

## Rețele sociale online și studiul creierului consumatorilor

### Online Social Networks and the Consumer Brain

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**Rezumat:** În ultimii ani rețelele sociale online au evoluat de la stadiul de modă socială sau canal de comunicare către stadiu de instrument eficient în afaceri. Acestea joacă un rol major în viața multor categorii de consumatori. De asemenea, este demn de menționat faptul că, în multe situații, cumpărările online sunt mai puțin raționale decât ne-ar face plăcere să credem. În acest articol demonstrez de ce este important studiul creierului uman în realizarea instrumentelor de comunicare online pentru rețelele sociale. Astfel, cercetarea modului în care consumatorii reacționează la diferiți stimuli de marketing online reprezintă un factor cheie în succesul unei rețele sociale online.

**Abstract:** Online social networks have moved from being seen as trends or communication channels to becoming an effective tool for business. They play a large role in consumer's life. The online purchase decisions are not as rational as we consider them to be. This paper shows why it is important the study of the human brain for social networks website. By researching how they react to different online marketing stimuli is a key factor in having success on an online social network.

**Cuvinte cheie:** rețele sociale online, comportamentul consumatorilor online, neuromarketing

**Key words:** social network websites, consumer behavior online, neuromarketing

#### Introduction

The term of “social networking” is associating with forming connections with other people on Internet. In general, social networks are self-organizing, emergent, and complex, such that a globally coherent pattern appears from the local interaction of the elements that make up the system. These patterns become more apparent as network

size increases. However, a global network analysis of, for example, all interpersonal relationships in the world—or even one global region—is not feasible and is likely to contain so much information as to be uninformative. They permeate our social and economic lives being critical to the trade of many goods and services (Jackson, 2010).

In each country there are global and local social networks, depending on the population preferences. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Hi5, Habbo, Tagged, Meetup, MyLife, Multiply, NING, MySpace, Orkut, Google+, Nexopia, Friendster, Gaia Online, Tuenti, Netlog, Xing or Badoo are just few of the most popular world-wide web-based social networks. There are websites dedicated to professionals like LinkedIn or The Sphere, a luxury social network service, with top-class service providers, access to an international address book and possibility to participate in exclusive party events.

Even if Facebook is the world leader, there are differences for some countries:

- **Twitter** is most popular in Venezuela and Brazil.
- **LinkedIn** is most popular in the Netherlands and India.
- **Google+** is most popular in Taiwan and Hong Kong.
- **Tumblr** is most popular in the Philippines and Brazil.
- **FourSquare** is most popular in Indonesia and Malaysia.
- **MySpace** is most popular in Puerto Rico and Myanmar (Burma).
- **LiveJournal** is most popular in Singapore and Russia.
- **Bebo** is most popular in Ireland and New Zealand.
- **Orkut** is most popular in Brazil and Paraguay. The interest shown for Orkut in Brazil far outstrips that of any other country.
- **Odnoklassniki** is strong in some former territories of the Soviet Union.
- **V Kontakte** is the most popular in Russian territories.
- **Maktoob** is the most important Arab community/portal.
- **QQ**, leader in China, is the largest social network of the world.

Sharing information and influencing users can be realized at any level: directly to consumer (B2C), between companies (B2B) or from computer to computer (C2C) using computers connected to the online social platform. Every attempt to send and receive messages is influenced by culture. The multicultural environment determines marketers to improve their intercultural communication skills like studying other

cultures, languages, writing and speaking clearly or helping the others to adapt to his culture (Thill and Bovee, 2005, p.62-64).

As our lives become more complex, more ways to share information, advices, interests and connections are emerging. Resources and opportunities may be available when networking. Users are aware of them and sometimes access them. In these cases, knowing people with different backgrounds, grades of expertise, and social levels turns out to be essential.

Consumer behavior changed during the last years due to the mobile devices development. Mobile phones revolutionized how people communicate and take decisions. In their cars or on the way to the office the consumer can take advice or receive useful information using his social network account.

Social marketing focuses on influencing behaviors. It is a process of creating communication and delivery benefits. If in commercial sector the primary aim is financial gain, in social marketing the primary aim is societal gain (Kotler and Lee, 2008, p.7-13). To change behavior into a social community-based needs pragmatic approach in fulfilling more steps: selecting the behavior to be promoted, identifying the barriers and benefits associated with the selected behavior, designing a strategy to use this behavior-change tool, testing the strategy with a small social community, evaluating the impact of the program (McKenzie-Mohr, 2011, p.7).

### **How social networks influence the online consumer**

There are more possibilities to reach the customers on social network websites. Product links, company links, personalized advertising, interactive catalogues or recommendations can reach the users and make them buy. Very specific is shopping with friends or being influenced by friends when making decisions. An online shopper can see products or information “liked” by their friends. This generates trustworthiness with that product and the purchase decision is easier. Even more, many shoppers actively seek opportunities to interact with brands and companies like that. This makes clear that shopping and online socializing are becoming intertwined. By including social aspects to the shopping experience it provides richer experience and will make customers to come back frequently. The interaction with brands, companies, friends or professional leaders influences users to ask more questions and to change their

preferences. Buzz Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Niche Marketing or Content Marketing are just a few converging tools used on this platform to convert the users into repeat buyers.

Usually marketers integrate tactics like multimedia content sharing, blogging, social sharing buttons on websites, social sharing buttons on email, SEO for social sites or moderating discussions with other tactics into the marketing mix. But the major role of communication in our lives gives the opportunity to the social networks to take advantage and becoming one of the most effective of these tactics. Two complementary activities in real life: socializing and shopping are beginning to converge online as well. Social networks like Facebook for example allows marketers to reach audience based on their specific activities, age, education, relationship status or location. The feed-back from the audience and the advices marketers receive can help them to strategize their business and improve it. Conversions marketing tactics are used successfully in the social networks. The basis of this activity is rooted in behavioral ad targeting.

eMarketer predicted that the social network advertising worldwide will continue to grow from 2 billion dollars in 2008 to 3,8 billion dollars in 2011 and even more in next years. There are more kinds of social network advertising. The most effective one is the direct advertising based on the networks of friends. Their recommendation can easily influence the users' preferences and their decisions. Referrals and recommendations can come in many forms – a comment, a link or a casual online conversation. Social media makes it easy to find and spread referrals and recommendations, being a powerful tool for growing any business (O'Brien, Wigley, 2011). The direct advertising placed on the social websites is targeted by taking advantage of demographic data from users' profile. The newest form of advertising on social networks is creating "groups" or "pages" with specific topics and interests.

Companies can take additional measures to stimulate the influential persons to support their interests (Kotler, 1997, p.772). As social networks plays a large role in consumer's life the reference groups or opinion leaders engage audience with specific information, ideas and brands. References groups are significant to the extent that social media users aspire to be like them, emulate them, listen to them, identify with them and buy what they buy (O'Brien, Wigley, 2011).

It is important for marketers to identify the most important actors or groups on web-based social networks. The concepts of “centrality” or “prestige” quantify the actor’s prominence. It reflects the visibility to other users in the networks and at the group level. It evaluates also the divergence of all group’s prominence. The difference between centrality and prestige is depending on the direction of lines. In centrality the user has many direct links with other users regardless of the direction, whereas in prestige a prominent user receive many lines but does not initiate many outgoing ties (Zhao, Lin, Ray, 2011, p.6-12).

### **Social networking and human brain**

The online purchase decisions are not as rational as we consider them to be (Lindstrom, 2010, p.66). That’s why during the last few years the neuromarketing researches help investors to understand better the human behavior and how our brain takes decisions. The online customers are driven, alike the off-line customers, by simple and emotional impulses (Hill, 2011)

The online social networks are perfect “places” to generate awareness or to launch a new brand. To access the big community of social network websites can be a real advantage, but to grab the users attention is the most difficult. That’s why during the last few years the Neuromarketing researches help investors to understand better the human behavior and how our brain takes decisions. Our online purchase decisions are not as rational as we consider to be. (Pradeep, 2009)

In her book “The Human Brain”, Rita Carter dedicates an entire chapter to “The social brain”. We are “social animals” with neuronal circuits dedicated to communication, understanding the others and predicting the actions of others. The highly interdependence between us leads to the big success of Facebook and the other social network websites. Even if our face and body language are not accessible there are situations in which we have the same reactions in virtual and real world. fMRI scans revealed that people are afraid of being rejected even if they play just an online game. When we are being afraid of rejection a specific area of the brain activates – the anterior cingulate cortex. The prefrontal cortex helps us to control these emotions and to reduce the pain of being rejected.

The increasing ubiquity of web-based social networking services is a striking feature of modern human society. The degree to which individuals participate in these networks varies substantially for reasons that are unclear. It was demonstrated that quantitative variation in the number of friends an individual declares on a web-based social networking service reliably predicted grey matter density in the right superior temporal sulcus, left middle temporal gyrus and entorhinal cortex. Such regions have been previously implicated in social perception and associative memory, respectively. An individual's online social network is closely linked to focal brain structure implicated in social cognition (Kanai, Bahrami, Roylance, Rees, 2011).

### **Conclusions**

Consumers are connected to information and to each other as never before due to the technologies development. These technologies are changing how consumers purchase products and determine marketers to take notice. The Internet has become a core part in the purchase journey of Europeans (Von Abrams, 2010) and worldwide. A strategic social marketing plan provides value to the general company goals and can be the differentiator against the competition. Many companies are allocating increasing social media budgets due to the higher ROI of social marketing, like converting the members and followers into paying customers.

In the offline traditional environment to launch a new product involved geographical limitations. Small companies could select a city or a small region while big companies have their own national distribution network (Kotler, 1997). Now entrepreneurs who run small business can take advantage of this resource to set up a global presence. They understood that promoting the business is not just face-to-face discussion, but also personal contacts on social media. Small business owners create profiles and pages to connect with potential customers and advertise their products and services.

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