

DOI: 10.20535/2522-1078.2025.1(17).326021

ROR: 02aaqv166

УДК 316.77:004.738.5

Надходження до редакції: 04.03.2025

Прийняття до друку: 30.03.2025

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DIGITAL CONTENT IN THE AGE OF INTERACTIVITY: RETHINKING AUDIENCE PERCEPTION AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEDIA CONSUMPTION

ЦИФРОВИЙ КОНТЕНТ В ЕПОХУ ІНТЕРАКТИВНОСТІ: ПЕРЕОСМИСЛЕННЯ СПРИЙНЯТТЯ АУДИТОРІЄЮ ТА НОВІ МОЖЛИВОСТІ ДЛЯ СПОЖИВАННЯ МЕДІА

Abstract. The digitalization of media and the shift to digital content have significantly influenced media consumption, raising questions about its perceived value. This article reviews contemporary research on how audiences perceive digital media in an era of rapid technological change. Covering studies from 1999 to 2025, it explores key factors shaping consumer attitudes, particularly the interplay of emotional and rational perceptions (e.g., psychological ownership, functionality).

The study highlights digital content's advantages — interactivity, scalability, ease of purchase, and personalization — showing that these features, if positioned well, can turn digital content's drawbacks into competitive strengths. Additionally, the issue of digital content obsolescence is examined, demonstrating that evolving technologies and formats can hinder long-term content accessibility, making digital media as vulnerable to obsolescence as printed materials.

The paper advocates for a paradigm shift, recognizing digital content's unique value rather than viewing it as an analog of traditional formats. Future research suggests that AI and the metaverse may redefine media consumption, shifting the focus from format to the depth of user experience.

Keywords: digital media product, interactivity, digital content, online media, consumer behavior in the digital environment, value of digital content.

Анотація. Цифровізація медіа та міграція від фізичних носіїв до цифрових форматів суттєво трансформувала моделі споживання контенту. Ключовою проблемою залишається сприйняття цінності цифрового контенту аудиторією. У статті узагальнено дослідження з цієї тематики 1999–2025 років. Авторка зосереджується на чинниках формування споживчих патернів щодо цифрових медіапродуктів, приділяючи особливу увагу взаємодії емоційних та раціональних аспектів сприйняття (психологічне володіння, функціональність тощо). Розглянуто переваги цифрового формату: інтерактивність, масштабованість, доступність придбання та персоналізація. Дослідження показує, що ці характеристики при ефективному позиціюванні перетворюють потенційні недоліки цифрового контенту на його конкурентні переваги.

Окремо досліджено проблему застарівання цифрових медіа. Динамічний розвиток технологій зумовлює зміни як у технічних засобах, так і у форматах подання інформації, що ускладнює або унеможливорює відтворення матеріалів із часом. Тож, попри уявну довговічність, цифрові продукти старіють подібно до аналогових.

Аргументовано необхідність переосмислення цифрового контенту не як простого заміни традиційного, а як самостійного продукту з унікальними властивостями. Аналіз перспективних напрямків досліджень свідчить, що розвиток штучного інтелекту та метавсесвіту створює підґрунтя для виникнення інноваційних форматів медіаспоживання, де цінність визначатиметься не типом носія, а якістю та глибиною користувацького досвіду.

Ключові слова: цифровий медіапродукт, інтерактивність, цифровий контент, онлайн-медіа, поведінка споживачів у цифровому середовищі, цінність цифрового контенту.

Statement of the problem

Digital technologies have fundamentally transformed the landscape of media consumption, precipitating a paradigm shift from physical media to digital formats. The global COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digitization of society, leading to a doubling of global digital content consumption by 2020 [19]. This trend continues to grow. According to the Digital Content Creation Global Market Report 2025 [13], the digital content creation market is projected to expand from \$27.99 billion in 2024 to \$57.04 billion by 2029. Concurrently, the non-professional media sector has been identified as a significant contributor to this expanding market. As of 2025, the number of blogs stood at approximately 600 million, with a daily output of over 7.5 million posts [43]. The consumption of digital content engenders changes in user behavior and attitudes towards digital formats in comparison to analog [25]. The advent of digital content has created numerous opportunities, along with the emergence of multifarious challenges about perceptions of value, monetization, and trust.

The purpose of this study is to identify key issues related to user perceptions of digital media products.

Particular attention is given to how both emotional and rational aspects of content influence the audience's willingness to pay for digital products, and how interactivity can be a tool to bridge the digital divide and build trust in digital media.

Methodology of research

This article provides a critical review of the existing research on the topic of audience perceptions of digital media products. This approach allowed us to identify key thematic clusters in the literature that are the focus of our study: motives for using digital media, user behavior patterns in consuming digital content, comparative characteristics of digital content and analog formats, and problems of monetization of digital media products.

The theoretical framework of the study is based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the Theory of Consumption Values (TCV), and the Hawkins-Stern Impulse Buying Theory. This scoping study covers peer-reviewed journal articles that addressed the problems of rethinking the perception of digital media products by consumers, published between 1999 and 2025. The review was limited to a sample of journals in the fields of marketing and business, media, and social communication. The search strategy incorporated the keywords «consumer behavior», «digital product», and «rethinking the perception of digital products» in the marketing field, complemented by the keywords «content interactivity» and «value of digital products» in the media and social communication field. A critical approach was adopted to evaluate the contradictions and limitations of existing research, particularly regarding the pervasive assumption that digital media products are inherently perceived as less valuable than their physical counterparts.

Literature review

The necessity to reconsider the value of digital content for consumers has been a focal point of research endeavors, primarily within the domain of business marketing [23; 31], user behavior regarding digital products [28], and the economic aspects of determining the value of digital products [4]. The monetization of digital media content remains one of the most pressing issues for strategic media planning. Research on this topic can be categorized into two groups. One of these groups focuses on the emotional characteristics of content, which, by evoking strong emotions,

becomes more effective in attracting attention and motivating consumers to pay for content [23; 22]; and the other focuses on rational characteristics of content, such as, for example, practical value [4].

As C. Buschow and C.-M. Wellbrock observe in the digital environment, where the entry point is not invariably a media resource, it becomes more arduous to communicate content's value to the audience due to the loss of the user's association of content with the media brand [7]. As the study by R. Olsen and M. Solvoll showed, there is a gap among young people between their recognition of the value of digital content and their still demonstrated reluctance to pay for it [29]. In this regard, many researchers raise the question of the consequences of the impact of the so-called «culture of free». M. Goyanes et al. employ the term «culture of free» to describe users' attitudes towards news content as a «public good that must be free of charge» [16, p. 207]. The authors observe that this tradition is embedded in the long-standing practices of Internet content consumption, the utilization of user attention as a motivating factor, and the waning interest in news in general [16], which has been noted in many reports [12].

Digital piracy has also been demonstrated to contribute to a diminution in users' perception of the economic value of content while concurrently providing a source of monetization for the users themselves. A recent study evidences this phenomenon, which generates more than \$2.5 trillion per annum through products that are often free of charge to the user [6], paving the way for their monetization [37].

A review of the extant literature indicates that most researchers are aware that the digitalization of media has engendered fundamental changes in how consumers perceive the value of content. The future of the media industry is contingent on the combination of digital technology, interactivity, and emotional connection with the audience. The following discussion will examine these constituent factors in more detail.

Summary of the primary material

Digital content and consumer behavior

According to Maslow's theory of needs which identifies five fundamental needs: physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization, along with other behavioral theories, consumer behavior regarding digital media products can be classified in consideration of the influence of various factors, including individual preferences, cultural characteristics, emotional reactions, and other aspects. The behavior of different users can vary significantly. While some will be quality-driven, others will be looking

for the lowest-cost options [38]. S. Piri Rajh identifies four categories of buyers: *careful* buyers who are the least impulsive to purchase and ultimately value the quality of the digital product; *impulsive hedonists* who «perceive the digital goods purchasing process as a pleasant activity»; *moderate* and *relaxed* buyers, who pay the least attention to the evaluation stage and do not worry about quality [32, p. 199].

According to W.-M. Hur et al., product choice and behavioral consumption are formed based on the evaluation of the four consumer values of digital goods: «functional value, social value, emotional value, and epistemic value» [17, p. 459]. In this case, the more innovative the product (and therefore more unaccustomed to the consumer), the more values are involved in the decision to purchase and use [17]. O. Turel et al. consider a theory of customer value based on 5 dimensions of value: «enjoyment, quality, sociality, value-for-money, and their tradeoffs» [42, p. 53–54].

In the context of media products, it is important to recognize that different digital formats (e.g. video or online media publications) exhibit distinct consumption dynamics, which is directly related to the Uses and Gratification Theory. For instance, a study by S. Ariffin et al. examined the consumption and satisfaction of digital video content, revealing that «functional value, entertainment value, perceived usefulness, and confirmation» [1, p. 81] were of paramount importance to consumers and «continuous intention to view video content» [1, p. 117]. In contrast, social value and informative value were found to be secondary. This data prompts us to re-evaluate our assumptions regarding news consumption in video format. Research findings indicate that older age groups, often termed «Digital Immigrants», demonstrate a higher propensity for consuming news and information content in video format. The pivotal factor influencing their media consumption habits is the content quality of the media product [14]. By contrast, «Digital Natives» are looking for entertaining content. 67 % of Gen Z prefers comedy and memes on short-form content platforms like TikTok, and 42.9 % rely on social media for daily news [34]. On the issue of interactivity, «Digital Immigrants» are less interested in these content features [20]. In addition, the multi-screen consumption patterns of the millennial audience must be considered, as this demographic tends to engage with multiple content simultaneously, prioritizing that which is deemed more appealing [40]. Recent research revealed that a significant proportion of consumers, amounting to 54 %,

actively follow their preferred content creators across all the social media platforms where these creators post content [46].

Advantages of digital content

The perception of the value of digital content represents a complex psychological phenomenon that is rooted in theories of consumption and the opposition to tangible products. Despite the absence of physical attributes, which have the effect of diminishing the perceived value of digital products, this feature is offset by several unique advantages.

Inability to physically own/Save space. Despite the absence of physical possession and interaction with the media product, this characteristic offers certain advantages. Primarily, it conserves space, as old magazines, for instance, can eventually become cluttered. Furthermore, the psychological dimension of possession must be considered, encompassing the sense of proprietorship and its impact on valuation. Consequently, users are willing to pay for long-term ownership, as evidenced by media companies' attempts to sell subscriptions without time limitations, offering content regularly and maintaining a certain quality.

No physical contact/Ease of acquisition. Digital media products are distinguished by their expeditious delivery, eliminating the need for physical interaction with the product. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of users continue to experience a lack of physical engagement with the product. This deficiency can be readily addressed by the interactivity of the content, which facilitates the incorporation of features such as the simulation of rustling pages turning, along with supplementary video or music accompaniment.

Insufficient control and management/Extensive product interaction functions. While a physical object may appear to be more controllable at first, passive control ultimately offers a significantly reduced range of options and possibilities for interacting with a media product in physical form when compared to its digital counterpart (including online distribution, use, and storage).

In this context, *scalability* is worth mentioning. This refers to the capability of repeated playback of a digital product without incurring additional costs. The selected content can be accessed at a time that is convenient for the user, without constraints on duration or other parameters. Consequently, it can be posited that the value of a media product in digital form can be equivalent to, or even significantly superior to, traditional content in physical form, such as magazines and newspapers.

This assertion should be reflected in the pricing structure of digital products, ensuring fair pricing for users.

In addition, as R. Catapano et al. observe, users ascribe considerable importance to a characteristic such as convenience and «that digital goods tend to dominate physical goods on the convenience dimension» [35, p. 354]. This finding indicates that positioning digital content as an advantage and differentiation rather than as an analog of traditional content can increase its attractiveness and the likelihood of purchase.

Digital and analog product obsolescence

In comparison with print media, for instance, digital content appears to be more durable. However, research by P. Conway shows that printed material on paper can be preserved for a long time if the necessary storage conditions are met, whereas digital data requires that the infrastructure is constantly updated. Technological developments may render content formats and their technical characteristics (e.g. image quality parameters, digital file formats) obsolete, making them impossible to reproduce. In this sense, the obsolescence of digital content can be compared to the obsolescence of analogue media products (e.g. printed paper, cassettes and tapes), but digital resources require continuous technical and financial input from the media [9]. In the 1990s J. Rothenberg made the following ironic statement: «Digital documents last forever — or five years, whichever comes first», referring to the obsolescence of digital products, which become unreadable due to changing technologies and are thus subject to their encoding [36, p. 2].

Despite the passage of several decades, the issue remains relevant. An examination of media sites' activities reveals their susceptibility to frequent updates, alterations in server software, and transitions to different domain names [9]. Consequently, archival materials are often misplaced and rendered inaccessible. Media entities typically offer subscription services to access content, yet they often fail to specify the extent of material covered and the period for which access is granted. Consequently, users procure products with unclear specifications, which also undermines the perception of digital content longevity.

Digital form and „freemium” culture

A significant factor contributing to the proliferation of digital content is the ease with which it can be accessed online, often at no cost. The term «freemium», a portmanteau combining the English words «free» and «premium», has gained traction. This business model, which combines

providing users with essential content free of charge and charging for supplementary features or enhanced experiences, was initially adopted primarily by IT companies and start-ups. However, it has since gained traction in the media sector as well. The model can attract a substantial audience through the provision of free access, with the subsequent objective of converting a proportion of these users into paying customers. However, it should be noted that this model can also negatively affect monetization process, given its capacity to modify user perceptions of value and alter established user habits. Given the prevalence of platforms offering free access to content, users have come to expect that digital products should be free of charge. J. Swart, C. Peters, and M. Broersma posit that a potential solution to this issue is the conceptualization of news consumption as a form of civic engagement [39].

In addressing this challenge, J. Choi et al. have proposed a novel «wait for free» model as a potential monetization strategy for regular media video content [11]. Under this model, access to content is initially provided free of charge, but users are then offered the opportunity to watch it earlier by paying for it. This approach aims to motivate users to invest in content by providing an incentive to access it at an earlier stage. A similar strategy involves temporarily removing paywalls during significant social events (e.g., the Olympics, elections, etc.), as studies demonstrate that this not only results in a natural increase in traffic but also enhances the probability of subscriptions and monetization [10]. Furthermore, a noteworthy business model that effectively combines the digital and print formats of a media product involves the provision of a subscription to the content of a media site, conditional upon subscription to the paper version [30].

The «freemium» model is currently experiencing significant changes in the context of artificial intelligence (AI). The integration of a state-of-the-art platform-based machine learning algorithm has enabled the development of a system capable of identifying when a user is prepared to transition from free to paid content. Leading providers such as Netflix, Spotify, and YouTube Premium are leveraging behavioral analytics to offer personalized paid plans, reflecting a shift towards a more data-driven and targeted approach to content consumption.

Digital content monetization

The issue of monetizing digital content continues to be a significant concern, as it reflects differences between how audiences and media companies perceive content value. Typically, the economic value of content

is determined by the media themselves through the implementation of subscription models or the sale of premium materials. In the context of digital formats, publications have the autonomy to set prices for news content, independent of its actual cost of production. Media is taking a scarcity approach by offering limited access to some content. According to the Digital Content Next report, 69 % of news organizations in the USA and Europe have implemented various models of restricted access to their content [33]. Ultimately, however, the price is contingent on the extent to which readers are willing and able to pay. According to the report entitled *Understanding Value in Media: Perspectives from Consumers and Industry*, the vast majority of consumers (80 % for news content and almost 90 % for entertainment content) consume content almost 24 hours a week. However, the proportion of users paying for content is still very low, with only 20 % paying for news content and 44 % for entertainment content [44]. The most considerable challenge pertains to the young audience, which, according to H. Gil de Zúñiga, N. Strauss, and B. Huber, does not actively seek news based on the principle that news will be found through social media or other online channels [15].

Research indicates that habits are a significant factor in media consumption. According to J. Bayer's et al. findings, «contemporary habits replicate and extend the habits learned from past tools» [8]. While reading a newspaper could be considered a routine activity 20 years ago, contemporary mornings now typically begin with users scrolling through social networks. Consequently, media content is migrating to mobile formats, which are conducive to easy consumption. Concomitantly, the value of such content must remain elevated, to satisfy the demands of the audience about format.

The advent of novel channels of information and innovative formats has precipitated a paradigm shift in consumer spending habits. The way individuals evaluate and allocate their leisure and entertainment budgets is undergoing a profound metamorphosis. This transformation is evidenced by a shift in evaluation criteria and a redefinition of what constitutes a valuable investment of time and financial resources.

A study of the correlation between consumption and the motives for purchasing both digital and printed books [22] revealed that, for the same price, consumers demonstrated a clear preference for the physical medium. However, a price decrease, attributable to production costs, has been shown to increase the attractiveness of the digital format [22]. In other words, users

recognize the fair value of the physical medium but are willing to purchase the digital form at a lower, more favorable price [22]. However, if the publishing product is limited in its interactivity capabilities, media can leverage this by offering new interactive experiences. This is a key consideration in the assessment and justification of the value of a digital media product.

It should also be noted that a digital media product cannot be considered a direct analog of a traditional product. This is due to both the repackaging of physical products that have been entailed by the digital form and the emergence of new content formats and new media products (for example, NFTs) [26].

Emotional engagement with digital content

Media outlets frequently employ emotional digital content, to engender memorable experiences, increase engagement, and fortify the emotional connection to the brand (author) [5; 3]. J.-A. Kang et al. establish an analogy with business, proposing that emotion constitutes one of the most significant factors in determining customers' propensity to disseminate information through word-of-mouth channels [21]. The efficacy of emotional connections is achieved through personalization, storytelling [41], and interactive elements that can add value to digital content. Media outlets could benefit from adopting elements commonly employed in retail brands, such as interactive animation and background music. According to A. H.-C. Hwang and J. Oh, the incorporation of background music in particular has been shown to attract audience members and result in a «stronger behavioral intention and more positive perception toward the website and its brand» [18]. Digital metaverse projects are also a promising direction, as they create additional worlds for users and thus offer a new emotional experience.

Conclusion

The present review of extant research in this area suggests that, despite the intangible nature of digital products rendering their value somewhat opaque, the advantages inherent in the digital format are progressively effecting a transformation in consumer attitudes concerning the recognition of their unique value. The factors influencing audiences' readiness to pay for digital products include emotional attachment, a unique user experience, and interactive elements.

Concurrently, the proliferation of «freemium» models and the pervasive expectation of gratis content have compounded the issue of monetization, particularly among youthful audiences who have become accustomed

to unencumbered access to information via social networks. Therefore, effective monetization necessitates a re-evaluation of content creation and dissemination strategies, encompassing both the technological and psychological dimensions of user interaction with digital media products. The ability to adapt to the evolving demands of users, providing both quality content and interactive experience, will be pivotal in determining the future success of the media. This must be done in a manner that can compete with traditional formats.

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