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The Patchy Digital Landscape of Romanian Food Retail: Regional Disparities and Implications for Market Performance

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyse the digital presence of general food retail companies in Romania and investigate whether there is a link between the digital presence and the market performance of these companies. This study is relevant in the context of the digital transformation, that is revolutionizing the retail landscape offering challenges and opportunities alike. For the Romanian food retail sector this is a third major wave of transformation in the last four decades, and these speedy changes generate diverse reactions, with metropolitan areas quickly embracing digital advancements while more peripheral regions face developmental inertia. To offer a better understanding of the context this paper will first review some important studies on the retail landscape and performance of the companies and then will examine the proportion of companies with digital presence on a sample made of the 198 largest companies in general food retail, according to their turnover. With a large sample we aimed to ensure that each county is represented by at least two companies, so we stopped collecting data when this criterion was met. The results highlight a very patchy landscape of digital presence, as in certain regions top companies have developed an multichannel digital presence but in others most companies are invisible in the digital space and are solely rooted in the physical retail activity. The analysis also reveals some challenges of the local food retail companies, that are currently having a large turnover, but who risk losing touch with the consumers, who are increasingly spending time in the digital world. This also places local competitors in a vulnerable position compared to the large multinational retail chains who have taken many steps forward to leverage the digital transformation and secure a long-term competitive advantage. This is a first study on the digitalization of food retail companies in Romania that considers the development differences between the counties and enables a mapping of the regions where more support in terms of digitalization of the retail sector would be needed for local companies to remain in business.

Keywords: food retail; Romanian companies; digitalization; market performance.

JEL Classification: L81; O33

1. Introduction

The retail sector represents a major economic force worldwide, acting as a key driver of employment, consumption, and overall financial activity in virtually every country. As Dekimpe (2020) highlights, retailing has consistently attracted researchers due to several compelling characteristics, like its scale and visibility, its complex and ever-evolving nature, as well as a generally good availability of data suitable for empirical research.

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The core functions of retail encompass several key areas: strategic selection of product assortments, physical movement and management of merchandise through the supply chain, conducting transactions with customers, providing essential information about products and services, and extensive communication and service efforts that enhance the customer shopping experience. Until recently, these responsibilities were the exclusive preserve of traditional retailers, who managed physical storefronts and face-to-face interactions with consumers (Zentes et al., 2007). However, the digital revolution has triggered a profound transformation in how these functions are performed and the types of organizations involved. E-commerce platforms and omnichannel strategies have introduced new paradigms for assortment building, leveraging data analytics to personalize offerings at scale. Physical logistics are now intertwined with complex digital fulfilment networks. Legal transactions are increasingly taking place online, requiring robust cybersecurity and data privacy measures. Information provision and communication have exploded through websites, social media, and personalized digital marketing. In addition, ancillary services are now expanding to virtual consultations, personalized recommendations, and digitally integrated loyalty programs, signifying a significant evolution beyond the traditional confines of the physical store.

The Romanian retail sector is also deeply influenced by this transformation which follows other major transitions that took place less than 50 years. Stanciu (2015) briefly describes the historical context of the retail sector in Romania and suggests that three stages of development took place, starting with communist retail, characterized by shortages and centralized control, passing through a stage of privatization in the early post-communist period and reaching a stage of globalization, in which several large global retailers are increasingly present, with continuously growing store networks. However, it is clear that retail is a constantly changing type of business, so digitalization is further transforming the retail landscape in Romania.

In the context of the general food retail sector in Romania, this paper wants to explore the adaptation to digitalization of companies, paying attention also to companies with Romanian capital. Therefore, the aim is to analyse the digital presence of companies in the general food retail sector in Romania and to investigate whether there is a link between digital presence and the market performance of these companies. Since there is the expectation that the global retail chains present in Romania will be more advanced, the focus of the paper will be mainly on local companies and their effort to imitate or keep up with some of the digitalization strategies of their major competitors.

Since the general food retail sector in Romania has aroused much interest from researchers, the following section highlights the main findings and aspects studied so far, with a focus on digitalization and performance aspects. The following sections will continue with a presentation of the dataset used and the analyses performed. The findings are detailed and discussed further, followed by the conclusion section which highlights the main contribution, some managerial implications, and future research directions in the Romanian retail landscape.

2. Romanian Food Retail Studies

The retail sector in Romania has received a considerable research attention.

Busu et al (2020) analyze with an econometric model the influence of several financial indicators like fixed assets, current assets and number of employees on the economic performance of retail companies in Romania and conclude that the current and fixed assets indeed impact the economic performance. They randomly selected 68 companies and analyzed the mentioned indicators from a particular year.

In a similar vein, Carstea et al. (2017) also regressed several indicators, such as turnover, number of employees, capital, debt, stocks, and fixed assets, on the net profit of retail companies and found statistically significant and positive influence for most indicators, with the exception of capital and fixed assets which had no significant influence on the net profit. In their analysis they included data from the top largest retail companies in Romania.

Stanciu et al. (2019) analyze the expansion of retail food networks with international brands and note an increase in the foreign capital and a bankruptcy of indigenous companies, noting that when the paper was published no large network of food stores with Romanian capital thrived at national level. To prove their assertions, they assessed the concentration of the market with the Gini Struck Index method. They concluded that that there is a high concentration in the market in the top 10 largest retailers, and the 4 largest ones accounted for 60% of the total turnover reported by the sector. Although they mention twice the fact that the expansion of large retail networks leads to the bankruptcy of domestic food retail companies, this assertion is not proved by the study carried out as the bankruptcy situation is not analyzed in the article.

Harangi-Rakos and Fenyves (2021) compared the financial indicators of leading retail companies in Romania and Hungary and also noted a high concentration in the retail sector, which is noticeable in the whole European countries. They also mentioned that retail outlets are usually present in urban areas with higher average incomes usually low prices due to the higher competition, and the rural areas, which are usually characterized by more modest incomes have fewer retail outlets to shop from who don't have strong competition, thus their prices are usually higher than in large urban agglomerations. In terms of concentration, they also note this is increasing worldwide and that more than 90% of food turnover is coming from various retail chains.

Purcarea et al. (2022) noted that digitalization play an important role in the transformation of both retail sector and the needs and expectations of consumers, thus analyzed the major shifts in consumer behavior in the retail market for Romanian consumers in the context of a greening of the economy sparked by the European Green Deal. They conclude that consumers are aware of the shift of the public image and agenda of retailers towards sustainability on the one hand, and on the other consumers see an increased concentration of retailers digitizing of processes and enhanced digital communication in social media and through personal messages to their phones.

Stanciu (2015) starts by briefly describing the historical context on the retail sector in Romania and proposes that a three stages development has taken place, with the period of the communist regime in retail, a privatization period when privately owned shops started to develop in the post-communist years, arriving at a globalization stage that is also currently taking place. Beyond the perspective on the origin of the capital (state, private but domestic, or foreign), it should foremost be noted a transition from a traditional form of retail to a modern type retail that Romanian consumers have fantasized about and once they entered the Romanian market were embraced with enthusiasm. In essence, Stanciu (2015) notices an increase in the number of outlets pertaining to large general food retail chains and a decrease in the total number of companies in the retail sector overall, while noting the success of several local initiatives that managed to develop their own retail chains, usually with a more local presence in regions of Romania and not developing their presence with shops in various regions throughout the country.

According to Javorcik and Li (2013), after 1989 many developing countries have opened their retail sector to foreign direct investment and so was the case for post-communist countries in the Central and Eastern Europe, which facilitated a rapid expansion of global retail chains. Their study aims to understand how the entry of global retailers has affected the host economy by focusing on upstream industries, and their results suggest that the opening of the retail sector led to productivity growth in the upstream manufacturing.

3. Methodology

The main research questions of this study are the following:

(a) How diverse is the digital presence of general food retail companies and what are the differences between regions in Romania?

(b) What are the differences in terms of market performance according to the digital presence level?

In order to answer these questions, a dataset was gathered from several different sources. The list of top performing companies in terms of turnover was collected from Doingbusiness.ro, financial data for these companies were collected from mfinante.gov.ro, and the digital presence was observed through searches on different platforms, like google search results, social media presence, and google maps presence. Financial data comprised the turnover, gross profit and average number of employees for the years 2019 and 2023 in order to enable a comparison in performance, which also corresponds to a comparison of the performance before COVID-19 pandemic and during a recovery from the pandemic. Two more indicators were computed based on these data: work productivity (turnover divided by number of employees), return on sales (percentage of net sales revenue that remains as operating profit).

The digital presence was computed as a score for each company depending on the number of channels used to the digital communication, thus a company received 1 additional point for each of the following channels: presence on google maps, presence on social media, having own website, and having developed a mobile application. Thus, the digital presence variable could take a maximum score of 4, and a minimum score of 0 (no information available on the company except that offered by platforms who aggregate companies' data).

A dataset with information from 198 companies was gathered, from those with the highest turnover downwards until we included at least 2 companies from each county. However, during the data gathering stage, it appeared that not all companies have general retail as actual activity, and some may be active in the business-to-business distribution, thus their inclusion in the analysis would affect conclusion. For this reason, an outlier identification was performed in order to ensure the relevance of the dataset, using work productivity as a differentiator. This was used as a way to identify companies that may have kept the general food retail classification code without actually running a business in this sector, and we identified 22 outliers – companies who may have the main business activity in the FMCG distribution sector and not retail. We eliminated these from the further analysis in order to keep results and findings relevant to the specificities of the general food retail sector. The sample used for the analysis was formed of 176 companies from Romania.

4. Results

4.1. Overall Analysis of the Digital Presence

We first explored the whole dataset on aspects like number of years in activity (years since the company was founded), overall evolution of the turnover and the number of employees, as well as average return on sales.

The average number of years in activity for the companies was 24 years, with a median in 1997.5, so half of the companies (88) were founded before 1998, and the mode was the year 1994. Overall, the turnover generated by the analysed companies increased with 64.34% between 2019 and 2023, while the total number of employees decreased by 0.67%, from 94740 to 94107 total employees. The average return on sales also has decreased, from a 3.86% return on sales in 2019 to 3.36% in 2023, thus a decrease of around 15%. These average indicators of the sector indicate that although turnover is increasing in value, the profitability is deteriorating despite a reduction in the number of employees.

The distribution of the digital presence score in the total sample is illustrated in Fig.1, showing a small number of companies with a high score of digital presence (6.82%, 12 companies), a slightly higher number of companies with no digital presence (16.48%, 29 companies). In between, there are 36 companies (20.45%) who use 3 digital presence channels, usually they haven’t developed a mobile application, while most of the companies 56.25 % (99 companies) have a smaller digital presence, usually with some social media communication and presence of google maps.

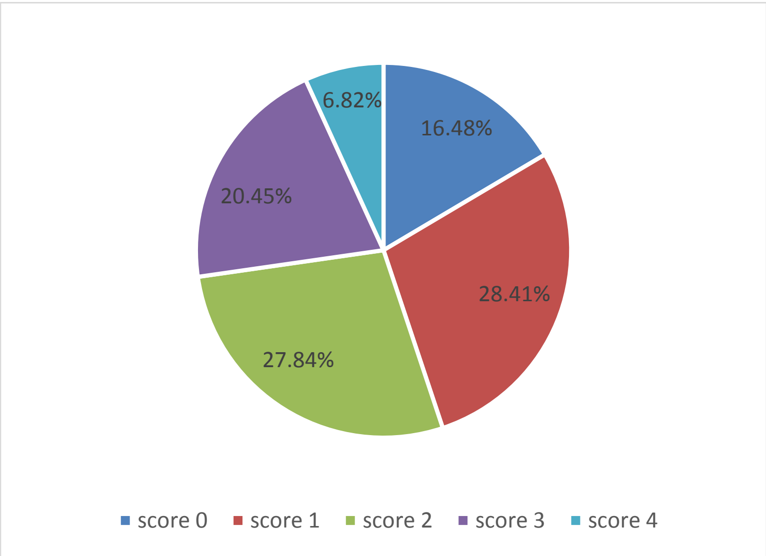

Figure 1. Distribution of the Digital Presence Score Among the Retail Companies

The retail companies that use 3 or more digital communication channels thus represent 27.27% of the sample. This means that more than 70% of companies with business in the general food retail sector tend to avoid or not use strategically the digital communication channels, although consumers are increasingly present online.

When analysing the geographical distribution of top performing companies in general food retail and the average digital presence score of the companies pertaining to each county, the results are illustrated in Fig. 2 and 3. Regions most represented in the general food retail sector were Bucharest (the capital city) with 18 companies top performing, followed by two counties in the southern half of the country, Dolj and Arges, with 9 companies each and then five counties from different regions of Romania which have 7 companies each, Alba, Buzau, Iasi, Mures, Vaslui. Although it is expected that big retail companies have their headquarters in the capital city, this map shows us that there is a variety of regions where there are top performing local retail chains.

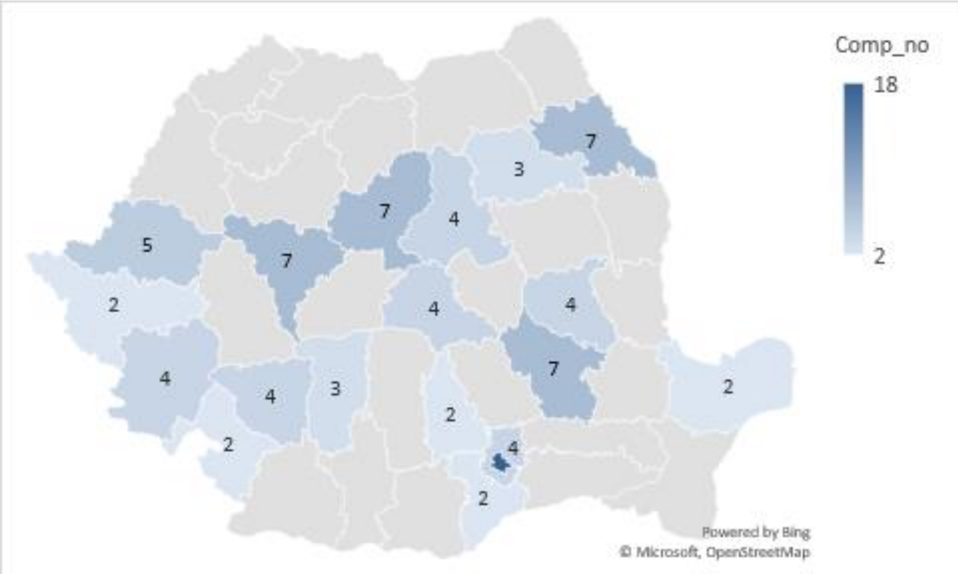

Figure 2. Distribution of Companies According to the County

The digital presence score map depicts a different image, where Ilfov county has the highest average score, 3.25, followed by Timis with a score of 3 and a set of 5 counties with an average score of 2.5, namely Bucuresti, Dambovita, Giurgiu, Harghita and Tulcea. Although the average score of the digital presence can be somewhat biased because of the different number of companies from each country in the sample, thus, cannot be used to generalize results, higher performing regions in terms of digital presence can be noticed. On the whole sample, the average score for the digital presence is 1.73, so in order to better understand the efforts put into the digital presence, Figure 4 highlights the counties with a score above the average, while showing the number of represented companies.

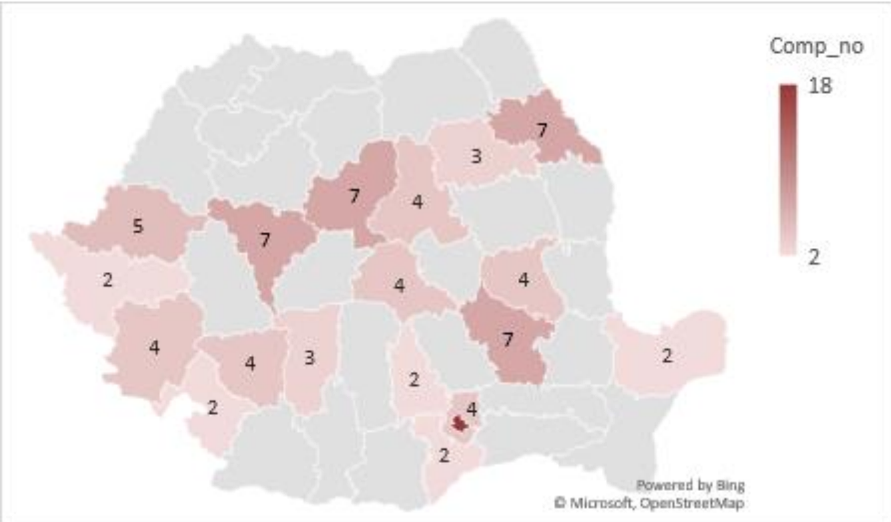

Figure 3. Distribution of the Digital Presence Score According to the Company's Headquarter County

Figure 4. Counties with a Digital Score above the Average

Figure 4 allows us to see the important digital presence efforts made by companies in some remote regions, Timis and Tulcea, but also in counties around the capital city, like Ilfov, Dambovita and Giurgiu.

Thus, answering the RQ1 (How diverse is the digital presence of general food retail companies and what are the differences between regions in Romania?), a big diversity can be noticed in terms of digital presence of general retail companies, with a small number of companies taking advantage of all digital interaction tools with the consumers, while a higher number of companies have no digital presence. In between, there is a whole set of companies that have adopted the digital communication channels to various degrees; some are more advanced and they just didn't develop an own mobile application yet, while others seem to be lagging behind with no website and just social media communication on Facebook. Some regions seem to have more retail companies that strive the increase their digital presence.

4.2. Digital Presence and Performance

This section will analyse the differences in performance indicators for the companies with different digital presence scores in order to understand the current implications for the performance of the company in making such efforts. The analysed indicators are presented in Table 1 and 2 and described below.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of the companies according to the digital presence score

Group	% of the Sample	% of Total sales	% of Total employees
Digiscore0	16.48%	1.10%	1.70%
Digiscore1	28.41%	2.18%	3.44%
Digiscore2	27.84%	3.17%	6.02%
Digiscore3	20.45%	4.32%	7.64%
Digiscore4	6.82%	89.22%	81.20%

Source: Own Calculation

Companies with a digital presence score of 4. Companies with the highest score of digital presence account for 89.82% of the total turnover generated and 81.20% of the employees in the sector. Their return on sales has decreased between 2019-2023, from 3.86% to 3.26% (-15.56% change), the total number of employees decreased with 3.01%, while their turnover increased with 63.88%. It was expected that companies with strong digital presence have more resources and some are multinationals thus, it was expected that their impact on the total turnover and employment be important, and it is obvious that these companies dominate the sector. Compared to the values for the whole sample, the big companies with digital presence have lost more employees than the whole sector, while their return on sales has decreased around the average of the sector. Looking at the performance of individual companies, only 2 (16.67%) of them had a decrease in their turnover, and 6 (50%) reduced the number of employees, and 7 (58.33%) registered a decrease in their return on sales in 2023 compared to 2019.

Companies with a digital presence score of 3. Companies with a slight smaller digital presence accounted for 4.32% of total sales and 7.64% of the employees in the sector. Their return on sales increased from 3.07% to 3.77% (+22.76% change), the number of employees increased with 7.64% and their sales increased by 67.86%. These companies have a good digital presence, meaning that they use most of the digital communication tools available, except for developing an own, branded, mobile app, and we can see this strategy was associated with an increase in sales slightly above the average, an increase in the return on sales and an increase in the personnel, probably showing signs of expansion. In terms of individual performance of the companies, only 2 (5.56%) of these companies had a decrease in their sales, 13 (23.11%) reduced the number of employees, and 16 (44.44%) registered a decrease in their return on sales in 2023 compared to 2019.

Companies with a digital presence score of 2. Companies with a score of 2 usually are present in Google maps and have some communication on social media, most frequently Facebook. They account for 27.84% of the sample, but generate 3.17% of the sales and represent 6.02% of the employees. Their return on sales decreased from 4.69% to 4.15% (-11.52% change), with the highest increase is sales in 2023 compared to 2019, by 89.68%, as well as an increase in the number of employees by 26.68%. These companies are characterized by expansion, visible in terms of sales and number of employees and possibly this may also explain the decrease in the return on sales. The individual performance analysis for these companies, shows that 8 (16.33%) of these companies had a decrease in sales, 20 (40.82%) reduced the number of employees, and 21 (42.86%) registered a decrease in their return on sales in 2023 compared to 2019. The high number and percentage of companies that had a decrease in sales or personnel, shows that indicators have a higher variability in this group, so there are companies improving their performance and other losing their position and they both practice a limited digital communication strategy.

Companies with a digital presence score of 1. These companies offer little information online, some just communicating on Facebook, but most of them just marked their presence on Google maps. They are quite numerous as they account 28.41% of the sample, but only generate 2.18% of the sales and have 3.44% on the employees. Their return on sales increased from 4.01% to 4.41% (+10.15% change), with a sales increase of only 51.34%, below the sample average, and a decrease in the number of employees by 0.86%. The individual analysis, shows that only 2 (4.00%) had a decrease in sales, but 31 (62.00%) reduced the number of employees, and 23 (46.00%) had a decrease in the return on sales in 2023 compared to 2019. These companies seem to be in a survival mode because they strive to maintain a profitability by reducing personnel, yet they do not compensate with online sale, which usually involve lower personnel costs per unit sold, so their sales have a steady increase but below that of their competitors.

Companies with a digital presence score of 0. In this category there are companies that only have a physical presence and offer no digital information, as the only information available on their activity come from platforms aggregating company data. This group represents 16.48% of the sample but only generates 1.10% of sales and account for 1.70% of employees. Their return on sales increased from 3.79% to 4.82% (+27.06% change), with a sales increase of 53.50%, and have increased their personnel by 1.39%. The individual company analysis, shows that only 2 (6.90%) had a decrease in sales, but 17 (58.62%) reduced the number of employees, and 10 (34.48%) had a decrease in the return on sales in 2023 compared to 2019. It cannot be said much about these companies, due to limited online information, yet because of their averagely good performance, it can be noticed that in Romania companies in the retail sector can carry on well enough without a digital presence. It may also be that they developed a chain of stores under a francize contact for a proximity stores retail brand.

Table 2. Percentage Change in the Indicators for 2019-2023 Period

Group	% change total sales	% change total employees	% change Return on Sales
Digiscore0	53.50%	1.39%	27.06%
Digiscore1	51.34%	-0.86%	10.15%
Digiscore2	89.68%	26.68%	-11.52%
Digiscore3	67.86%	8.32%	22.76%
Digiscore4	63.88%	-3.01%	-15.56%

Source: Own Calculation

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences between the 5 groups of companies in order to identify specific differences and thresholds for the performance indicators analysed. The ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in sales and employee numbers, but no difference in terms of return on sales, sales growth, total number of employee change, and return on sales change. Table 3 offers details on these results.

Table 3. Results of the ANOVA Analysis

Variable	F-value	df* between	df within	p-value
Sales	51.863	4	171	.000
No. of employees	71.672	4	171	.000
Return on sales	1.249	4	171	.292
Sales growth	0.619	4	171	.649
Change in total number of employees	0.580	4	171	.678
Change in return on sales	2.181	4	171	.073

Source: Own Calculation, df – degrees of freedom

The differences between groups were further analysed for the two variables with statistically significant differences, sales level and number of employees, using a Bonferroni Post-Hoc test. The original alpha level of .05 was adjusted to 10 comparisons, with a new alpha value of .005 for each pairwise comparison to control for the family-wise error rate. These comparisons indicated that company group with a digital presence score of 4 had significantly higher sales (M = 1.595 million euros, SD = 1.445) than company groups with a score of 3 (M = 0.026 million euros, SD = 0.033) 2 (M = 0.014 million euros, SD = 0.023), 1 (M = 0.009 million euros, SD = 0.007) and 0 (M = 0.008 million euros, SD = 0.004). This sets apart the group with a high digital presence in comparison to the others, as they are the big players in the retail market. The company group with a digital presence score of 3 was also different from the groups with scores of 0, and in the comparison with group 1, the p-value of the difference is .0055, just above the .005 threshold.

Comparing the groups on the number of employees variable, more significant differences are observed in the between the group comparison. Here again, companies with a score of 4 set themselves apart as the group, having significantly more employees than the other groups (M = 6368.167, SD = 4835.502). Significant difference can be found also between groups with score 3 (M = 199.722, SD = 240.705) and score 2 (M= 115.592, SD = 219.995). The groups with scores of 1 (M = 64.66, SD = 43.853) and score 0 (M = 55.241, SD = 31.826) were not significantly different, nor compared to the group with score 2.

These findings show that in the current market situation in Romania general food retail companies need to grow beyond a certain level in terms of sales and personnel before starting to have a dedicated strategy on digital communication.

Thus, answering the second research question (What are the differences in terms of market performance according to the digital presence level?), the main finding is that a higher digital presence is associates with a higher level of sales and number of employees, thus enjoying a wider market share as well as having a bigger impact on the socio-economic environment though a higher number of jobs. This increased dimension is only associated with more presence (in the physical and digital space), but in terms of return on sales and growth, the digital presence doesn't make a significant difference. This may be explained by several possible circumstances: consumers in Romania still favour shopping in stores for groceries and general goods with a small percentage of shopping being done online or through home-delivery platforms, a much smaller than in other product categories such as clothing, electronics and others. Another possible explanation could come from the specificities of competition the companies in these groups are facing, with large corporations having certain struggles, different from those of the SMEs that are typically found among groups with a lower digital presence. These possible explanations could be further explored and tested in future research on digital communication efforts of retail companies in the Romanian market.

5. Conclusion

This paper investigated the digitalization efforts in the Romanian general food retail sector, with a specific focus on locally owned companies. The study aimed to analyze the digital presence of these companies and determine if a correlation exists between their online presence and market performance. Recognizing that international retail chains operating in Romania are likely more digitally advanced, the primary emphasis will be on examining how local companies are adapting to and attempting to compete with the digitalization strategies of their major competitors, and what are the consequences in terms of performce for those not using the digital communication channels.

The digital landscape of Romanian general food retail companies exhibits a significant diversity. A small segment of companies fully utilizes the spectrum of digital interaction tools available to engage consumers, while a considerable portion lacks any digital presence whatsoever. Between these extremes lies a range of companies with varying degrees of digital adoption; some are quite advanced but haven't yet developed a dedicated mobile application, while others are notably behind, operating solely with a Facebook presence and lacking a website. Furthermore, there are indications that certain regions within Romania have a higher concentration of retail companies actively pursuing an enhanced digital presence.

In response to the second research question, findings reveal a positive correlation between a stronger digital presence and enhanced market performance, specifically in terms of increased sales and a larger workforce, leading to a greater market share and a more substantial socio-economic impact through job creation. However, this expanded scale, driven by both physical and digital presence, does not translate into significantly different returns on sales or growth rates.

This study makes several notable contributions to understanding the digitalization of the Romanian general food retail sector, particularly focusing on locally owned companies. Firstly, it provides a detailed snapshot of the current digital landscape, highlighting the significant heterogeneity in digital adoption among these companies, ranging from complete absence to sophisticated utilization of various online tools. This nuanced understanding of the existing digital maturity levels offers valuable insights for stakeholders seeking to support the digital transformation of local retailers. Secondly, the paper establishes a positive correlation between a stronger digital presence and enhanced market performance indicators such as increased sales, larger workforce, and greater market share, underscoring the tangible benefits of embracing digital communication channels for these businesses. This finding is particularly relevant for local companies as they navigate competition with more digitally advanced international chains.

Recognizing the significant diversity in current digital adoption levels, managers should adopt tailored digitalization approaches rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. Companies with minimal or no digital presence need to focus on foundational steps like establishing a professional website and engaging on relevant social media platforms. More digitally advanced local retailers should explore further opportunities such as developing mobile applications, leveraging data analytics for personalized marketing, and optimizing their online customer experience. Understanding their current digital maturity level and the specific characteristics of their target market within different Romanian regions will enable managers to allocate resources effectively and implement digitalization strategies that yield the most significant impact on their performance.

The study also has several limitations which also offer opportunities for further research. The digital presence scores only measured if a company used or not a certain digital communication channel but did not differentiate between companies who communincated more frequently, nor between the quality and details of information offered in own company website. Thus, this is an indicator which could be improved and the findings on the quality of online communication and market performce could be refined in further studies. Although the sample is not representative for the total number of companies registered under the general food retail and companies were not randomly selected, the findings are still representative for the sector considering that the companies in tha sample accout for total sales of 21.5 billion euro, and the whole sector had an estimated value of 28 billion in 2023.

Considering the findings, several questions and curiosities remain: the large companies with a high digital presence seem to be struggling more with their return on sales than companies who have less invested in online communication, and companies with very few online communication channels (if any) seem to have performed better over the analysed period, considering total sales growth and return on sales that also associated with an increase in the number of employees for some. Further explorations of the digital changes and investments in the food retail sector in Romania are needed for a better understanding. For example, a further analysis of the effort for digital presence made by companies who scored 2 and 3 would reveal a more nuanced image of the consequences of adopting digital communication channels in terms of performance. The analysis of company efforts in terms of digital presence could also be paired with an analysis of consumer reaction and interest in digital communication is this sector.

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