need to include digital marketing content in the curricula of higher education institutions. Based on the above, this paper sets two goals - to describe the growing application of digital marketing in business practice in general and to explore the general determinants of the choice of the study program by the students at the higher education institution that will start realization of a master's study program in digital marketing in 2021/22 school year. In the context of the previous objectives, in addition to collecting secondary information, a primary survey was conducted in June 2021 (n = 89). The results of the primary research indicate a pronounced positive acceptance of the study program digital marketing by students, regardless of specific general determinants.*

Keywords: *digital marketing, study program, higher education institutions, choice of a study program, general determinants, primary research*

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MARKETING ISTRAŽIVANJE OPŠTIH DETERMINANTI IZBORA STUDIJSKOG PROGRAMA DIGITALNI MARKETING OD STRANE STUDENATA AKADEMSKIH STUDIJA

Sažetak: *Digitalni marketing postaje sve relevantniji u poslovnoj praksi. Istovremeno, sve je jača potreba za uključivanjem sadržaja digitalnog marketinga u nastavne programe visokoobrazovnih institucija. Polazeći od navedenog, u ovom radu su postavljena dva cilja – opisati rastuću primenu digitalnog marketinga u poslovnoj praksi, generalno, i istražiti opšte determinante odabira tog studijskog programa od strane studenata na visokoobrazovnoj instituciji koja će početi sa realizacijom navedenog studijskog programa u školskoj 2021/22. godini. U kontekstu prethodnih ciljeva, pored prikupljanja sekundarnih informacija, sprovedeno je i primarno istraživanje u junu 2021. godine (n=89). Rezultati primarnog istraživanja ukazuju na izraženo pozitivno prihvatanje studijskog programa Digitalni marketing od strane studenata, nezvano za specifične opšte determinante.*

Ključne reči: *digitalni marketing, studijski program, visokoobrazovne institucije, izbor studijskog programa, opšte determinante izbora studijskog programa, primarno istraživanje*

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern digital environment has led to significant changes in business operations through a fundamental shift in the way companies and consumers communicate, which has enabled companies to gather detailed information about consumers, competitors, and the market as a whole, which, in return, has affected all aspects of the marketing mix (Cowley & Nguyen, 2019, p. 32). Appropriate statistical data can be given on the conditions in which digital marketing experiences its pronounced rise in business practice. The growth of 12.2% in Internet advertising expenditures was recorded in 2020. compared to 2019. when these expenditures amounted to 124.6 billion dollars (Internet Advertising Bureau, 2021). A HubSpot report (2021) based on a survey of 1,500 marketers from around the world states that in 2021, the most important way to conduct marketing activities will be through social media, suggesting that personalized and conversational marketing are preferred. The same report points to the growing importance of achieving brand awareness, which is becoming the 3rd marketing priority, surpassing sales as a goal. Most marketers have an increased budget this year (63%) and plan to spend it on paid advertising, content creation, and software.

This paper sets two goals - to describe the growing application of digital marketing in business practice in general (predominantly presented in the aforementioned paragraph, as well as the part of the paper that provides a review of the literature) and to explore general determinants of the choice of study program by students at higher education institutions which will be implemented to the master's study program of the same name in its offer the next school year (which the rest of the work is predominantly dedicated to). To achieve the first goal, marketing research "at the table" was conducted and appropriate secondary data were obtained based on relevant scientific literature. To achieve the second goal, marketing research was conducted using the test method, with the intention that the obtained results be relevant to the strategy of the higher education institution.

2. BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Understanding marketing as both an industry and a field of study is in a constant process of innovation, so although many theories and topics covered in class are certainly permanent, the skills employers seek are constantly changing, which requires innovative teaching techniques not only to teach skills that can be easily "sold", but also to enable students to show to future employers that they have these skills (it can be done by using certification programs created by digital marketing service providers, which help the higher education institution to prepare its students using the most modern resources available) (Staton, 2015, p.20).). The significance of such considerations, in general, is also present in the domestic scientific and professional public (Komnenić, Bolesnikov & Milošević, 2020). Higher education institutions face important development decisions about the extent to which they can and should adequately meet the demand for next-generation marketing training, and in this regard, there are different approaches used in an effort to incorporate digital marketing and analytics into course offerings, requirements, and options for specialization (Langan, Cowley & Nguyen, 2019, p.40).

As recently as a decade ago, Wymbs (2011) indicated the three aspects that support the acceptance of digital marketing as an academic field. On the one hand, the traditional marketing curriculum did not provide students with the necessary skills to analyze the implications of purchasing behavior in relation to power changes between customers and companies, the exponential growth of recorded customer-company interactions, and the use of experiments to understand consumers. On the other hand, it was stated that the digital economy is a real, not a temporary change. In the end, there was a statement that marketing as a discipline was becoming less relevant for business.

Certain previous researches have indicated a positive reception of digital marketing content by students, as well as business representatives. Thus, Key, Czaplewski and Ferguson (2019, p.133) concluded that students in digital marketing classes enjoyed and learned significantly more (and thus were more ready for future jobs) from the Google Ads campaign than from large projects in other business courses. Another advantage is the possibility of using external certificates in teaching (Staton, 2015, p. 23). For example, in the author's digital marketing course, the exam for individual qualification in Google Analytics, HubSpot's inbound marketing test, as well as the HootSuite exam for a certified professional is taken in class, and students send professors screenshots of their grades, which they evaluate within the grades from individual subjects, while allowing students to show the skills valued by future employers (former students indicate that taking these exams has directly led companies to offer them an internship or hire them; also, business owners in various areas of digital marketing report that they are more likely to employ candidates who already have these certificates).

As a framework for selecting the determinants to be used in the primary research in this paper, it served as part of the criteria that Kotler and Keller (2006) identify in market segmentation: geographic, demographic, psychographic, and behavioral. In this sense, the variables used for considering the choice of program, are: gender, number of years, high school students graduated from, year of undergraduate studies, undergraduate study program, funding status, assessed family financial status, whether the students work during their studies, if they have had an internship while studying, if they have had any experience in digital marketing (unrelated to employment), if they had any other experience related to digital marketing (attending courses, listening to tutorials), etc., as well as perceived knowledge about digital marketing. Starting from the previous elements, two hypotheses are defined:

H1: *Respondents who are thinking and who have not thought about applying to the study program in Digital Marketing at the time of applying for master's studies differ significantly in the stated variables.*

H2: *The probability that the respondents at the time of applying for master's studies apply for the study program in Digital Marketing can be brought into a statistically significant relationship with the stated general variables.*

It should be noted that, in addition to the above determinants, personality factors (Vedel, Thomsen & Larsen, 2015; Humburg, 2017; Wild & Alvarez, 2020), relevant theories, such as the theory of planned behavior, may be included in the research of study program selection, (Chipidza, Green & Riemenschneider,

2019; Moore & Burrus, 2019), and the quality of the program itself (Faranda, Clarke & Clarke, 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

The marketing research used a test method, primarily a structured test with a questionnaire. The portion of the questionnaire that was used for the purposes of writing this paper consisted of two parts. The first part consists of potential general determinants that can be related to the choice of the study program in Digital marketing. These are, as already emphasized: gender (male, female), number of years, the high school completed by students (economics, others), year of undergraduate studies they attend, study program in undergraduate studies (Marketing, others), funding status (budget, self-financing), the assessed financial situation of the family (scale from 1 to 5), whether they work while studying (yes, no), whether they did an internship while studying (yes, no), whether they have had any experience in digital marketing (unrelated to employment) (yes, no), if they have had any other experience related to digital marketing (e.g. attending courses, listening to tutorials, etc.) (yes, no), perceived knowledge of digital marketing (scale from 1 to 5). The second part of the questionnaire consisted of two questions: whether they had so far considered applying to the study program in Digital Marketing (yes, no) and the estimated probability of applying to that study program (scale from 1 to 5).

Starting from the second part of the questionnaire, certain analyses were conducted using SPSS software. First, we compared the respondents who are thinking and who have not thought about applying to the study program in Digital Marketing at the time of applying for master's studies. When comparing them, when it comes to nominal variables (gender, high school that students graduated from, study program in undergraduate studies, funding status, if they work while studying, if they did an internship while studying, if they had any work experience in digital marketing, if they have had any other experience related to digital marketing) the χ^2 test was used, i.e. the Fisher test of exact probability when the preconditions for conducting the χ^2 test were violated.

t -test of independent samples was used to compare numerical variables (number of years, year of undergraduate studies they attend, assessed family financial status, perceived knowledge about digital marketing).

After that, the answers of the respondents were considered in the context of the probability that they would apply for the study program in Digital Marketing at the moment of applying for the master's studies. Numerical variables were related to the answer to this question using Pearson's correlation coefficient.

Each of the nominal variables (all at two levels) was brought individually to this question using a t-test of independent samples.

An appropriate sample was used in the primary study. Students of undergraduate studies at the Faculty of Economics in Subotica were interviewed, where master's study programs in the school year 2021/22, also implement the Digital Marketing program. The survey was conducted in June 2021. and included a total of 89 respondents. When it comes to the gender structure of the sample, 20.20% of respondents are male and 79.80% are female. The average number of years of respondents is 21.33. If we look at the high school that students have graduated from, 68.5% of them are from the high school of economics, while 31.5% of the respondents are from other high schools. The structure of respondents by years of undergraduate studies they attend is as follows: 21.30% in the first, 18.00% in the second, 25.80% in the third, and 34.80% in the fourth year of study. 93.30% of respondents come from the undergraduate study program in Marketing, while 6.70% of respondents come from other programs. Regarding the status of financing, it can be stated that it is based on the scholarship in the case of 92.10% of respondents and self-financing in the case of 7.90% of respondents. The average assessed financial situation of the family on a scale from 1 to 5 is 3.53, with a grade of 2 giving 2.20%, a grade of 3 giving 49.40%, a grade of 4 giving 41.60%, and a grade of 5 giving 6.70% respondents. In addition to studying, 30.30% of respondents work (worked) and 69.70% do not work; and the practice was performed by 11.20%, while it was not 88.80%. So far, 32.60% of respondents have had some experience working in digital marketing (unrelated to employment), while 67.40% have not. In addition, some other experience related to digital marketing (e.g. attending courses, listening to tutorials, etc.) had 43.80% and not 56.20% respondents. Finally, the average grade of perceived knowledge about digital marketing is 2.79 (grade 1 gives 14.60%, grade 2 gives 25.80%, grade 3 gives 31.50%, grade 4 gives 22.5%, and grade 5 gives 5.60% of respondents).

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The results show that 86.50% of respondents have so far considered applying to the study program in Digital Marketing at the time of applying for master's studies, while 13.50% of respondents have not done so. To summarize, the stated numbers of respondents are 77 and 12, respectively.

The average estimated probability of applying to that study program is 4.06, with grade 1 giving 2.20%, grade 2 giving 0%, grade 3 giving 22.50%, grade 4 giving 40.40%, and grade 5 giving 34.80% of respondents.

Table 1 shows a comparison of respondents who are thinking and who have not thought about applying to the study program in Digital Marketing for each individual determinant at the time of applying for master's studies.

Table 1

Comparison of respondents based on different thoughts about applying to the study program

Characteristics		Have thought about applying	Have not thought about applying
Gender (%)	<i>male</i>	20,80	16,70
	<i>female</i>	79,20	83,30
Age		21,29 (1,55)	21,58 (1,31)
High school (%)	<i>economy</i>	66,20	83,30
	<i>other</i>	33,80	16,70
Year of study		2,70 (1,18)	3,00 (0,95)
Study program (%)	<i>marketing</i>	92,20	100,00
	<i>other</i>	7,80	0,0
Funding status (%)	<i>scholarship</i>	94,80	75,00
	<i>self-funding</i>	5,20	25,00
Income		3,56 (0,68)	3,33 (0,49)
Work while studying (%)	<i>yes</i>	32,50	16,70
	<i>no</i>	67,50	83,30
Internship while studying (%)	<i>yes</i>	13,00	0,00
	<i>no</i>	87,00	100,00
Work in digital marketing (%)	<i>yes</i>	29,90	50,00
	<i>no</i>	70,10	50,00
Other experiences in digital marketing (%)	<i>yes</i>	44,20	41,70
	<i>no</i>	55,80	58,30
Knowledge on digital marketing		2,83 (1,16)	2,50 (0,80)

Note. Authors' analysis.

When it comes to nominal variables, they are presented in percentages in the table. When it comes to numerical variables, they are represented by arithmetic means, ie. average values, followed by a standard deviation as shown in the parentheses.

When it comes to the previously mentioned segmentation of respondents, Table 2 shows the results of the corresponding tests (Fisher's test of exact probability, Chi-square test and t-test of independent samples).

Table 2

The results of difference tests

Characteristics	Test	Statistical significance / Result
Gender	<i>Fisher's test</i>	p=1,00
Age	<i>t-test</i>	t(df=87)=-0,631; p=0,529
High school	<i>Fisher's test</i>	p=0,326
Year of study	<i>t-test</i>	t(df=87)=-0,975; p=0,344
Study program	<i>Fisher's test</i>	p=0,438
Funding status	<i>Fisher's test</i>	p=0,049
Income	<i>t-test</i>	t(df=87)=1,103; p=0,273
Work while studing	<i>Fisher's test</i>	p=0,333
Internship while studying	<i>Fisher's test</i>	p=0,346
Work in digital marketing	<i>Fisher's test</i>	p=0,194
Other experiences in digital marketing	<i>Chi-square</i>	χ^2 (df=1)=0,026; p=0,872
Knowledge on digital marketing	<i>t-test</i>	t(df=87)=0,950; p=0,345

Note. Authors' analysis.

Based on the table, it can be seen that the results of Fisher's test of exact probability show that there is a statistically significant difference when it comes to funding status ($p = 0.049$) between respondents who have so far considered applying to the master program in Digital Marketing and those who have not. In the case of all other characteristics, there is no statistically significant difference.

When it comes to analysis related to the probability of applying to the study program in Digital Marketing, the corresponding results are given in Table 3

(where Pearson's correlation coefficient is denoted by r ; t-test of independent samples with t ; a arithmetic mean with M).

Table 3

Comparison of respondents by the probability of applying to the study program

Characteristics		M	Test results
Gender	<i>male</i>	4,00	$t(df=87)=-0,300$; $p=0,765$
	<i>female</i>	4,07	
Age			$r=-0,099$; $p=0,357$
High school	<i>economy</i>	4,00	$t(df=87)=-0,884$; $p=0,379$
	<i>other</i>	4,18	
Year of study			$r=-0,008$; $p=0,941$
Study program	<i>marketing</i>	4,04	$t(df=87)=-0,794$; $p=0,429$
	<i>other</i>	4,33	
Funding status	<i>scholarship</i>	4,07	$t(df=87)=-0,619$; $p=0,538$
	<i>self-funding</i>	3,86	
Income			$r=0,124$; $p=0,246$
Work while studying	<i>yes</i>	3,96	$t(df=87)=-0,655$; $p=0,514$
	<i>no</i>	4,10	
Internship while studying	<i>yes</i>	4,50	$t(df=87)=1,107$; $p=0,092$
	<i>no</i>	4,00	
Work in digital marketing	<i>yes</i>	4,17	$t(df=87)=0,732$; $p=0,468$
	<i>no</i>	4,00	
Other experiences in digital marketing	<i>yes</i>	4,13	$t(df=87)=0,676$; $p=0,501$
	<i>no</i>	4,00	
Knowledge on digital marketing			$r=0,024$; $p=0,826$

Note. Authors' analysis.

All tests indicate the absence of statistically significant differences and/or connections.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS DISCUSSION

When it comes to primary marketing research, the results indicate an extremely high percentage of students who are considering enrolling in the master's study program in Digital Marketing (over 85%) and a high probability (over 4 on a five-point scale) that they will apply to study it. Considering the results above in the context of individual general determinants used in this research (gender, number of years, high school students graduated from, year of undergraduate studies they are attending, study program in undergraduate studies, funding status, assessed family financial status, whether they work while studying, if they did an internship while studying, if they have had any experience in digital marketing (unrelated to employment), if they have had any other experience related to digital marketing (e.g. attending courses, listening tutorials, etc.), perceived knowledge of digital marketing) as a rule (with only one exception during the analysis) does not indicate statistically significant differences and/or connections.

The general absence of statistical significance can be explained by the fact that most respondents come from the study program in Marketing (undergraduate studies), while all the other differences between them are secondary when considering the choice of the master program in Digital Marketing. However, the choice of such a sample is justified by the fact that most students who apply for master programs of the institution finished undergraduate programs in the said institution, and also by the fact that it does not necessarily imply a positive attitude towards such innovation as the master study program.

Having in mind the previously offered explanation, it is possible to suggest that in similar research one should not omit the conceptual framework that includes the criteria identified by Kotler and Keller (2006) in market segmentation, which is partly used in this paper. The importance of these variables is exceptional for the overall marketing strategy and tactics. Rather, it could be concluded that, given the specifics of primary research mentioned, emphasis should be placed on certain other variables contained in the same framework. In this sense, one can consider including the already mentioned personality factors in future research (Wedel, Thomsen & Larsen, 2015; Humburg, 2017; Wild & Alvarez, 2020), the theory of planned behavior (Chipidza, Green & Riemenschneider, 2019; Moore & Burrus, 2019), the quality of the study program of the program (Faranda, Clarke & Clarke, 2021). Additionally, their inclusion makes sense having in mind the lack of specific research that connects the mentioned variables and the study program in Digital Marketing.

6. CONCLUSION

Digital marketing has become a significant part of business practice in the world and its importance is growing by the year. In the first part of this paper, the authors tried to look at the issue of digital marketing from two perspectives - first, in the context of its positioning in terms of trends and tendencies in business, and then in the context of needs, opportunities, and past experiences to implement its content in the curricular programs of higher education institutions. In that sense, secondary marketing research was conducted, by reviewing the relevant literature.

When it comes to conducting primary research, the obtained results indicate the rejection of the first hypothesis that respondents who have thought and who have not thought about applying to the study program in Digital Marketing, differ significantly in general variables. In addition, the second hypothesis can be rejected, according to which the probability that the respondents at the time of applying for master's studies apply to the study program in Digital Marketing can be brought into a statistically significant relationship with general variables.

What can, according to the authors, have implications for the scientific, and even more for the professional public, is, first of all, the emphasis on the need to apply the marketing philosophy in business and higher education institutions. In particular, when introducing new study programs, in addition to all other stakeholders (employees who will have to improve in relation to new subjects, especially when it comes to such expressed innovation; company and/or institution where graduates and/or master students will find work; certain state administrative structures in accordance with whose accreditation rules a new program must be prepared, etc.) should pay special attention to the opinions of those students who should predominantly apply for these programs. And not only that. Researching preferences based on the study program in the context of certain other determinants may have consequences for the approach of promoting it, especially in light of the possibilities that are enabled through digital marketing targeting. Subsequent research should include other determinants in an effort to find potential segments among students.

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