The Impact of Social Networks on Consumers' Behaviors

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Abstract

The Internet is part of the day-to-day life of the vast majority of the world population, and within this environment, a new form of communication has gained prominence in recent years: social networking sites. It is one of the most effective and significant business development tools in the 21st century because of its ability to connect individuals with others. The main objective of this research was to obtain insight into the impact of social networking on consumer behavior. This research was organized in five chapters and revealed the overall influence of social networking on consumer behavior while recommending ways to further enhance the topic under consideration. Increasingly, consumers are looking at websites, as well as the habits and behaviors of peers before making a decision on a purchase or in selecting a type of entertainment. Social networking breaks down barriers between individuals and builds communities. The methodology adopted in this study was quantitative in order to collect vast data related to the research topic. This methodology also facilitated in collecting numeric data. Survey respondents were males and females who were18 years old and older. The study was to analyze the influence and effect of online social networks sites such as Facebook on the customer's behavior. Internet has proven to be a lucrative communication channel linking the customers and the organizations. As results, for marketers had emerged as a splendid network or channel to interact with consumers through social media tools.

Keywords: Social media, consumer behavior, marketing, decision making process, word-of-mouth

The Internet has emerged as a cost effective communication channel between organizations and customers. In 2008, online sales were reported to be $165.9 billion, an increase of21.8% from 2007 (Berger & Nasr, 1998). This surge in online sales can be attributed to the Internet's unique characteristics as a marketing channel. Traditional marketing channels such as television, print media, and radio have focused on reaching as many people as possible. Mass media allows for neither customer targeting nor the customization of products and services. Marketers have, however, seen the need for product customization and targeting of customers through the Internet (Crosby & Johnson, 2000). Thus, the Internet creates a platform on which organizations of all sizes can compete.

Companies using modern marketing techniques such as Internet marketing, viral marketing, search engine marketing, and e-mail marketing will be more successful in meeting the competition. Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987) revealed that relationship marketing has evolved and is playing an integral part in the formation of partnership arrangement in an era characterized by network and technology utilization. Flint and Woodruff (2001) reviewed the benefits related to new technology, such as shortening the product life cycle and changing standards.

In contrast, consumer behavior can be described as a psychological method of decision-making as well as physical action. The act of purchasing, therefore, is not just a stage in the sequence of physical and mental activities that occur during a particular period. Few of the activities occur before the real purchase, whereas others occur later. However, as an advantage to SNS impact, the adoption of services and products, which will be regarded as fraction of purchasing behavior of concern. For instance, suppose a photographer who commonly purchases a film brand immediately makes the decision to purchase another competitive brand, even though there has been not any variation in the film's quality or in the price of the film. What can be the reasons for the loyalty change?

Therefore, simply indicating that a person has altered his/her purchasing behavior does not in fact explain why. Perhaps the competing brand of film had been enthusiastically suggested by a friend, which in turn caused the photographer to prefer the color quality of this new brand. Or maybe the decision is due to the photographer's dissatisfaction with the old brand for a multitude of reasons. It can be stated, then, that the process of decision-making describes the consumer's choice process when purchasing services and products.

Background of the Study

The Internet is part of the day-to-day lives of the vast majority of the world population, and within this environment, a new form of communication has gained prominence in recent years: social networking sites (SNSs). In this Internet age, some SNSs at increasing their users at a growing pace. Connecting individuals to others is among the most effective and significant business developments of the 21st century. These sites focus on providing different ways for users to interact others with similar interests, which is done by sending messages, webcams, posting comments, file sharing, group discussion, blogging, or tweeting friends to inform them for their activities rather than preferring face to face communication. Moreover, individual groups of people who specifically relate with small communities or subdivisions can meet others and share information and experiences (Bennett, Owers, & Tucker, 2010).

One particular phenomenon that has taken the world by storm is the rise of social networking. Initially starting out as a means for people to stay connected globally, social networking has now evolved into an indispensible business tool for both social as well as commercial needs. With the increasing impact of social networking on daily lives, its influence spans beyond global boundaries, transcending even social and cultural limitations. The development of SNSs and the extensive use of such sites for social and business purposes has created an emergent global phenomenon, prompting interest in this paper to discuss the significance and impact that social networking will bring to businesses big or small relating to consumer behavior. Social networking has also attracted the attention of academic and industry researchers (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

There are many firms that have a Facebook page and it is used to reach out to their target audience. Retail firms also this tool for the promotion of their business activities. The usage of social media will increase further in the upcoming years because it is a tool that is easily accessible. The frequency of the people using Internet has also greatly increased in recent years. From the perspective of consumers, social networks have helped create resources like support and information. Social capital and intellectual capital are two resources that are imparted by means of shopping from the social networks, and they may be expected to serve a significant role in the provision of support and information, thus helping in the decision-making process of the consumers, as well as enhancing the quality of those decisions. Conversely, the professed advantages of shopping through social networking websites in the decision making process by consumers would be dependent on what the consumers deem worthwhile in regards to social capital and intellectual capital, as well as in the way consumers appraise or analyze these sites in regards to whether the acquired information is precise and has originated from trustworthy and knowledgeable resources. Online consumer-to-consumer communications can also play a significant role in attracting a consumer who might be closer to a positive decision regarding whether to purchase a service or product.

Problem Statement

As noted in marketing and consumer behavior literature, information that consumers get from their interpersonal sources invariably influences their decisions towards whether to purchase a particular brand. Even though advertisement commercials and other non-personal messages are also significant in the development of consumer awareness towards brands, products or services, word-of-mouth (WOM)—which is known as an act of exchanging marketing information among different customers—has been seen to play an even more critical role in changing consumer behavior and attitude toward different products and services. This is mainly because interpersonal sources commonly are seen as more credible and reliable than non-personal or commercial sources.

The majority of the online consumers rely on the WOM when they want to purchase a specific product or a service. A study found out that 33% of Twitter users share opinions about companies or products at least once per week. These opinions and views affect other consumers with regards to purchasing products or services. In recent years, social networking has received an increased emphasis on business as well as individuals' lives.

Therefore, this research has originated from the observation that consumers nowadays rely more on WOM than advertisements for buying products and services. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of social networking on consumer behavior.

Purpose of the Study

This research study is aimed at exploring the relationships of firms' social media presence on consumer behavior.

These behaviors consist of purchasing various products or services by the consumer through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, etc., where consumers interact with user generated content (UGC) and self-evaluation of consumer behaviors. It has been generally seen that users, such as various business operators and consumers, view SNSs as their own personal space to buy and sell services and products. In this, the users of SNSs can share their opinions, judgments, thoughts, and beliefs with their friends and other individuals who are a part of the same social circle. This freedom of broadcasting their opinions and sharing information with one another has enabled the users to become more powerful and therefore share their wants and expectations from various business operators. With an appropriate approach, SNSs can offer a medium for business operators to engage with different consumers, and also to encourage them to pass on their business messages through WOM to their entire network of friends and other contacts. Consumers have different types of ties with other consumers on SNSs and by keeping this in perspective, various companies may also become friends with the consumers if they are able to win their trust. As these consumers spend more and more time on SNSs, it has become significant for different firms and business operators to engage with them. Therefore, this study will also investigate the impact of firms' social media presences on consumer behavior, such as purchasing products and services.

Research Question

This research investigates the relationships of firms' social media activates on consumers' attitudinal (e.g., positive attitude towards the product) and behavioral sentiment (e.g., purchase or positive WOM) for the products or services of these firms. The research question posed for this study was, What is the correlation between self-evaluation of the degree to which consumers interact with UGC and MGC and self-evaluation of consumer behaviors?

Hypothesis

The following research hypothesis correspond to items on the survey questionnaire used to address the research problem in this study. The hypothesis was tested to find an answer to the question relative to the evaluation of the impact of SNSs on consumers' purchasing behaviors.

H01: There is no significant correlation between the degree of self-evaluated interaction of consumers and UGC, and the consumers' self-evaluated attitudinal purchasing behavior.

Significance of the Study

It has been suggested by the researchers that the consumers might look for information assisting them in deciding the relative significance of the several appraising criteria, and might further seek concepts regarding the degree to which they alternate features that they consider significant. People in the past were confined to sharing information with their neighbors, family or friends; however, now people are able to impact the international community by articulating their personal experiences on the Internet. In accordance with the pertinent researches, the external resources may be either online or offline (Breiger, 2004). Many sources of external search include interpersonal search, and media search. Powered by social software and Web 2.0 tools that support social behavior to create and recreate social conventions and social contexts, the Internet allows consumers to interact, compare experiences, and exchange ideas with other consumers. Social media is the relational connection that motivates consumers to participate and contribute CGC, which becomes an essential digital asset for purchase decision-making and WOM marketing.

Social Media as a Means of Giving Consumers a Voice

Possible components involved in a consumer's decision process are related to the aspects and essence of social media. Many researchers believe social media plays the role of a special touch point for today's consumer decision process, from the stage of consideration to the stage of post purchase.

Similarly, companies are also striving to enhance customer engagement, create brand awareness, drive traffic for marketing properties, and also grow the number of communication channels(Zarrella& Zarrella, 2010).

Consumers are affected through social media in many ways, it is important for marketers to note this. After reviewing the information processing theory of consumer choice, it is clear that customers are exposed to many advertisements, and advertisements must compete with each other for individuals' attention. Furthermore, human beings have an obvious limit to their brain capacity at the time of processing information.

For these reasons, it is a challenge for each and every discrete message to be heard above the din, even if the marketers have the right set of messages (Fennin & Stroebe, 2011; Silverman, 2001).

All the social media platforms play their parts when it comes to exchanging, giving out, and receiving information devoid of any boundary or limitations. Social media enables the two way flow of information. The flow of communication affect show companies are able to access targeted groups and influences the entire decision making process, from the phase of interpreting the message, to searching for available alternatives ,to carrying out operations right after the purchase (Smith &Zook 2011). As a result, it is important to signify that the rejection of the message, its misinterpretation, and also its misunderstanding are factors that might be considered pitfalls in the flow of communication.

User Generated Content (UGC)

Existing empirical studies about social influence in information systems have for the most part focused on similarities with respect to behaviors; that is, people's behavior influences the behaviors of others with whom they are connected. For instance, many researchers have done studies about how peer behaviors influence the level of adoption of a product or service (Aral, Muchnik, & Sundararajan, 2009). In the context of online social media, Susarla, Oh, and Tan (2011) showed that social influence affects the popularity of YouTube videos. An arguable case of social influence is opinion leaders: some of the members of the overall population who might be exerting a disproportionally high level of influence on others' product choices. Various methods have been proposed for identifying opinion leaders in any particular network (Trusov et al., 2009).

Further, social psychology researchers have identified the sheer presence of observers can change behaviors. Similarly, in online social media there are options for subscribing to certain content; user subscriptions allow some content generators to keep track of the size of their audience. These indicate levels of trust for the UGC developers who are allowing them to push in an easier manner when it comes to their followers' pages or walls. The presence or absence of a captive audience can influence behavior. Furthermore, product reviews, along with incoming contents, might also affect the decision of the writers in terms of whether they are going to write, in what quantity, and in what manner (Trusov et al., 2009).

Coming to WOM, many studies have examined the way online WOM, in particular online reviews and ratings of products and services, influence a wide range of overall outcomes such as consumer choices, product sales, and even invest or decisions (Agarwal & Prasad, 2006). There is still not a very significant amount of knowledge when it comes to generation of product ratings in the first place.

As stated by Hoand Wu(1999), consumers are much more likely to post reviews when they are highly satisfied with the offerings of the product, which results in the bimodal distribution of online ratings. However, in earlier times, consumers of a product tended to be more enthusiastic about it, and thus with the span of time average ratings tend to be decreased in the end. Along with all this it has seen that the uniqueness of consumers may be effective their decision of providing important reviews or their feedback about products or services.

Methodology

Research Design

The main theme of this particular research study was to examine the impact of social networks on consumers' behaviors. This study used a quantitative research design to discover how social networks impact consumer behavior. The methodological approach of this study allowed the researcher to explore research question being presented and evaluate and analyze data with respect to the research hypotheses. Social research that utilizes empirical methods and empirical statements is known as quantitative research. An empirical statement can be defined as a descriptive statement that identifies what *is* the case in the real world instead of focusing on what *ought* to be the case (Cohen, Sargent, & Sechrest, 1986). Empirical statements are generally articulated in numerical terms and followed with the numerical evaluations in the research (Creswell, 1994).

The sampling method that was used in the research study was based on the convenience sample technique, also known as the simple random sample, also known as the equal probability sampling method. The sample was selected randomly and each of the population elements had an equal chance of being selected. The simple random sampling is conducted as follow. First is to identify the population or sampling frame (McNeill, 1990). Next, the population elements must be given unique names so that they do not mix up with other elements. The correct and true sample size was determined and finally the sample was selected.

The simple random sampling was also divided into two main types: sampling with and without replacement. In the sampling with replacement, the element can be selected more than one time once selected, can be selected again. In contrast, the sampling without replacement cannot be selected more than one time.

Analysis and Discussion

The main point of this study was to analyze the influence and effect of online social networks such as Facebook on the customer's behavior. The Internet has proven to be a lucrative communication channel linking customers and organizations. The Internet also allows organizations to compete with each other irrespective of their size. Laroche etal. (2012) identified that companies who utilize modern marketing techniques(including Internet marketing, viral marketing, and search engine marketing)achieve more success than those that do not. Mangold and Faulds (2009) also asserted that social networking has shaken the world of marketing and most importantly the Internet community upside down in a positive manner. Though the Internet was at first made for connecting people from around the world, it quickly transformed and helped in meeting the needs of the customer.

Descriptive Statistics – Survey Analysis

Table 1 shows the results when participants were asked to indicate how many firms/products have they befriended/"liked" on Facebook. Out of the selected 150 participants, 60 participants indicated that they liked/befriended more than 20 firms/products, 60 participants stated that they liked/befriended 16-20 firms/products, and30 participants stated that they didn't like/"befriend" any firm/product. No participants stated that they liked/befriended 1-5 firms/products, 6-10 firms/products, or 11-15 firms/products. Thus, from the responses it is apparent that most Facebook users in this study liked/"befriended" more than 16 firms.

Table 1: How Many Firms/Products Have You Befriended/"Liked" on Facebook?

Number of Firms/Products	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
None	30	20%	20	20.00%
1-5	0	0%	0.0	20.00%
6-10	0	0%	0.0	20.00%
11-15	0	0%	0.0	20.00%
16-20	60	40%	40	100.00%
More than 20	60	20%	20	20.00%
Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The results of the Pearson correlations are shown in Table 2. Correlations with number of Facebook friends was analyzed with the number of firms "liked." This test revealed a .231 coefficient of correlation, and this result was statistically significant at a .05 level of significance. Although this finding statistically significant, the small correlation coefficient shows this relationship was weak; consequently, it can be argued that there was a slight relationship between the number of friends users have on Facebook and the number of firms they have "liked." The relationship between the number of friends and the number of firms they have "liked.". Correlations with the number of companies liked on Facebook and the shopping frequency at these firms or services was tested. A correlation coefficient of .419 relationship was found between those variables; that relationship was weak and found to be significant at a level of .05. Thus, this positive relationship was found to be moderate and substantial. The *p*-value of this coefficient is 0.00, which is less than 0.01, the maximum *p*-value for a 95% confidence interval, indicating that individuals who like firms on Facebook are likely to shop at these firms.

Table 2: Pearson Correlations for Facebook Variables

Variable	Statistic	fbfriends	fblikes	fbsalesuse	fbshopfrequ
fbfriends	Pearson Correlation	1	.231*	.259*	.314*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.078	.079
	N	150	150	150	150
fblikes	Pearson Correlation	.231*	1	.487**	.419**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.001
	N	150	150	150	150
fbsalesuse	Pearson Correlation	.259	.487**	1	.612**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.078	.000	.	.000
	N	150	150	150	150
fbshopfrequ	Pearson Correlation	.314	.419**	.612**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.079	.001	.000	.
	N	150	150	150	150

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 shows that the correlation between males and attitudinal behavior is 0.841, indicating that a strong relationship exists between those variables. The correlation between males and sentiment is .253; the relationship between those variables is weak. This finding shows a positive relationship between males and attitudinal behavior. The *p*-value of this coefficient is 0.004 and 0.005, which is less than 0.01, the maximum *p*-value for a 95% confidence interval.

Table 3: Correlations: Males and Attitudinal Behavior

Variable	Statistic	Male	Attitudinal Behaviors	Sentiment
Male	Pearson Correlation	1	.841**	.253**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.005	.004
	N	150	150	150
Attitudinal Behaviors	Pearson Correlation	.841**	1	-.250**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005		.000
	N	150	150	150
Sentiment	Pearson Correlation	.253**	-.250**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.000	
	N	150	150	150

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Restatement of Research Hypothesis

The first research hypothesis was:

H01: There is no significant correlation between the degree of self-evaluated interaction of consumers and UGC and consumers' self-evaluated attitudinal purchasing behavior.

H1: There is a significant correlation between the degree of self-evaluated interaction of consumers and UGC and consumers' self-evaluated attitudinal purchasing behavior.

In particular, the relationship between UGC in social media platform and its impact on consumers' purchasing behavior was examined. The data were entered into the SPSS version 21.0 utilizing a Pearson Correlation test to analyze data and determine if the null and alternative hypothesis should be accepted or rejected. The researcher sought to understand if a relationship exists between UGC and attitudinal purchasing behavior, and the strength of that relationship, if one exists.

The correlation between the degree of self-evaluated interaction of consumers and UGC and consumers' self-evaluated attitudinal purchasing behavior was 0.574. This shows positive a relationship between the variables. The *p*-value of this coefficient was0.00, which is less than 0.05, the maximum p-value for a 95% confidence interval (see Table 4). Thus, the correlation is significant. The test statistic exceeds the critical value, the Null Hypothesis is rejected and it can be concluded that there is a significant association between UGC and consumers' self-evaluated attitudinal purchasing behavior (H01).

Table 4: Correlations: User Generated Content and Attitudinal Behaviors

Variable	Statistic	UGC	Attitudinal Behaviors
UGC	Pearson Correlation	1	.574[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	125	125
Attitudinal Behaviors	Pearson Correlation	.574[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	150	150

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Summary of Findings

The study found a recent pattern of utilizing long range informal communication destinations for product and service advancement that can provide a platform for reaching to a larger audience, irrespective of geographical location. However, organizations are gradually acknowledging the value of using SNSs for product and service advancement and social media for promoting new products globally. Interpersonal organization influences consumer purchasing choices, which has an effect on marking and showcasing systems. However, SNSs are of service for advertisers to expand brand mindfulness and item consciousness, therefore serving as a platform in order to communicate with larger audience.

The research question of this study was, What is the correlation between self-evaluation of the degree to which consumers interact with UGC and self-evaluation of consumer behaviors? Hypothesis one suggested that there is a significant correlation between the degree of self-evaluated interaction of consumers and UGC and consumers' self-evaluated attitudinal purchasing behavior. Hypothesis one was supported by the findings; the results of this research indicated that a strong, positive relationship exists between the variables of UGC and consumers' attitudinal purchasing behavior. The Pearson correlation test produced a statistically significant correlation coefficient of 0.574.Based on this analysis an increase in UGC can be said to related to an increase in usage of sales and promotional offers by consumers, and that consumers who receive UGC are more likely to take advantage of these sales or promotional offers. Thus, the correlation is significant and the test statistic exceeds the critical value, so the null hypothesis (H01) was rejected and the researcher concluded that there was a significant association between UGC and consumers' self-evaluated attitudinal purchasing behavior.

Conclusion

Every day people are making purchases according to their requirements both online as well as in person. Simultaneously, they are also making several decisions regarding purchasing. Merseyet al. (2010) noted that the development and quick growth of online social networks enables customers to do several kinds of activities that include blogging, chatting and interaction, gaming and entertainment, as well as messaging. According to Ross et al. (2009), Facebook has been acknowledged as the most popular and widely used SNS. People who sign into Facebook make lively and dynamic profiles, share many kinds of information with people they have added, and so interact with others in a lively manner. Social relations and dealings with individuals play a great role in changing people's mind sets regarding their purchasing decisions.

Networking through social media lets consumers express their opinions, thoughts, and perceptions, and share their knowledge and experiences with other users. This feature aids marketers in appealing to potential customers at low price and electronically. The ability to address inquiries, rectify comments, and revise online marketing approaches competently is one of the advantages of advertising using social media networking. Brand awareness and brand image can be endorsed using the Internet if marketers make use of the opportunity. Marketers can also arrange ways for consumers to seek brands online and cause circulation among social media programs and organizational websites.

Online associations are simplified by the influential components of social media. Individuals are continuously engrossed in dialogue that may range from general to specific, discussing anything that is of mutual interest among them. These dealings involve sharing perceptions, knowledge, or other elements that may affect a consumer's final decision. Real time dialogues or content a recreated by innovative methods that allow consumers as members of the audience to be engaged in numerous networking sites. To reach the audience, social media offers brands an expression, a comprehensive audience, and openness to influence the audience; these aspects contribute to form the gains of advertising by social media networking. Customers realize that they have influence and authority over social media, and, as a result, it is important that effective, efficient, and interactive marketing strategies are in place that allow customers to give feedback to the retailers. Social media is a social tool that allows people to communicate and interact with one another. Social media is not just related to reading and analyzing information from a customer; it also allows the customer to share and spread information as well as to make content that can help others to participate. Social media has been growing in popularity and usage in recent years. This shows that since social media helps connect people and improve interactions among people around the world, people appreciate that SNSs can be helpful and effective for them. Social media is a great platform for brands to reach their customers.

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