

CAN SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION INFLUENCE THE CONSUMERS' LOYALTY FOR A CERTAIN BRAND OR PRODUCT?

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Abstract: *The individuals and especially the young ones live in a certain online information and communication bubble. The aim of this paper is to present certain aspects related to social media, to the addiction of social media developed by young individuals that are becoming the main online consumers in today's economy and to identify if a certain social media addiction can affect the consumers, the products that they buy and the brands that they acquire or use. The paper underlines the concept of brand loyalty; its main characteristics and we point out certain advantages and disadvantages in relation to social media and the addiction for the online environment.*

Keywords: social media, addiction, brand loyalty, consumers, influence

1. Introduction

The age of the Internet is in a continuous state of change with the development of the last decades concerning communication and information technologies and online platforms.

The development of the online communication tools has generated new methods of reaching the consumers, of promoting one's products, services or brands and it has also developed online communities and online social interaction at an unprecedented level.

These changes that we have witnessed are the effects of the fast-paced proliferation and worldwide usage of a new communication tool known as social media. Of course, such an important development has had a profound impact on the companies, on the consumers and on the ways and means of approaching them in relation to the brands of the products/services that organisations sell, distribute, use, etc. At the same time, such actions have generated, in recent years, the

emergence of certain negative aspects related to the usage of social media, like online bullying, stalking, aggressive language, negative/fake information, online addictive behaviour, etc.

The current paper underlines such a negative aspect related to social media usage, namely the extensive and addictive usage of these online communication platforms, while underlining aspects related to the consumers' loyalty to certain brands of products or services in the context of social media usage.

2. On Social Media, Brand Loyalty and Brand Community

The development of social media or social networking sites as it is also known started in the late 1990s with the development of a web site known as sixdegrees.com [1].

But the development and the recognition of the current types of social media platforms came to life in the second part of the years 2000s.

The first recognised definition of social

media was developed by Boyd and Ellison [1], who defined the social networking sites as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. Kaplan and Haenlein, defined social media as “a group of internet-based applications that builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and it allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content” [2].

Different authors underline the social media platform as “websites that the individual use to connect with friends/acquaintances, with people that they know from outside the virtual world or with people that they know just from the virtual world” [3].

A more recent definition of the social media platforms is that presented by Kwon and Wen, who states that “web sites that allow the development of relationships, with the help of collecting interesting information and by allowing the access for that information to those interested. At the same time, with the help of social media sites, the users can create groups that allow the interaction with users that have similar interests [4]”. From these concepts, we can see some common traits for social media online platform like: (1) the existence of an online connection; (2) the possibility to connect and communicate with others; (3) the possibility to upload personal information in the online environment etc.

The second part of the paper presents the concepts of brand and brand loyalty and other brand-related elements. According to the world well-known marketing professor Philip Kotler [5, 6], the brand represents “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of these, that identifies the products or services of one seller or group of sellers and differentiates them from those of competitors”. The same authors state that brand equity represents “the differential

effect that knowing the brand name has on customer response to the product or its marketing”. According to the American Marketing Association, cited by Market Business News [7], brand loyalty is “the situation in which a consumer generally buys the same manufacturer-originated product or service repeatedly over time rather than buying from multiple suppliers within the category”.

In the context of the online environment and of the development of brand awareness by the consumers, another element should be defined: brand community. According to Philip Kotler [5,6], there are two dimensions to this concept: (1) “a specialized community of consumers and employees whose identification and activities focus on the brand” and (2) “a website that presents brand content that engages consumers and creates customer community around a brand”.

There are some authors [8, 9] who have classified virtual communities “as small group-based communities, in which members usually have both online and face-to-face social interactions, and network-based communities, in which members' interactions are exclusively online”.

There are three main characteristics of an online brand community [10]: (a) *a shared consciousness* in which members feel a strong connection with one another and are aware of differences from those individuals not in the community; (b) *rituals and traditions*, as members have common rituals and traditions that occur through sharing their stories and experiences; (c) *a sense of moral responsibility* that arises because members have a sense of duty and obligation to the community.

3. Social Media Addiction

As stated before, with the development of social media and of instant and worldwide communication via the social networks, there are some negative aspects related to the online that one should consider.

The intensive usage of the Internet,

especially by the young individuals has generated a shift in the way the online usage is seen by the medical practitioners. In the last issue of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) it is only mentioned the Internet Gaming Disorder as a tentative disorder, there is no such mentioning of Social Media Addiction [11].

Longstreet and Brooks define social media addiction as “*a subset of Internet addiction, dealing specifically with social networking sites*” [12].

Also, Anderssen and Pallessen define social media addiction as “*being overly concerned about social media, driven by an uncontrollable motivation to log on to or use social media, and devoting so much time and effort to social media that it impairs other important life areas*” [13, 14].

Some recent developments have shown [15, 16, 17] that social media addiction is mostly present among young individuals, especially women (who spent more time than men on social media) that have no life partners. Another aspect shown by the same researches is that there is a need for the young generation to be present online and for their peers to see what they do, where they go, aspects linked to their narcissistic social media needs of being out there in the virtual environment. The research developed in the field of social media addiction is still in its infancy as is the research related to the general Internet addiction.

4. Brand Loyalty in the Context of Excessive Usage of Social Media

As we saw before, branding relates to how the consumers perceive your products or services and how and with what they associate your products or services. Brand loyalty is “*the positive association consumers attach to a particular product, demonstrated by their repeated purchases of it even when given choices of competing alternatives*” [18]. Starting from these aspects, over the time, several advantages and disadvantages of using brand loyalty as

a marketing strategy have arisen.

Among the most important advantages, we underline: (a) loyal consumers lead to lower marketing expenses; (b) loyalty to a brand reduces the risk of jumping to the competitor; (c) a loyal consumer promotes your product or service to his or her friends, family, etc. mostly by word-of-mouth and social media; (d) having a large base of loyal consumers, the company can extend the brand or the product line.

At the same time, we should also point out several disadvantages of brand loyalty, such as: (a) a brand that has a considerable loyal consumer base is usually more expensive than the normal brand; (b) after a while, the company might decide to pull your favourable brand off the market; (c) some products or services are associated with certain features, but sometimes the brands that have very loyal consumers, do not change, or add features, due to the fear of losing their consumers; (d) while loyal consumers usually buy their favourite brands, sometimes, they might want to change their products or services for the sake of variation.

All the above-mentioned advantages and disadvantages can be considered in the offline environment as well as in the online and social media environment.

The main idea behind brand loyalty is *trust*, trust in the product or service, in the company or in the reputation behind the brand. In this context we should consider the effects of social media on brand loyalty. In a previous research, this author [19], modelled the influence of social networking sites on the consumers' behaviour, where it was shown that the consumers are influenced by aspects presented and promoted on social media accounts, when deciding what product/service to buy or to inform about. As social media is an online community, the aspects related to brand loyalty in the context of social media should also consider the aspects related to brand communities.

Brand communities are made up of their

entities including their members, their relationships and the sharing of essential resources either emotional or material [20]. Laroche et al. [21] showed that brand communities based on social media can enhance feelings of community and value creation practices. They also show that the usage of social media in the context of brand loyalty leads to a strong connection among the same brand users; a strong sharing of information related to the brands/products/services that they are loyal to; they share the same “rituals and traditions” related to the brands, products and services they are loyal to; and last but not least, by using social media in the context of brand loyalty and community they feel a responsibility towards the goods and services, as well as for the community in itself.

Taking all these into consideration, the excessive addictive usage of social media can lead to potential positive effects on the brand, on the consumers’ loyalty towards a product or a certain service and even an individual, but at the same time, the addictive social media behaviour can translate into an obsessive and narcissistic behaviour towards a product or a service.

6. Conclusions

The life we live in is a life full of technology and of online interactions. This is especially more intense in the case of the young individuals and consumers. Social media platforms have become ever-present in the lives of the young generation as well as the

need to buy certain brands of goods and services. We have shown in this article, the importance of social media in the context of brand loyalty and brand communities as well as several advantages and disadvantages related to brand loyalty. We can conclude by emphasizing the fact that the development of social media affects the consumers, how they react to brands, but at the same time, we underline that there are also certain negative aspects that companies, managers and online specialists should consider: social media and online addiction.

Even if there is no definite diagnostic of social media addiction disorder, the young generation is spending large amounts of time on social networking sites, communicating, promoting and interacting in certain online or brand communities.

The recent researches done by academics and practitioners investigate the effects of social media addiction and we consider that such research should be continued with studies that should focus on researching the social media addiction in the context of social interactions, in the context of the business environment and many other areas of study.

Although this is a literature review paper, we consider that the subject is a very new one, which has not been sufficiently studied in Romania and it should raise the interest of individuals, medical practitioners and marketing specialists in communication and marketing.

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