

МЕНЕДЖМЕНТ И МАРКЕТИНГ: ТЕОРИЯ, МЕТОДОЛОГИЯ, ПРАКТИКА

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IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CONSUMPTION PATTERNS: EVIDENCE FROM REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

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Social media has gained an increasingly important role in consumer life. Building a permanent social network presence and interacting through online communication have become a very popular and inevitable sphere of modern society. Social networks represent a great platform for gradual emergence and promotion of consumer-brand relationships, where both retailers and consumers participate in the creation of online brand communities. From the marketing perspective consumers all over the world are strongly connected to each other via engagement in online word-of-mouth communication, generating new patterns in brand purchasing processes. Having given that teens and young adults are considered main advocates of this trend, we extrapolated this idea to accessing the student population, with premise that their behavior is more specific to related research question than random sample perspective would be. The intention of the study was to investigate the role and the importance of social media among the student population in the Republic of Serbia, with a special emphasis on their opinions and attitudes towards gathering and using online information about brands. The results should be beneficial for marketing professionals in terms of better understanding consumer behavior, as one of the most complex and unpredictable phenomenon in the time when Internet creates a suitable environment for business success. In the era of social network platforms brands are considered to have their own persona that actively participates in life of customers by responding to communication via social media.

Key words: Social media, consumer behavior, consumer trends, word-of-mouth, purchase decision.

Introduction

Consumer behavior has become one of the most complex phenomenon on the market due to the complex web of influence and the modern technological, social, economic and communicative trends that shape and highly determine the decision making process. Consumption patterns are adopted through the process of socialization, therefore most of our consumption is actually socially driven (Dolan, 2002; Michaelis and Lorek, 2004; Assadourian, 2010; Heath and Chatzidakis 2012). Through this process customers emulate purchasing behavior and choices. Brands have a meaning for a certain social group, reflecting admiration for aspirational individuals and/or groups, as well as need to be accepted by their peers. In other words, “our own internal perspective is not only determined by our own thought and personality structures, but by the input of others” (Baines, Fill and Page, 2008:95). Nonetheless, the permanent endeavor to a reach social and cultural context and hipper personalization, along with the remarkable technology advancements and the Internet era increasingly and appreciably determine both buying behavior and the creation of a modern consumerism theory. Con-

sequently, companies’ success depends on their capability to understand consumption patterns and reveal what drives consumers in their purchasing processes, in order to actively influence future decisions.

As early as the 1980’s, Levitt (1983:95) observed that high-tech products were becoming “the universal language of customers”. Nowadays, being online is considered as an important segment of required technical education, the preferred social attribute and a favorable supplement of a modern person’s lifestyle. The information sharing path as well as a decision making process in both business and personal spheres of a life is conducted through the Internet (Kimmerle & Cress, 2013). The occurrence and continuous development of new technologies has transformed the way people communicate and interact with their environment, leading to the appearance of purchasing patterns that hadn’t existed in the past. Specifically, people approach and interact with each other through a wide variety of popular online social networks (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, or various blogs etc.) which redefined social communication and have provided exchange of opinions and experiences about purchasing behavior,

which subsequently influences further consumers' shopping decisions. This trend was especially accepted by younger people (Akhter, 2003), so called Millennials or generation Yers, are inclined to purchase product and/or services based on information available from the Internet, having a very specific behavioral patterns induced by complex web of environmental influences during their socialization (Szlávicz & Szakál, 2013). These information are not just used to reduce inherent uncertainty in purchasing decisions, but foremost to be able to access new trendy products, that induce admiration of peers.

The main approach in the paper will be to point out the contribution of social media in marketing theory and practice due to their high potential in managing future consumption patterns and behaviors, investigating the perspective and opinion of specific segments of young people – student population – towards social media usage, information available on those sites as well as their importance in decision making processes. A special point of interest could be determining the contribution of social media in the marketing paradigm and practice due to their high potential in managing and dealing with challenges of future consumption patterns and behaviors.

A pilot research was conducted in order to identify the extent to which social networks among young people encourage new consumption habits. Research was administered to students of second largest university in Republic of Serbia – University of Novi Sad, in order to determine use of various social networks and impact on purchasing decisions. Students certainly prequalify as younger population group, identified by Akhter (2003) as groundbreaking group in Internet usage. Giving a fact that Republic of Serbia belongs to developing tier of countries it is our assumption that there is ability to generalize some findings to other developing nations, as well as it opens opportunity to future research extended to different nations.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Word-of-mouth online communication

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is usually defined as “informal communication among consumers about products and services” (Liu 2006:74). Chen et al. (2011) concluded that, besides the actions of others and observational learning, a very important influential factor of consumers' purchase decisions are opinions of others also known as WOM communication. Consumers tend to create their social image by seeking information about products and imitating opinion leaders for different reasons. As Hyuk and Morrison (2008:5) ex-

plained, “friends and acquaintances – those people to whom consumers talk every day – are the most influential sources in terms of opinions and subsequent behaviors, and personal contacts provide the most effective form of WOM”, especially in cases of new items purchase when consumers have no personal experience and required knowledge. Considering WOM as an extra element of the marketing communication mix, companies can “help consumers identify the products that best match their idiosyncratic usage conditions” (Chen & Xie, 2008:477).

WOM can range from everyday inter-personal conversation to more profound conversation with strictly defined objectives like “brand advocacy” where consumers tend to promote the products to other people (Keller 2007; Feng & Papatla 2011).

Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) identified numerous motivators for customers to engage in extensive WOM communication, since it should deliver some (or even all) of following:

1. reducing potential risk;
2. keeping up with what others are doing;
3. providing better prices;
4. easy accessing to information;
5. unplanned and spontaneous behavior;
6. because it is modern and trendy;
7. stimulation by offline media (TV, radio);
8. collecting information before purchase.

Similarly, Godes et al. (2005) concluded that consumers tend to gather information through social interactions in order to avoid unsuccessful purchase decisions, while other authors (Robertson & Gatignon 1986; Lam & Mizerski 2005; Hyuk & Morrison, 2008) summarize principal motivators in providing: support and vindication in a decision making process, social recognition through authority and status, as well as the getting necessary information.

Following transition of substantial part of everyday communication towards various on-line platforms – WOM communication is nowadays colloquially referred to as word-of-mouth communication (Wood, 2010). Modern technologies enabled transition from traditional to innovative communication lines, enabling consumer to engage in active communication in any moment and any place.

As form of communication WOM exists for a long time, yet it proved to be compatible with innovation in information technologies. Today, WOM has transitioned into the electronic environment and people exchange their satisfaction and brand experiences through “Web-based opinion platforms, discussion forums, boycott Web sites, news groups” or “consumer-opinion platforms”

(Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004:39). Online WOM can be described as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004:39).

The Internet has empowered WOM communication and “directions and volume of communication among the firm and consumers” (Parka & Lee, 2009). Online consumers act proactively, creating a completely new and unexplored marketing environment and extending their purchasing options (Parka & Lee, 2009). They produce, send and receive large amounts of different information, especially marketing information that further create images of products that influence opinions and decisions of others. Nowadays, online consumer reviews are a major source of the WOM process (Chatterjee 2001; Parka & Lee., 2009) and a high level of acceptance of online WOM communication by consumers highlights its powerful impact on the purchase decision-making process. The Wall Street Journal recently reported results of a survey that 71 % of U.S. adults regularly use consumer product reviews for online purchasing, and 42 % of them believe in such source of information (Spors, 2006). Keller (2007) claimed that the average consumer in the U.S. participates in almost 121 WOM conversations per week – where around 75 % of them include various discussions about brands. Duration of online information exposure and its availability for millions of consumers makes electronic environments common “place” for pre-purchase evaluation of products and services alternatives (Parka & Lee, 2009).

As business and consumer interests are increasingly transmitting into the online world, it is evident that WOM marketing has become “a particularly prominent feature on the Internet” (Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, 2009). The best example of WOM usefulness in the Internet era is a rising number of social media that confirm basic advantages of this type of communication.

1.2. Social media: the new source of pre-purchase information

“Social networking” is not a new phenomenon, in fact research of social networks is as old as sociology. It is considered as the simple act of broadening the list of people you know by meeting your friends' friends and their close friends, and further expanding your social circle. This process goes beyond the physical contacts due to the existence of online social networking sites which become “a central, virtually unavoidable

medium for social interactions” (Gosling et al., 2011). Social network can be described as “a social structure made of nodes, which are usually individuals or organizations tied by one or more specific types of relations, such as financial exchange, friendship, passion, trade, web links, airline routes, hobbies, etc.” (Yang, Kim & Dhalwani, 2008). In other words, they reflect specific relationships among the members of one or more families, communities or organizations (Urban, 2011). Social networking sites are considered as the fastest-growing field of the World Wide Web (Trusov et al., 2009). These sites allow people to interact with their friends, families and people with similar or completely different interests, creating strong relations between each other, which affect future social network attractiveness in both private and corporate environments. Members of the sites send invitations to their friends to join their social network and this is considered as the foremost driving force for further development and extending of the sites (Trusov et al., 2009).

Social media trends are important to the marketing strategy creators because of the close relationship among social networking sites, consumers and the WOM activity. Furthermore its importance to consumer reflects ability to gather a lot of useful information about the products they are interested in. “The Internet provides numerous venues for consumers to share their views, preferences, or experiences with others, as well as opportunities for firms to take advantage of WOM marketing” (Trusov et al., 2009:90). More important, researches like one of Stephen & Galak (2012), indicates social media impact on sales and brand evaluations, and connects it to the purchasing intentions.

Along with self-identity effects on brand preferences, buying choices and social communication are much more consistent with the consumers' sense of self today (Levy 1959, Escalas 2013, Kettle & Häubl 2013). The concept of social identity is defined by Taifel (in. Doohwang, Hyuk and Jung, 2011:60) as “that part of an individual's self-concept that is derived from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the emotional significance attached to that membership”. According to Dholakia et al. (2004) social identity is formed in on-line communities, allowing members to fulfil basic societal needs, confirming positive social identity through practicing socially acceptable behavior related to membership group.

Although popularity of social networks is constantly growing because people can make contacts with others all over the world, it has be-

come even more popular for gathering information about products and services, given that the human society, over time, has become a consumer society. According to Messina and Iwasaki (2011:161) this trend is observed mostly among adolescents aged 12-17 and young adults aged 18-24 years who are “the best witnesses of the Internet era and the exponential rise of virtual interaction”. Similarly, Cha (2009) stresses that social networking sites are primarily focused on teenagers and people in their 20s and 30s.

Facebook is the most popular online social networking site in the world with “802 million daily active users on average in March 2014” (Facebook newsroom, 2014). They are inspired with the mission statement “Give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook, n.d.). It provides widespread access and sharing of all kinds of information among users, such as personal data, photographs, messages, conversations, thoughts, interests, lifestyle items etc. (Darvell, Walsh & White, 2011). As Knibbs (2013) stated “the age distribution on Facebook is extremely skewed toward younger people”, more precisely around 52% of Facebook users is between 18 and 34 years old (Morejon, 2011). Twitter is organized as a mixture of online social networking and microblogging services that allows users to send and read short messages, so called “tweets”. In 2014 there were 255 million monthly active users sending 500 million Tweets per day (Twitter, 2014). Age group between 18 and 34 represents 43% of Tweeter users’ population according to Morejon (2011).

Blogs are also a very popular way of sharing information, experience and knowledge about all aspects of life. As Johnson and Kaye (2004:624) explained, blogs are the “web sites that generally offer observations and news, as well as commentary and recommended links” with extremely high level of influence on individuals and “are not bound by standards of objectivity; most have strong views that they express openly”. Nielsen/McKinsey data (Nielsen, 2012) claim over 180 million blogs worldwide, with specific socio-demographic structure of bloggers, dominantly comprised of educated individuals with university degree.

Most of the content on these sites is usually “generated by ‘ordinary’ people – not trained marketers – who represent end users of products or services” (Hyuk & Morrison, 2008:3). These people are by some authors seen as opinion leaders, with the far-reach and the access to unlimited numbers of people worldwide, having a high potential of affecting purchase patterns, as well as

opinion forming (Lyons & Henderson 2005; Graham & Havlena 2007).

Networking sites are interesting for the presentation of diverse brands and products as well. Senecal and Nantel (in Hyuk & Morrison, 2008), conducted the experimental study of online recommendations usage by consumers and found that people are twice as likely to buy the recommended products because of positive recommendations that those who didn’t receive it.

According to the American Marketing Association survey of likelihood of e-commerce on social networking sites, 47% of respondents said that they are prone to visit the sites to find ideas and discussions about holiday gifts, and 29% of them would also buy products there for real (in Cha, 2009). Following the trend, Facebook added a shopping option as an application that help users to search for brands and products they are interested in and to convey product information and options among other members (PRWeb, 2007).

2. Methodology

The major research questions are related to opinions, attitudes and behavior of business students towards using social media networking sites for making purchase decisions and their level of trust and willingness to use product information that is available on these sites. Gallagher, Parsons & Foster (2001:80) explained that the student population is a more effective sample than random samples when exploring online consumer behavior, because students are “among the most experienced populations of web users” with low brand loyalty and they are more likely to seek for products and all important information in cyberspace. It was already mentioned that teen and young adults are the best advocates of the Internet era and all the trends that it brings, so they are also the biggest segment that use social networks.

The short descriptive research has been conducted at the University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Economics Subotica, Serbia. The aim was to explore respondent’s tendency to use different social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and blogging sites as an advisor and potential source of information before and after purchase. Administration of questionnaire was done by mixed mode using pencil-and-paper method with 50 respondents, while additional 100 responses were collected with an on-line survey, totaling to 150 valid responses.

3. Preliminary discussion and results

Research results showed that social-network of choice for our sample is Facebook (see Fig. 1).

Almost all respondents have account on Facebook, while Tweeter is on a second place, with far lesser share. From frequencies is easy to conclude that student population can be easily reached by social media, dominantly Facebook. Authors experience also shows that students organize in various student groups (i.e. majors of study or level of studies) so they can share ex-

periences and information. Substantial number of local business, as well as bigger companies, is more and more exercising this channel of communication to convey messages to this target group: local bakery near campus – “Lipa” – has more than 3500 likes on its FB page and generates WOM communication around its products and boosts image among local student community

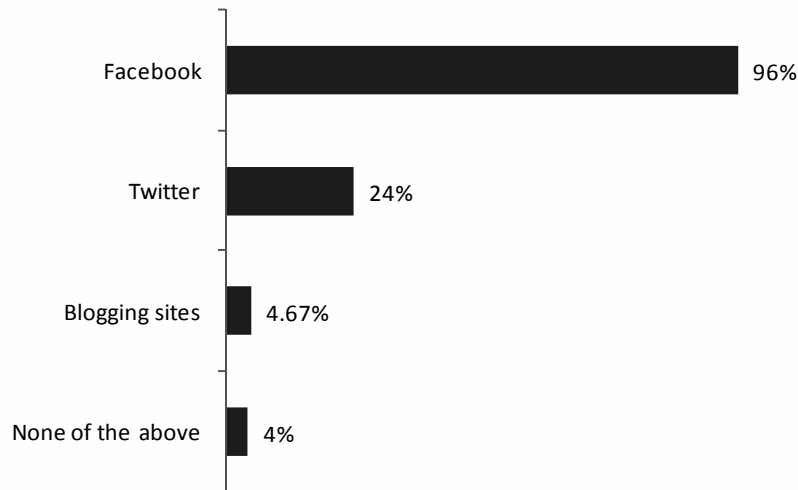


Fig. 1. Structure of social media platforms used by respondents in survey

The second research question attempted to access level of trust that users place on information obtained through social media channels (Fig. 2). Despite the great popularity of Facebook, our respondents' associate low level of trust in information provided through posts on FB. Our

assumption is that due to very wide access to this network, information seem uncategorized and questionable in many instances. Tweeter (as microblogging platform) and blogs in general achieved somewhat better trustworthiness assessment.

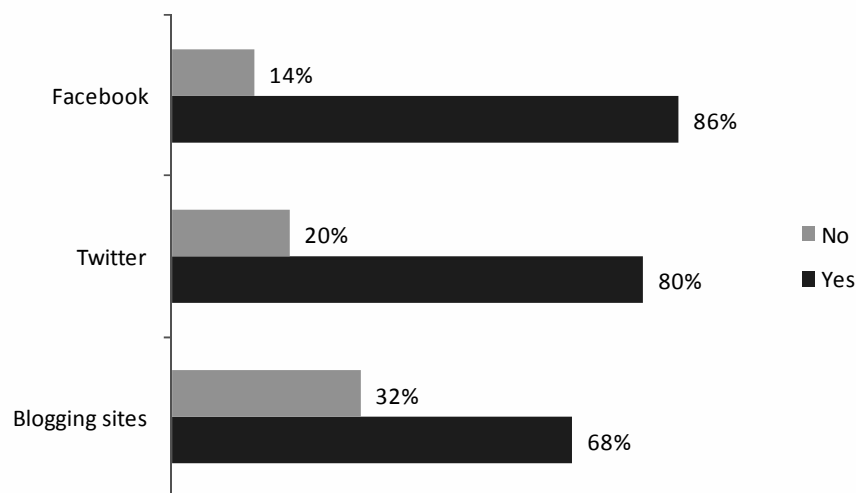


Fig. 2. Answers to the question “Do you trust information that could be found on these social networks?”

Results shown in the Fig. 3 point out that 94 % of respondents use the Internet as a potential source of information before a purchase, while only 4 % of them evaluate their decision after the purchase. This is a significant result because it confirms that the Internet, as well as social media

sites, have prominent influence on consumers before making purchasing decision, as well as in moment of purchase. Our sample expressed lesser reliance on social networks after making the purchase.

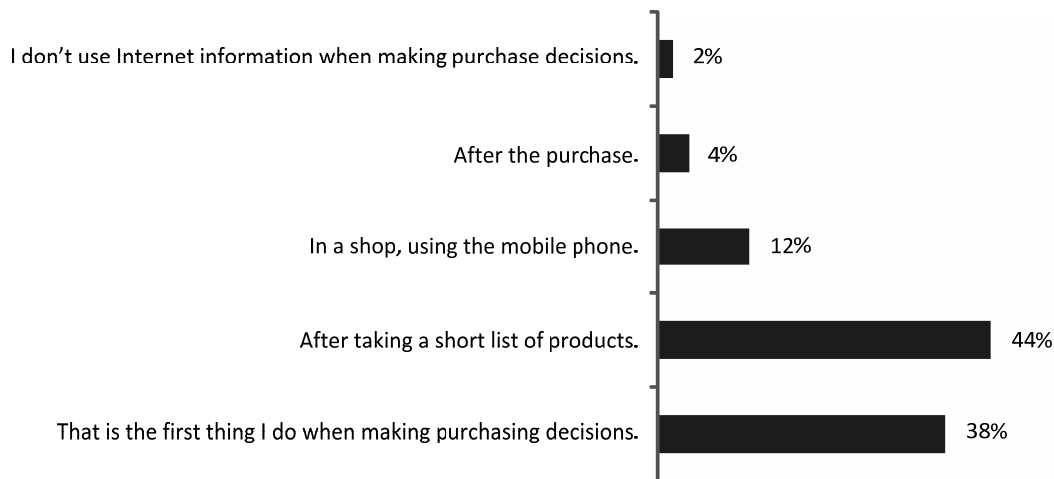


Fig. 3. Answers to the question “A moment in which you use information from the Internet when making purchasing decisions is:”

Next question was designed in order to measure ability of different social networking platforms to influence purchasing decision process and actual behavior on the market (Fig. 4).

As in the question 2 (Fig. 2), based on our sample, blogging sites have the greatest influence on students in processes of gathering information about products and services, while Facebook and

Twitter have limited influence on respondents. Question appendix “Which products you have purchased based on information from the social networks you use?” enquired about product categories that have been purchased, revealed that most frequently purchased products based on information from social networks are: fashion, beauty and electronic products.

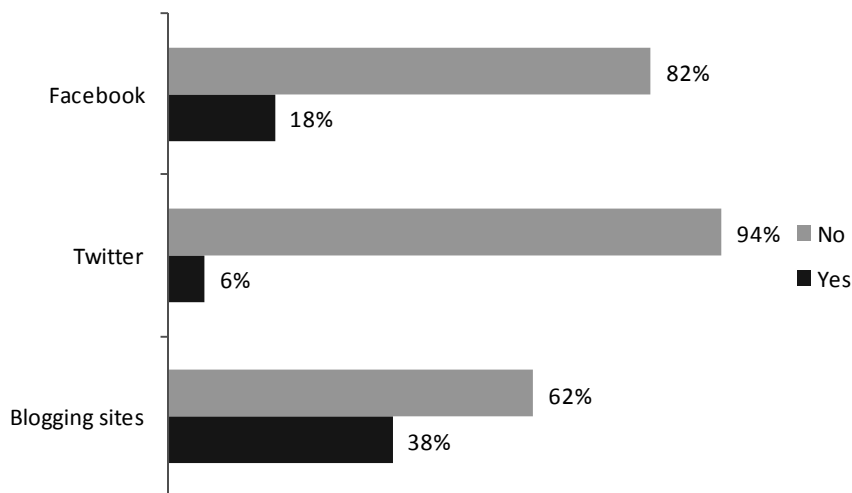


Fig. 4. Answers to the question “Have you bought at least one product/service based on the information obtained from some of these social networks?”

Finally, we asked our respondents to evaluate importance of social network in their experience (Fig. 5). The results, cross-referenced with gender data, suggests that there both female and male students consider, in majority, that social media platforms have impact on their purchasing behavior.

4. Managerial implications

Businesses should be aware, more than ever, of social media blooming and how it drives the

new, popular way of connecting people around the globe that include high commitment in discussions about companies' activities and their products through this type of media (Leeraphong & Mardjo, 2013). Doohwang et al. (2011:59) explained that social networking sites create a great potential for both marketers and consumers “to build and promote consumer–brand relationships through online brand communities”, especially in the time when business networks have become probably the most important strategic resource

(Human, 2009). Social networks specifically are based on “a person’s close social network” that plays the most important role in a consumer’s purchasing process (Godes & Mayzlin 2005; Nitzan & Libai, 2011). For business this is a precious revenue opportunity that provides social and economic reward for both consumers and companies. In such online brand environments, decision makers and marketing specialists can manage online brand communities by creating, managing

and distributing their own product and service information. According to Wood (2010) presence in social media is necessity to all brands that strive to build brand image, where communication between brand and customer is essential. On the other hand, consumers can be a part of this product managing process through their own personal community, recommendations, participation and engaging all the members in the network with specific brands.

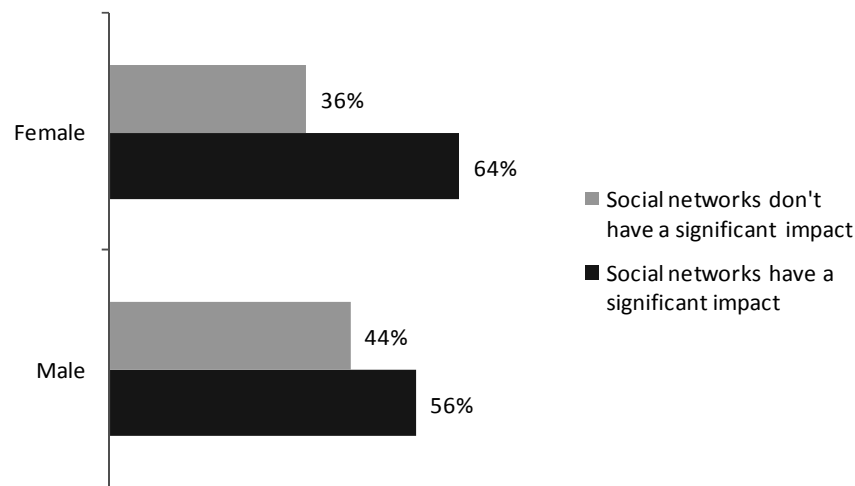


Fig. 5. Answers to the question “Do the social networks have a significant impact when it comes to the process of making a decision”

Our research, based on non-probability sample, confirmed some of trends acknowledged in literature. Regardless on lesser level of economy development, Serbian students are global citizens regarding the use of social media. Creating the social networks they exchange information and influence attitudes and behavior of their peers, as well as their behavior is shaped by actions (posts) of their social network. Companies should be aware that there is existing line of communication opened towards this important consumer group. Technology is enabling them to collect unprecedented amount of information about attitudes, feelings and behavior of target market, and use this information to further shape their purchasing decision making process and real purchases.

Major research limitation is in non-probability based sample, with limited scope. In order to gain data with higher potential for extrapolating behavior of this generational cohort we should devise sample that covers wider access to potential respondents. Future research might also include accessing this population in number of markets ranging from developing to developed nations, and grouped by independent measures of usage of social networks.

This field of consumer behavior tremendously affects each company on the market be-

cause this is for sure one of the most useful tools for building strong relationship and “getting under the skin” of the target market. Social media attracts millions of users worldwide, no matter of the age, gender or the territory. For people this is the way of being in line with trends, being in touch with friends, sharing same interests, getting and posting necessary information, spending free time etc. These virtual platforms are built to enrich and complement the lives of the people around the globe and have become an avoidable part of successful marketing strategy that aim to delight consumers and deeply understand the essence of modern consumption patterns.

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