

Social Networking and Consumer Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

Today, we are in 21 century and people do not find time to come & interact with each other.

Social media helps in connecting themselves with social networking sites through which now

people can stay far and yet remain connected. Apart from this media like Facebook create a loyal connection between product and individual which leads to large advertising opportunities. Similarly, other social media

like Blogs create a platform to post comment on any event which needs to be publicized also can be utilized as a

promotional technique for customer's adoption as well as for promotions. Now users are acquiring followers &

subscribers and directing them to your social networking page. These media has

an competitive edge over other popular public media like Television because there is a time gap between social event occurrence and the time it is being broadcasted. This research paper emphasizes on the strategies which can take this viral marketing mode beyond the normal social media at present. As a result it can also help in building your community strong enough to make your marketing effective & initiative buying.

KEYWORDS: Social Media, Blog, Twitter, Facebook, Social Advertising.

INTRODUCTION

Social media marketing refers to the process of gaining website traffic or attention through social media sites. Social media marketing programs usually centre on efforts to create content that attracts attention and encourages readers to share it

with their social networks. A corporate message spreads from user to user and presumably resonates because it appears to come from a trusted, third-party source, as opposed to the brand or company itself.[citation needed] Hence, this form of marketing is driven by word-of-mouth, meaning it results in earned media rather than paid media. Social media has become a platform that is easily accessible to anyone with internet access. Increased communication for organizations foster brand awareness and often, improved customer service. Additionally, social media serves as a relatively inexpensive platform for organizations to implement marketing campaigns. Social media originated as strictly a personal tool that people used to interact with friends and family but were later adopted by businesses that wanted to take advantage of a popular new communication method to reach out to customers, for example, by informing them of sales and offering them special coupons. Social media use web-based technologies, desktop computers and mobile technologies (e.g., smartphones and tablet computers) to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals, communities and organizations can share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content or pre-

made content posted online. They introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between businesses, organizations, communities and individuals.^[4] Social media changes the way individuals and large organizations communicate. These changes are the focus of the emerging field of technoself studies.

In America, a survey reported that 84 percent of adolescents in America have a Facebook account.^[5] Over 60% of 13 to 17-year-olds have at least one profile on social media, with many spending more than two hours a day on social networking sites.^[6] According to Nielsen, Internet users continue to spend more time on social media sites than on any other type of site. At the same time, the total time spent on social media sites in the U.S. across PCs as well as on mobile devices increased by 99 percent to 121 billion minutes in July 2012 compared to 66 billion minutes in July 2011.^[7] For content contributors, the benefits of participating in social media have gone beyond simply social sharing to building a reputation and bringing in career opportunities and monetary income.^[8]

Social media differ from paper-based media (e.g., magazines and newspapers) or traditional electronic media such as TV

broadcasting in many ways, including quality,^[9] reach, frequency, usability, immediacy, and permanence. Social media operate in a dialogic transmission system (many sources to many receivers).^[10] This is in contrast to traditional media which operates under a monologic transmission model (one source to many receivers), such as a paper newspaper which is delivered to many subscribers or a radio station which broadcasts the same programs to an entire city. Some of the most popular social media websites are Baidu, Tieba, Facebook (and its associated Facebook Messenger), Gab, Google+, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Reddit, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter, Viber, WeChat, Weibo, WhatsApp, Wikia, and YouTube. These social media websites have more than 100,000,000 registered users.

Observers have noted a range of positive and negative impacts of social media use. Social media can help to improve individuals' sense of connectedness with real or online communities and social media can be an effective communication (or marketing) tool for corporations, entrepreneurs, nonprofit organizations, including advocacy groups and political parties and governments. At the same time, concerns have been raised about possible

links between heavy social media use and depression, and even the issues of cyberbullying, online harassment and "trolling". Currently, about half of young adults have been cyberbullied and of those, 20 percent said that they have been cyberbullied regularly.^[11] Another survey was carried out among 7th grade students in America which is known as the Precaution Process Adoption Model. According to this study, 69 percent of 7th grade students claim to have experienced cyberbullying and they also said that it is worse than face to face bullying.

Social Networking can be defined as a phenomenon that has recently taken over the web, allowing more connectivity and interaction between web users. Several websites, such as Facebook and MySpace are labeled as "virtual communities."

media, which share most or all of the following characteristics: Social media is best understood as a group of new kinds of online

Simple User Interface:

A clear, clean and clutter free interface is a must-have – not only for a social networking site but for any website. If you notice, all the popular social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn etc. maintain a very simple and

minimalistic user interface. The choice of color for the site should be very sober - Preferably use white backgrounds and highlight the updates etc. in light color. In social networks, the content amount is (mostly) very large and conversations are at the center, so the use of visuals and graphics should be such that it does not interfere with the conversations. The objective is not to confuse the users but to assist them with the required features “on-demand”. In order to make the content readable, one needs to pay special attention to the user interface and very subtly separate the content blocks visually with the use of fine lines or boxes.

While keeping the visuals minimum, one needs to ensure that the call to action option is prominently placed. The call-to-action buttons should motivate and guide users to take necessary actions.

Personalized User Profile and Experience:

One of the key features which distinguishes a social networking site from a regular website is the personalized experience for the user. On a social networking site, users expect the content and flow of the website as per their likes and preferences. The interface needs to focus on the interest of the user. With an objective to increase user-engagement and

to allow users increase their social circles, the interface should focus on users’ profile, suggest ways to connect and engage with wider audience as per their interests. An engaged user drives traffic to the website and also increases the word of mouth advertising.

All the features such as user profiles with activity feeds, member update notifications, emails, private messaging between members, ability to become friends with other members and follow members etc. enhance the personalized user experience.

Notifications and Real time updates:

A regular stream of updates / notifications entices users to come back to the site and thereby increase the user-engagement. The Notifications and updates therefore form a very important feature of any social networking site. The updates can be sent via emails for a new comment or for further activity on the already published comments. The notification email typically includes a link that takes the user to appropriate page/ topic. The notifications help in maintaining and enhancing the collaborative and conversational spirit of social networking site.

Interactivity:

Interactivity is at the center of social networking sites. For brands, it is not about interaction between users and the brand. The essence is to go away from monologue and encourage ongoing dialogue. The objective of social networking sites is to facilitate interactions between users by actively involving them. The interactivity could have multiple objectives such as: a) information sharing wherein; the users form a group or community based on interests and then invite friends, discuss stories which interest the group, share ideas or give recommendations. or b) photo or video sharing wherein; users share pictures and videos with varying privacy settings and share their comments on photos and videos. or c) friends networking wherein; users form a relatively small community of friends and share activities, photos, locations or interests and elicit comments and likes from the friend network. A good social networking site should facilitate effortless interaction which makes the experience on the site more enjoyable.

Participation.

Social media encourages contributions and feedback from everyone who is interested. It blurs the line between media and audience.

Openness

Most social media services are open to feedback and participation. They encourage voting, comments and the sharing of information. There are rarely any barriers to accessing and making use of content – password-protected content is frowned on.

Conversation

Whereas traditional media is about “broadcast” (content transmitted or distributed to an audience) social media is better seen as a two-way conversation.

Community

Social media allows communities to form quickly and communicate effectively. Communities share common interests, such as a love of photography, a political issue or a favourite TV show.

Connectedness

Most kinds of social media thrive on their connectedness, making use of links to other sites, resources and people.

Forms of social media.

We will talk about the most common forms of social media.

Social networks.

These sites allow people to build personal web pages and then connect with friends to share content and communication. The biggest social networks are MySpace, Facebook and Bebo.

Blogs.

Perhaps the best known form of social media, blogs are online journals, with entries appearing with the most recent first.

Wikis.

These websites allow people to add content to or edit the information on them, acting as a communal document or database. The best-known wiki is Wikipedia⁴, the online encyclopaedia which has over 2 million English language articles.

Podcasts.

Audio and video files that are available by subscription, through services like Apple iTunes.

Forums.

Areas for online discussion, often around specific topics and interests. Forums came about before the term “social media” and are a powerful and popular element of online communities.

Content communities.

Communities which organise and share particular kinds of content. The most popular content communities tend to form around photos (Flickr), bookmarked links (delicio.us) and videos (YouTube).

Microblogging

Social networking combined with bite-sized blogging, where small amounts of content “updates” are distributed online and through the mobile phone network. Twitter is the clear leader in this field.

Advantages of using social media.

- *A good tool to use to publicize your work.*
- *Costs very little money to set up online.*
- *Easy to create groups and forming communities of interest.*
- *Online participation can be easier than face to face.*
- *Cross border collaboration can be facilitated.*
- *Connections mean power and money for many companies.*
- *Constant flows of information from updates and real time communication Ex. Twitter.*

- *Breaks down barriers for people who want to stay in touch with other people.*
- *Companies can obtain information from their demographics.*
- *May be used for educational reasons such as:*
 - *publishing and sharing content.*
 - *collaborating with others.*
- *Provide added context and value to knowledge.*
- *With social networking sites, you are not bound by any geographical and cultural differences. You get to meet and know a variety of people whose interests are similar to your own. These sites are a window to different cultures and places.*
- *The social networking sites also facilitate you to procure information on any subjects from anywhere.*

Disadvantages of using social media.

- *The most glaring disadvantage of social networking sites is the risk of identity theft and fraud.*
- *Your message can be caught up in 'commercial noise'.*
- *Harder to gauge participation and commitment.*

- *Not as effective as a face-to-face conversation.*
- *User drop-out.*
- *Hits do not necessarily indicate attitude change.*

Social Media and Marketing

Social Media Marketing is an umbrella term that can be described as the utilization of social media platforms as marketing tools. According to Weinberg (2009), he refers *social media marketing as leveraging the 'social' through the 'media' to 'market' businesses' constituents*; in other words, it is a process in empowering individuals to promote their websites, products, and/or services through online social channels, to interact with and to tap into a much larger community that may not have been available via traditional advertising channels. It is no longer a striking fact that most of the advertisements via mass media are not as efficient as in the past, because by advertising through the mass, the message is generally reaching far more people than the potential customer intended to reach (Weber 2009; Weinberg 2009). Social web is where people with a common interest can gather to share thoughts, comments, and ideas; hence, *instead of continuing as broadcasters*, marketers

should become *aggregators* of customer communities; that is, the Web should not be considered as a mere advertising channel, it is a place where marketers can listen and respond to communities, review contents, as well as promote a particular piece of content within the vast social sphere (community building) (Weber 2009).

Upon the insufficient advertising budget that companies oftentimes encounter via the traditional channels, social media marketing might be, particularly, easier and more effective for small and medium-size companies to take maximum advantage of it. While social media marketing is an evolving technology with much potential, yet marketing's role still reminds the same – *defining the target market, communicating with prospects, building loyalty, customer engagement and so on.* (Weber 2009.) Weinberg (2009) has proposed few reasons to tap into a solid social media strategy in addition to (or instead of) the traditional ones, which are – *facilitation in natural discovery of new content, boost up in traffic numbers, strong relationship building*, as well as *a cheap alternative to traditional marketing.* Unlike the traditional advertising, individuals in the social media era have access to contents that are not necessarily associated

with commercial intent (neutral); consequently, if a person like a content, he/she is likely to pass it on to their peers, families, and so on via social sites, then content will be spread out quickly without interfering with traditional marketing. (Weinberg 2009.) Social media offers opportunities to achieve communities, once company has established its presence as a community participant worth following, eventually others will be likely interested in what it shares and pass to the relevant ones (Weber 2009). Besides, in the phase of the new marketing era, bringing the brand to alive depends solely upon the *engagement* within communities (Weber 2009; Silverman 2001), as a result if company is genuinely paying attention to the members of the community, *a strong relationship can be built* upon investing time in responding on feedbacks and concerns. (Weinberg 2009) '*Mass media audience become more and more difficult to buy,*' said Martin Sorrel (1996) of WPP (see Smith and Zook 2011, 282). The fortunes of advertising have grown alongside with the growth of mass media, however this growth has stopped these years. (Smith and Zook 2011.) In fact, there are many sport brands in the marketplace are taking social media marketing as a

vital component in their businesses, in which they look at effective ways to gain a more detailed understanding of their social media fanbase. Nike has been putting more marketing muscle behind its digital initiatives, for instance by taking social media marketing in-house, claiming that *online channels are more valuable to its business strategy than traditional advertising*. (Joseph 2013.)

3.5 Social Media: The New Mindset

In order to gain a better position in the transition from traditional marketing approach to social media marketing, marketers will have to, firstly, change their marketing mindset. Social media platforms has radically changed the approach of segmentation in implanting marketing strategy, instead of easily identified demographics, such as age, gender, or income are relatively less important, it groups people by *what they do, think, like, and dislike, and more importantly by their behaviors*, also known as behavioral targeting. (Weber 2009.)

Many marketing experts (Drury 2008; Mayfield 2008; Weber 2009; Weinberg2009) have always emphasized that since marketing via social media is rather about receiving and exchanging perceptions and ideas, which makes social media marketing no longer one dimensional but a two-way process

engaging a brand and an audience (Drury 2008) as well as a creation of increasingly visualize contents (Weber 2009). Oftentimes, content is a critical factor in achieving an effective marketing via social media; however, according to Curata's "B2B Marketing Trends Survey 2012 Report" (MarketingProfs 2012), companies seem to encounter challenges in creating original content, having time to create it, and finding high-quality content (see Jacobs 2013).

Drury (2008) has argued that with social media in particular, the content of advertising and branding must be provided as relevant value-added content that is more about consumer, rather than brash product placement. When companies help their customers through social media outlets, it is more likely to build a long-term relationship, which will in turn propel and leverage the brand awareness and growth (Young Entrepreneur Council 2012) Besides, with social media, company is able to create the platform of *true interactivity*, the American Express' OPEN Forum is undoubtedly an outstanding case, which has surly surpassed customer expectations when it comes to putting a customer first; because instead of heavily promoting their traditional financial offerings on the

community, the company has considered its consumers and their concerns and needs while providing information about their services (Weinberg 2009). Social media platforms serve as a tool for consumers who may not have an outlet or support system to find one another; brands like Weight Watchers and Nike Women have demonstrated how valuable social networking sites can be for bridging people who are facing similar daily obstacles (Young Entrepreneur Council 2012). In the foregoing chapter about the course of information search and evaluation in decision making process, it has been discussed that individuals are likely to seek information that is consistent to their initial thought, and keenly avoid those that encounters with it; as a result, social media in today's marketing provides linkages to connect individuals who share similar interests and backgrounds, in which, to consumers, these communities serve as an vital "tuning" mechanism in the selection of needed information among the overwhelming information.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONSUMER

Social media as a mean of giving consumers a voice Having explained the possible components involved in the consumer decision process, the nature and

the essence of social media, as well as having a brief discussion of the prominent features in different social media outlets, the researcher believes that social media is an essential touch point in today's consumer decision process, from stage quo to the stage of post purchase; likewise, companies are engaging with the purpose of creating brand awareness, engaging their existing customers, driving traffic to other marketing properties and growing channel number (Zarella 2010; Weber 2009; Weinberg 2009; Smith and Zook 2011). The following section discusses on how consumers are affected by social media, and identify which would be the considerate phase of the purchase process that marketers should tap into. Regarding the information processing theory of consumer choice, it is mentioned that there are vast amount of advertisements competing with each other in order to grasp individuals' attention (Fennis and Stroebe 2011) and the fact that human beings have an obvious limited brain capacity in processing information; therefore, it is a challenge for each discrete message to get heard above the din (extraneous factors that distract or distort the message), even if marketers have the right message (Silverman 2001, 67). Each of the social

media platforms plays a role in *giving out, receiving, and exchanging information without any boundary limitations*, and as mentioned previously that social media enables two-way flow of information. Since the flow of communication does not merely impact how companies can access their targeted groups, but also it influences throughout the entire decision process, from interpreting the message, searching for available alternatives, as well as actions carried out in the after the purchase; thus, It is important to denote that message rejection, misinterpretation, and misunderstanding are the possible pitfalls in the flow of communication (Smith and Zook 2011, 120). In relating to social media marketing, the biggest fear of companies and brands is *to give up the control over the content, and the frequency of information*, however, it is essential for marketers to realize that reviews and discussions, as user-generated contents, serve to demonstrate a company's transparency.(Weber 2007.) When Zagat and Amazon started inviting individuals (such as consumers and users) to give their opinions, there was no stopping the trend (Weber 2007); that is, the communication in present-day has drastically altered into a

medium that is composed of millions of people who can actually contribute or detract from a marketing message. Consequently, comparing to offline traditional marketing channels (such as television, newspaper, magazines, and so on), word-of-mouth solely relies on social media outlets in this digital age (Knowledge@Wharton on Forbes 2012), due to the fact that websites allow users to create their own virtual spaces in which fosters and ignite the word-of-mouth.(Weinberg 2009.) Conversation in traditional media is one-way: *the company spoke, an audience listened*. Mass messages are filtered through opinion leaders to the mass audience, in which opinion leader is very hard to be identified since they are not formal experts and do not necessarily provide advice but *have a certain degree of influence on consumers* (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). In the notion of communication models theories (Goldenberg, Han and Lehmann 2010), the findings (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Bulte and Wuyts 2007) have provided that opinion leaders are those *initially* exposed to certain media content who interpret the message based on their own opinion, and are more active than

others both in seeking information and in conveying it to others.

The Influences on Decision Making Process

As the business world re-centers around serving and delighting customers, CMOs are confident that social media impacts *sales, brand awareness, and loyalty* (Olenski 2012); as a result, social media data impacts their decisions while making predictions or forecasts. According to social media marketing industry report, the social media realm is not a mere fad in which marketers are increasingly attracted and 83% of them place high value high value on social media of their businesses (Stelzner 2012). Social media, as a new component, has further complicated the time-honored buying behavior process theory wherein the buying attitudes are not impacted merely by the traditional channels but *extend to the online platforms*. Preferences and decision marking are prompted depend upon the inputs provided by parties beyond the control of online marketers, such as peer reviews, referrals, blogs, social networks, and other forms of user-generated content. Constantinides and Fountain (2008) have suggested an innovative Stimuli and Response model based on Kotler's (1994) framework, due to the increasing usage of

social media. According to the presented diagram, see Figure 8, within a traditional shopping environment, consumers are most likely to be affected by the traditional marketing mix (e.g. ads on radio, newspaper, television, and so on) and other uncontrollable stimuli (e.g. values, societies, demographics, perceptions, and so on); however, with social media and Web 2.0, it extends to online marketing mix (e.g. emails, banners, cooperate websites, and so on) and the social media experiences, which are far beyond the marketer's control. Since the contents on social media are rather democratic and neutral, according to Vollmer and Precourt (2008), consumers are turning more frequently to various types of social media to *conduct their information searches and to make their purchasing decisions*. Reviews and user-generated contents such as rate movies, books, music, and other things on social media are involved *a high degree of personal taste and subjectivity to users*, in which these reviews have one overriding attribute that gives their influence on consumers' purchasing decision – *trust*. (Silverman 2001.) *“More than a quarter of social media users say they are more likely to pay attention to an ad shared by one of their social connections,”* Bannon

noted. “*Additionally, more than a quarter of consumers are OK with seeing ads on social networking sites tailored to them based on their profile information*” (Miller 2012); that is, individuals tend to trust these contents so as to filter, distill, and *objectively evaluate the mound of information* (Silverman 2001). Regarding the phase of marketers tapping into the purchase process with social media, Evans (2008) has presented the classic purchase funnel model as an indicator of how social media has impacted on consumer decision making process in different stages. Figure 9 illustrates the purchase funnel and the buying phases of awareness, consideration, and purchase. Figure 9. Classic Purchase Funnel (Evan 2008).

Consideration links the buying process activities by connecting awareness and purchase, thus all considered factors, such as *brand reputation, applicability, performance, and so on, trigger a potential purchase*. In comparison to traditional media, since social media connects with and involves consumers from awareness all the way through consideration in which simultaneously tackles awareness and consideration instead of inciting a purchase from the awareness perspective. Google (2012) conducted a research in U.K, U.S, France,

Germany, Japan, Canada, and Brazil associating with the customer journey to online purchase, the research has shown different marketing channels influence the customer at different points in the path to purchase. In all the targeted countries, social media serves as an assisting channel in which to *build awareness, consideration, and intent earlier in the purchase funnel*. Sliverman (2009) has also stated that there are many brands competing for attention, therefore an interesting blog post or a compelling video on YouTube can be the stage quo in

which a prospect pays attentions and gains awareness of a product or a service. During the stages of consumer decision process, social media is applicable as both a prompt (awareness) and as a validation (support the purchase decision takes place). (Evans 2008.) As indicated previously, one of the most valuable aspects of social media is in building and maintaining a feedback loop, as the conversations are more dynamic and flow in two-way. The difference that social media has impacted on the purchase funnel is the *accessibility and transparency* of experiential data generated by current customers for the benefit of the next wave of shoppers

and prospects. Although there is an obvious decline in the usage of traditional channels both from marketing and consumer perspectives, traditional media still takes a part of the picture in terms of triggering awareness. Furthermore, Evans (2008) has explicated the importance to denote the role of the social feedback cycle as a *purchase validation tool* (Figure 10); that is consumer may find out a particular product or service or either television, radio, or magazine, and then consumer can verify it on Internet. As it is depicted in figure 10, social media extends the purchase funnel with the addition of post-purchase word of mouth and user generated contents; that is, the post-purchase conversation is built up and validated via the collective wisdom of crowd. *Word of mouth* is self-generating, self-contained, and it costs nothing, besides it is *increasingly manifesting itself through social media*, where it spreads both farther and faster. Silverman (2001) has suggested the phenomenon of individuals liking to review products or services and engage in word of mouth is due to the basis of Zagat guides to restaurant, and it expects consumers to vote on everything from cruise lines to cookware; as a result, customer review

becomes particularly important (Weber 2009) and word of mouth has become an attribute of a product (Silverman 2001). In contrary, the exposure of an ad in traditional media is limited to the direct or pass-along readers. It is noticeable that the delivery of word-of-mouth is *an efficient way to make decision easier*, instead of confusing and low credibility information in the form of traditional marketing. (Silverman 2001.) The Social Web has had a pronounced impact on how people view *their ability to gather unbiased information, to seek, find, and obtain a wider range of products and services, and to talk with others about actual experiences both before and after purchase*. The main objective of marketers, particularly with social media, is to get people to talk about their positive experiences and to accelerate the spread of these contents around the communities.

Conclusion:

The motive of the research was triggered by personal interest in how consumer behavior has changed in the Digital Age, in particular with social media. The amount of information available to us increases in each new day, as a result, we

are overwhelmingly exposed and attained to different aspects of information via the Social Web. The accessibility and transparency that social media offers has led changes in how consumers position themselves in today's market, in which it is inevitable and necessary for companies to equip with a new marketing mindset. The central gravity of the research was to explain *why, when, and how* social media has impacted on consumer decision making process both in theory and in practice. There is a generous amount of reports relating to social media marketing which

are primarily aimed to help businesses benefit from this marketing trend. Oftentimes, businesses assume that they are on the right track in the new marketing era, for instance engaging customers by creating a Facebook page; in fact, customers may not share the same picture as businesses may have. Therefore, the research was carried out in the *perception of consumers* (in Finland), which was aimed to explain the impacts of social media on different stages in their decision making process, by finding out *how consumers perceive social media* in the entire process. Additionally, the research, perhaps, could help company to *gain new insights* from this

perspective and to *identify potential pitfalls and opportunities via social media*, for instance to develop *appropriate ways* to tap into the decision making process at the *right time* or to have a better understanding of why their social media marketing campaigns may not be executing as they would have anticipated.

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