

Consumer Behaviour in Social Networking Sites: Implications for Marketers



SARAH DIFFLEY,* JAMES KEARNS,* WILLIAM BENNETT* AND PETER KAWALEK**

ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to investigate the potential of social networking sites (SNSs) to be utilised as an effective marketing tool in engaging consumers to participate in marketing on SNSs. Qualitative research in the form of focus groups highlights that the main barrier to the effective use of these sites as a marketing tool pertains to how they are used by companies. A different approach is required by companies that 'pull' consumers in rather than 'push' marketing messages onto them. If the latter approach is adopted, consumers will have an adverse reaction to the marketing message and will express their dissatisfaction to others in their SNS. This can have a negative impact on a company and diminish the potential of SNSs as a marketing tool. As a result, developing the correct approach in using SNSs as a marketing tool is essential.

Key Words: consumer attitudes; consumer behaviour; social media; social media marketing; social networking sites

INTRODUCTION

Social media are tools that provide people with the ability to collaborate and communicate with one another online. Social media tools facilitate the creation and sharing of knowledge, information, media, ideas, opinions and insights, and allow people to actively participate in the media itself. This signals the move from passive consumption of marketing messages to facilitating interaction with messages. Online tools include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, podcasts, content aggregators and content communities. Of these social media tools, social networking sites (SNSs) and blogs have experienced the most prolific growth. SNSs account for nearly 17 per cent of total internet time. People are spending more time on SNSs and do so at the expense of traditional media (McGiboney, 2009). Hailed as a

* Letterkenny Institute of Technology

** Manchester Business School

prospective new means of reaching and engaging consumers, Nielsen (2009: 1) highlights that 'the social networks and advertising industry haven't yet found that magic formula to make this happen'. Despite the increasing amount of time people are spending on SNSs (McGiboney, 2009), these sites have yet to be harnessed as a successful marketing tool for reaching and engaging consumers (Nielsen, 2009). SNSs enable their users to create, build and maintain relationships that were not previously possible with a large and extended network of contacts. They can also provide a company with the potential to reach this large network of contacts (Enders et al., 2008). As a medium that centres on communication between individual users, companies must employ a different approach if they are to engage consumers effectively via SNSs (Gillin, 2007), as consumers are essentially using SNSs to be social and to make themselves heard (McKinsey & Co., 2006). Therefore, the primary research question of this paper is: Can social networking sites be used as an effective marketing tool to engage consumers to participate in marketing on SNSs?

The next section investigates SNSs in greater detail, while the following section describes the research methodology. The research findings are then reported, followed by conclusions and recommendations for further research.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Individual Motivations to Use Social Networking Sites

Communication and relationship maintenance are cited by Dwyer et al. (2007) as the main motivating factors for participation in SNSs. These motivating factors are reinforced by an Ofcom (2008) study of SNS users in which the primary reason for using these sites was to communicate with those people a person sees often and with those people they rarely see, and to rekindle old friendships. Social capital refers to connections within and between networks. SNSs help users to maintain and develop relationships with strong ties (those with whom they are close) and weak ties (those with whom they are less close), i.e. build their social capital. Developing and maintaining relationships with weak ties is known as bridging social capital and arises from the ability of SNSs to provide users with multiple means of maintaining more distant relationships (Steinfeld et al., 2008).

Haythornthwaite (2005) reports that where people have access to devices that allow them to connect to the internet, they are presented with the opportunity to communicate with individuals previously unknown to them, known as latent social network ties. The creation of these connections would not be possible without the internet. Once communications are initiated between latent ties they become weak ties, with the potential to become strong ties. This latent tie development is possible since the internet facilitates connections that were not previously possible. The internet was at times seen as a medium that diminished social capital (Kraut et al., 1998). However, Wellman et al. (2001) outline that more recent studies have shown it maintains and supplements social capital when used in a social context. Friendships constitute an important role in SNSs by allowing users to find friends within a network and to discern the fabric of the community. Friendship in online social networks is stretched in a sense. Anyone can be a 'friend' by simply sending an invitation, regardless of whether they are known to members or

not (boyd, 2006). This development and maintenance of weak ties in online networks is important as this is where new information is most likely to be attained by members (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

The Empowered Consumer

The trend towards social media shows no sign of slowing, as studies report those born after 1982 consume fewer newspapers, magazines and scheduled television in favour of online activities (Gillin, 2007). Furthermore, people can easily consume these media via the internet using social media tools such as YouTube to watch TV shows and web feeds to receive and read the news (Gillin, 2008).

Rust and Oliver (1994) propose that the emergence of new technologies has caused traditional advertising to become increasingly obsolete. In addition, media and markets have become increasingly fragmented. The authors also emphasise that consumers will become more empowered and give way to 'a new era of producer-consumer interaction' (Rust and Oliver, 1994: 71). They argue that this era will be most prevalent by 2010 and will be enduring. These projections appear to be accurate as in August 2006 Mc Kinsey & Co. published a report which indicated that by 2010, traditional television advertising would only be one-third as effective as it was in 1990. Among the reasons for this decline in effectiveness is the fragmentation of both media and audiences. Smaller audience size has lessened the effectiveness of the traditional top-down mass 'interrupt and repeat' advertising model. Customers are also becoming 'broadcasters' who are no longer satisfied with just listening to company marketing messages but want to engage in meaningful conversations (McKinsey & Co., 2006).

Moreover, we have now witnessed the evolution of consumers into 'prosumers'. The concept of the prosumer itself is not new. The key difference between the consumer and prosumer is that the prosumer is highly knowledgeable about products and services and can play a key role in improving these products and services. Furthermore, these prosumers will be more wary of companies and 'accepting of exploitation only where they perceive that the exploiter provides a service and value-add in return' (Clarke, 2008: 40). Essentially, the prosumer is a new, empowered consumer. Kotler et al. (2002: 36) describe the prosumer in the context of the internet and marketing:

Customers can use the internet to tell marketers what they want. The customer specifies the needs and the business delivers. Thus the customer changes roles from 'consumer' to 'prosumer'.

Traditional media allows a company to retain control over its marketing message and broadcast it to the consumer. Social media has contributed to the development of the prosumer by empowering consumers, allowing them to participate and assess content, share it with other consumers, and share opinions, attitudes and beliefs with one another in relation to that content, including company messages (Kozinets, 1999; Hoegg et al., 2006). Kozinets (1999: 258) argues that:

The existence of united groups of online consumers implies power is shifting away from marketers and flowing to consumers. Although consumers are increasingly saying 'yes' to the Internet, to electronic commerce and to online marketing efforts of many kinds, they are also using the medium to say 'no' to forms of marketing they find invasive or unethical.

Due to the degree of connectedness and increased communication facilitated by social media and SNSs, consumers can in essence access the *power of the people* more readily in relation to companies through the online communities which have brought them together in single spaces. Given these factors, Kozinets (1999) argues that building relationships and engaging in conversations with consumers in online communities has become increasingly important. This relationship building he calls 'virtual relationship marketing'.

In addition, Gillin (2007: xiii) states that social media presents an opportunity for marketers to converse with customers. Central to this discipline, which Gillin (2007) refers to as 'conversation marketing', is dialogue. 'Conversation marketing' will require marketers to approach consumers in a new way and to not only take from consumers but give back to consumers. The empowered consumer will expect to receive something of value in return for their participation. Gillin (2007: xiii) concludes: 'it means understanding who your customers are, who influences them and how to engage with those influencers'. As a result, it is not the message and pushing it onto consumers that is important but creating a real and meaningful dialogue with them (Meadows-Klue, 2007).

Marketing Implications for Companies

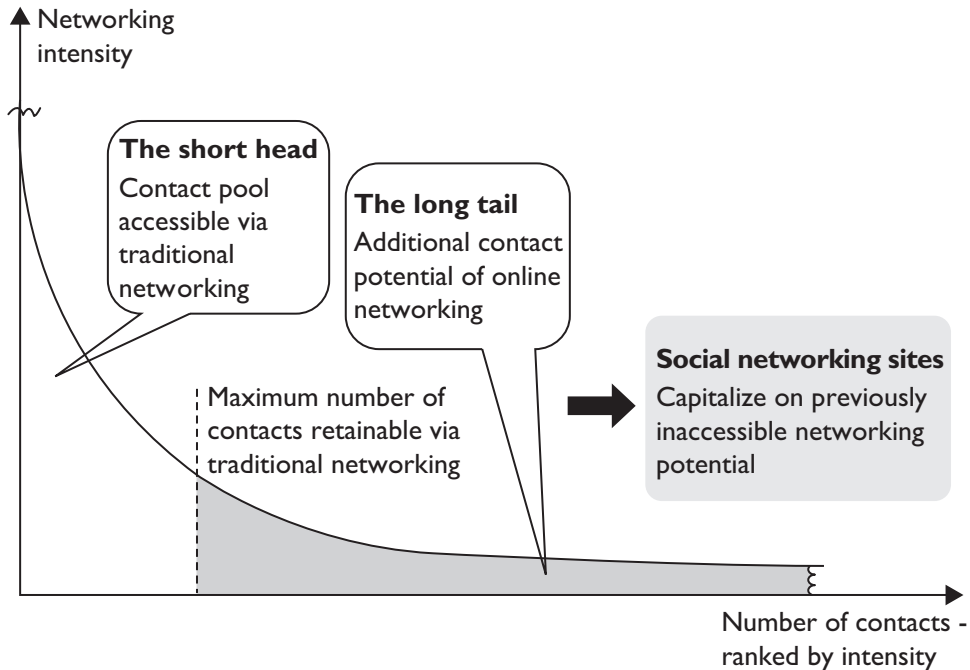
Given the level of connectedness facilitated by SNSs, Enders et al. (2008) highlight the potential these sites offer in terms of reaching a greater number of consumers. Building upon Anderson's (2006) model of the 'long tail', the authors propose the model shown in Figure 1.

As depicted in Figure 1, traditional social networks, i.e. those maintained offline only, are limited. The figure also illustrates the prolific network of contacts a company has the potential to reach through the use of online social networks.

Barabási and Bonabeau (2003) explain that the concept of 'scale-free' networks can also be applied in terms of the internet and SNSs. These networks contain nodes with a number of links that can spread to other nodes in many areas, i.e. networks linked to one another through common members. These networks work on the principles of growth and preferential attachment, and highlight the importance of connectedness and critical mass within SNSs. Where a member, or what the authors refer to as a 'node', is highly connected, they will have many friends and will be likely to develop relationships, links and more friends. This connectedness, in turn, will increase the likelihood of connections to other networks and thus increase communication capabilities and reach, increasing the size of the overall network. These networks can provide an ideal medium for marketers to generate word-of-mouth in relation to products and services (Barabási and Bonabeau, 2003).

Gladwell (2000) categorised influencer groups into mavens, connectors and salespeople. Eccleston and Griseri (2008) then found that these influencer groups could also

Figure 1: The Long Tail of Social Networking



Source: Enders et al., 2008: 7. Reproduced with permission, © *European Management Journal*.

be applied in an online context. Eccleston and Griseri (2008) further build upon these categories, applying them in the context of consumer behaviour. Mavens are people who gather product and service information and are asked by others to provide information in relation to these products and services. Connectors are those who essentially 'connect' to others and connect those they know to one another. This category of influencer is one who has discussed products and services with at least two other individuals. Salespeople are those who influence others to buy or refrain from buying products and services. Eccleston and Griseri (2008) explain that the majority of SNS members behave as connectors do. However, in exhibiting this behaviour, they are lacking a key element of Eccleston and Griseri's (2008) influencer types – they are not discussing products and services with each other via SNSs. Therefore, how to integrate themselves into these conversations and turn consumers into connectors is now the issue facing marketers.

MacKelworth (2007: 3) states in his research that:

...technology enabled networks of interaction have extended the social network to become a global mechanism of exchange between social actors with important repercussions for the distribution and influence of marketing communications. Further, that

it will affect the role of the consumer in the creation of added value to the brand proposition and product offering.

MacKelworth (2007) outlines the need for a different approach to reaching and engaging customers in online social networks and the subsequent power that has been bestowed upon consumers as the result of these networks. He finds trust and tie strength are essential factors influencing consumer purchasing decisions. In addition, a two-way dialogue between the source of information and the consumer will be of more influence than one-way communications. A survey conducted by MacKelworth (2007) with 899 business professionals in the business-to-business sector found respondents' professional contacts from their SNS were 'most worthwhile' or 'very worthwhile' (73 per cent) in terms of the level of influence their recommendations would have on respondents, although they did not often use their professional contacts as a means of acquiring recommendations. Business professionals surveyed did outline that their most trusted sources of information were friends and professional contacts. MacKelworth (2007: 30) states:

What is important for the marketing paradigm is to dedicate resources to engaging with them to lower the reception threshold of marketing communications by encouraging influencers external to the company to promote and evangelise new service and product offerings.

Furthermore, Urban (2005) argues that given this increase in the power of consumers, customer advocacy should be at the forefront of marketing strategy. Consumers can source information to aid the decision-making process and purchase products from a variety of sources, much of which have been provided by technologies, in particular the internet. As a result, control is increasingly in the hands of the consumer. Urban (2005) reports that, traditionally, if consumers were dissatisfied, they may tell a few of those close to them, and, at worst, a company would lose only a small number of customers. However, the internet has enabled dissatisfied customers to tell numerous friends, the effects of which can be detrimental for a company. The potential advantages of this communication in terms of positive word-of-mouth, and the extent to which this consumer communication can reach, can also provide many opportunities for a company. Urban (2005: 157) states that customer advocacy signifies a move away from the traditional forms of marketing to that of a company providing 'open, honest, and complete information' to consumers. Rather than pushing messages onto consumers, it involves a dialogue between a consumer and a company based on trust. This is the future of marketing as it recognises that the consumer is in control.

In accordance with Clarke (2008) and Rust and Oliver (1994), Lewis and Bridger (2004) argue that information technology has led to the development of a consumer-producer collaborative relationship. The authors highlight that as consumers become less trusting of companies, the trust which does remain will be invested in those companies that collaborate with them regarding products and services. Consumers' trust does however, remain

steadfast in one another; they find one another more credible than advertising. The network value of consumers and their subsequent potential to pass on messages to numerous individuals should not be ignored. It must be remembered that a person's online social network may not just end with their immediate network, but messages can pass from one network to another based on members who are common to two or more networks (Domingos, 2005).

Consumers have trust in one another and SNSs hold potential as a word-of-mouth communications medium regarding products and services. The question facing marketers and companies is how to create this trust and dialogue with members and encourage them to become those connectors proposed by Eccleston and Griseri (2008) and pass on company messages and recommendations to one another.

Essentially, consumers primarily use SNSs to be social. They view SNSs as their own private spaces where they can broadcast and share their opinions, beliefs, insights, media and more with those who share the same interests. This ability to become broadcasters in their own right and share important information with one another has enabled consumers to become more powerful and dictate exactly what they want and expect from a company. This prosumer expects their demands to be met. With the right approach, SNSs can provide a means for companies to engage consumers and encourage them to pass on company messages throughout the extended network of contacts they have established on-site. Consumers have trust in one another on SNSs and companies must also be viewed as consumers' friends and garner their trust. As consumers spend more and more time on SNSs, engaging consumers in marketing on-site has become essential.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to explore if SNSs can be used as an effective marketing tool to engage consumers to participate in marketing on SNSs. Inducing consumers to engage with marketing on SNSs requires gaining perspectives on how they behave in these communities, and the attitudes they possess in relation to advertising on these sites.

Qualitative research in the form of face-to-face focus groups to gain an in-depth understanding of consumer attitudes and the reasoning behind these attitudes was conducted. Due to the profound and complex nature of attitudes, it was felt that face-to-face focus groups were more appropriate, as indicated by previous studies conducted in the area of SNSs (Coyle and Vaughan, 2008; PwC, 2008a; PwC, 2008b). SNSs are used for numerous reasons, among which are to maintain and develop ties with others created in the physical world. Sweet (2001) maintains that where interactions are conducted online only, online focus groups are preferred. Online interactions only are often not the case between individual members of SNSs as they will often have met those in their network in an offline context. Furthermore, consumers will often have interacted with a company previously in an offline context via other media. Therefore, offline focus groups are more appropriate.

Verbal cues such as tone of voice, body language and gestures add to the quality of the focus groups and provide insights as to how members relate to certain types of marketing used and also to one another. Visuals in the form of different types of advertisements and marketing techniques were also utilised with respondents being asked to

discuss and evaluate the various techniques. These were presented to respondents using picture boards during the focus group proceedings and they were then asked to express how they felt about these different types of marketing on SNSs. Pictures included placed advertisements, product placement in videos on SNSs, sponsorship of pages and/or videos, company groups on SNSs and company profile pages. As visuals are utilised in focus group proceedings, face-to-face focus groups are deemed more appropriate (Sweet, 2001). Face-to-face focus groups have been found to facilitate easier communication among respondents, which for the purposes of studying consumer attitudes will be useful for gaining insights into how consumer attitudes influence one another and to keep the pace of the groups at that in which respondents can reflect on how they feel and elaborate upon these feelings through discussion with others in the group (Reid and Reid, 2005). Taking into account that respondents may use a number of SNSs and different SNSs to other respondents, online focus groups may also prove difficult in obtaining a representative sample.

Five focus groups with SNS users were conducted. Categories comprised of the following age groups: 14–17, 18–24, 25–34 and 35+. This categorisation is based on the premise that different age groups use SNSs for different reasons, and may behave differently on-site (PwC, 2008a) and, as a result, may have varying attitudes towards marketing tactics. As the most active users of SNSs, two focus groups were conducted with the 18–24 age group (iProspect, 2007). This also facilitated the drawing of comparisons between students and non-students. The focus groups consisted of both male and female respondents as both use SNSs and interact with one another on-site. Respondents were chosen using convenience sampling due to ease of sample selection and data collection. The main limitation of using convenience sampling is its lack of representativeness. The researcher selected participants by asking them if they were SNS users and if they belonged to the necessary age categories.

The 14–17-year-old focus group was comprised of four males and four females; the first 18–24-year-old focus group, which was conducted with students (hereafter referred to as the student group), consisted of four females and three males; the second 18–24-year-old focus group, which was conducted with non-students (hereafter referred to as the non-student group), was comprised of four females and three males; and the 25–34- and 35+-year-old focus groups were comprised of four males and four females each.

FINDINGS

This section describes why those within the focus group proceedings are motivated to use SNSs. Participants' attitudes towards the types of marketing used on SNSs are then addressed to determine what tactics companies should both employ and avoid. The influence of friends on individuals within SNSs is then addressed, and their subsequent potential to initiate and engage in word-of-mouth behaviour regarding products and services on-site. Given these issues, the means by which companies can reach and engage consumers on SNSs is then discussed.

In concurrence with previous research, the primary reason for using SNSs by respondents is communication (Dwyer et al., 2007; Ofcom, 2008). While respondents from all age

groups noted the ability to meet new friends via these sites, they are used primarily to build and maintain relationships with those they had already met in an offline context. The majority of respondents in all focus groups had a large network of friends on their SNS. Few respondents had less than 100 friends on their SNSs, highlighting the extended network these sites can provide.

The **14–17 age group** outlined that while SNSs allow them to keep in contact with weak ties and those far away, they primarily use them to contact strong ties. The **student group** and **25–34 age group** use SNSs as a means of communicating with both strong and weak ties, close by and far away. **Non-students** emphasised that SNSs allowed them to keep in contact with weak ties and those far away. Respondents' usage patterns on SNSs are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: SNS Usage Patterns of Respondents

Group \ Usage	14–17	18–24 student	18–24 non-student	25–34	35+
Daily	4	1	5	5	6
3–5 times per week	2	3	—	2	2
Twice a week	1	1	1	—	—
Once a week	—	2	—	—	—
A few times a month	1	—	—	1	—
Rarely	—	—	1	—	—
Total	8	7	7	8	8

Aware of the presence of companies, products and brands on their SNSs, respondents tended to discuss marketing tactics that irritated them, as these annoying tactics were most memorable to them.

Negative Implications of Marketing on SNSs

Those in the **14–17 age group** initially discussed pop-up advertisements in relation to SNSs. The respondents felt that pop-up advertisements had become quite frequent on SNSs and often appeared unexpectedly, causing respondents to click on them by mistake. This mistake would then take them to a different site and away from what they were doing, which was found to be extremely annoying. One respondent noted icons for pop-ups would often be placed strategically. When going to click on something else such as a photograph on her SNS, she would often click on the advertisement by mistake as it was so close and a pop-up would appear. Banner advertisements that appeared while the profile page was loading were also found to be misleading. These advertisements would load last and respondents would often click on the advertisements by mistake in an attempt to click on a part of their profile.

Respondents also spoke of the appearance of advertisements within profile pages on their SNSs. The lack of choice in relation to these advertisements being placed within the content of their profile irritated respondents as they felt they had a lack of control over their online representations of themselves. Advertising within content was also noticed by respondents, for example, advertisements within videos. These advertisements could be closed by respondents yet they still felt the appearance of such advertisements took away from the user experience.

Placed advertisements are typically ignored by respondents. They are there to be social, not to look for advertisements. Respondents also stated that advertisements were rarely relevant to their age and interests and so there was no motivation to click on them. The potential for viruses and trust issues also affected respondents' willingness to click on advertisements.

Other advertisements that agitated respondents were those that started automatically with some sort of movement, dialogue or noise. These advertisements took away from what respondents were doing and they would typically only click on them to stop them and would then go back to what they were doing straight away. All respondents felt SNSs have become over-commercialised.

When discussing advertisements on SNSs with the **student group** it became apparent that trust was a major issue among respondents. They automatically felt advertisements were not secure and so they typically ignored them. Lack of familiarity with advertisements played a large role here. Respondents tend not to see any logo with which they are familiar and so ignore the advertisements. They also felt advertisements tended not to be relevant to them at all and so would not click on them.

Respondents automatically began to discuss pop-ups and roll-overs. Roll-overs occurred when users rolled the mouse over a part of the screen and an advertisement then took over the whole screen. Respondents found this irritating. These roll-overs interrupted what they were doing and they could not proceed without clicking on the advertisement to close it or to find out more information. Once back to what they were previously doing this tended to happen again when the mouse again rolled over that part of the screen, which respondents found frustrating.

In relation to advertisements on SNSs, respondents discussed advertisements associated with the area in which they lived. These advertisements would display someone they knew who wanted to talk to them. One respondent had clicked through this advertisement but found an application process in place to find out who this person was. The process of filling out their details on the application form was found to be off-putting and they went no further with the process as there was too much work involved.

Respondents outlined the argument that they never really take notice of advertisements on SNSs as they felt they did not stand out and tended to blend in. Banner advertisements, they noted, were not different or noticeable enough to stand out. For those who tended to block advertisements out completely, they felt clutter and the amount of advertisements were partially responsible for this.

The **non-student group** also expressed trust issues in relation to advertisements on SNSs and as a result would rarely click through on advertisements on SNSs. A male respondent said some advertisements did not take him to the website of the company that had placed the advertisement and for this reason he did not trust these advertisements. A female respondent felt the company's reputation and familiarity with a company were issues influencing click-through rates. If she did not trust the advertisement she would not click through on it for fear of viruses. Again, all respondents said advertisements were rarely if at all relevant to them and they often felt advertisements were just randomly placed on their pages.

Advertisements that flash and make noise were found to be irritating by respondents. Respondents also discussed advertisements that tell the user they have a new message or someone in their area likes them. These were not trusted by respondents and they did not believe the advertisements. Respondents said they would be curious about such advertisements in the beginning but this soon deteriorated. Two respondents (one male, one female) had clicked through on these the first time they saw them. However, they were taken to a different site and did not know these people who liked them and so they left the site. Being brought to another website would annoy respondents; particularly if it was not for the purpose they believed it to be, which often occurred.

Respondents in the **25-34 age group** were irritated by pop-ups as they appeared when they were in the middle of doing something and interrupted what they were doing. Only one male respondent stated that pop-ups did not bother him. One respondent had clicked on an advertisement relating to someone in their area having a crush on them. However, it required them to fill out information and call a number, which they did not trust and so would not do.

In relation to applications such as quizzes and polls, respondents reported that when they were getting their results from them, a number of advertisements would appear which they had to keep closing in order to get their results. Some respondents had stopped using applications for this reason. Pop-ups in content, such as those in videos, were also noted by respondents, who found them irritating and would never click through on them. The placement of advertisements was also discussed by respondents. When completing applications they were often placed extremely close to the button to continue on to the next part of the application and could then be clicked on by mistake.

Trust was also a major issue among respondents and was a driving force behind not clicking through on advertisements, particularly if their details were requested (for example, to enter competitions). A lack of trust of who you would be providing your details to, not knowing who would be viewing your information, fear of viruses and a lack of familiarity with companies were mentioned. The majority of respondents felt advertisements on SNSs are not relevant to them. Respondents tended to ignore or not even notice placed advertisements. They stressed they were there to talk to their friends, not to click on advertisements.

Respondents in the **35+ age group** said they would ignore advertisements on their SNSs the majority of the time. In relation to advertisements on SNSs, a female respondent

discussed those advertisements that notify people they have won a prize; these were quite distracting. The female respondent was often subjected to these, did not trust them and as a result she would ignore them. Pop-up advertisements had become such an occurrence that one male respondent used a pop-up blocker when he went online. Others agreed and felt pop-up advertisements were merely distracting and useless. A male respondent stated that these advertisements were especially aggressive in nature. A female respondent said she had encountered advertisements that even when clicked out of, would continually reappear, to which other respondents agreed. A male respondent did not trust the companies that placed such advertisements. He had provided his information to one betting company advertisement and had then started receiving a number of emails from other companies. He believed his information had been sold on and as a result did not trust such companies and advertisements. A male respondent also said he had clicked through on an advertisement on his SNS and while he could not remember what the advertisement was for, it did annoy him as he was taken to a site which he felt was not related to the advertisement itself and what he believed it to be.

All respondents had major trust issues with those advertisements that requested information from them if they were not familiar with the company because they could not be sure as to what their information was being used for. Respondents also felt that a fear of viruses plays a large part in deterring people from clicking on advertisements on SNSs.

Two female respondents stated that advertisements on SNSs were rarely relevant to them as consumers. However, a male respondent who tended to use more niche SNSs, such as art- and music-related sites, felt advertisements were often relevant to him as they were related to the content of the SNS itself. These advertisements are essentially tailored to meet the SNS users' needs and as a result encourage users to click through on advertisements more readily. All the respondents who participated in general SNSs felt approximately 80 per cent of advertisements were irrelevant to them. If they were relevant it would simply be a matter of coincidence.

Positive Implications of Marketing on SNSs

Marketing tactics respondents felt positively towards were a rare occurrence. However, the majority of the respondents in each focus group had joined groups within their SNSs. Reasons for joining groups included that respondents did not have to leave their SNS to take part, they allowed them to keep updated on their interests and taking part in the group was under their control.

Where groups were recommended to respondents by their SNS they felt they were recommended based on their interests and as they were relevant to them they did not mind. A male respondent in the **35+ age group** who used music SNSs stated that users can sign up to an application which analyses what music that user listens to on the SNS and makes new music recommendations based on that information. He felt this was a good way of finding out about new music and artists. Other focus group members responded positively to mechanisms such as these if they were to be used. Again it was their choice and only certain information was being used. The respondent stated it also tied in with

advertising in a subtle yet effective way in that if respondents liked the music, they were provided with a link where they could go and buy the artists' music. This was also the case when friends recommended groups, as respondents stated their friends would have similar interests to them and have them in mind when suggesting the group. This meant they were likely to join and take part in the group. Where items on SNSs were relevant to respondents they were likely to notice them more.

Some respondents had visited company pages, although to a much lesser extent than groups. Reasons outlined by respondents for visiting company profile pages included taking part in competitions, they were different, relevant, interesting, allowed them to take part, allowed them to make comments on the page, they were familiar with the company and they could relate to the content on the pages. However, respondents stressed that they disliked when companies requested them as friends and it should be under their control to take part.

Three respondents in the **non-student group** said they had clicked on advertisements on a SNS. While respondents had highlighted previously that advertisements were rarely relevant to them, in this case they were and so they clicked through on the advertisement for this reason. This was also the case for respondents in the **35+ age group**. Where advertisements were relevant to them, they would click through on them. Two respondents also argued familiarity with the advertiser would be a factor influencing click-through rates.

A male respondent who utilised art and music SNSs stated he would click through on some advertisements on these sites. Advertisements on these sites tended to relate to music and art and as they were more relevant and related to the theme of the site, he would click through on those that were of interest to him.

The Influence of 'Friends' on SNSs

There was a general consensus among the members of all the focus groups that if friends were to make comments regarding products, companies and brands on SNSs, it would have an impact on their attitudes towards that product, company or brand. They felt, however, that this was their decision to make and disliked when they were forced to recommend an application to others in order to access it themselves.

A respondent in the **non-student group** said if friends were to recommend something, it would be of interest to them too as friends share similar interests and they would have you in mind rather than just sending information to seemingly random people, the way companies may do. This way the respondent felt the information was pre-filtered.

However those in the **student, non-student** and the **25-34 age groups** could not recall any incidents where friends had made recommendations to them on their SNSs. Moreover, respondents in the **student group** said this was unlikely to happen and they would expect this from younger individuals as they tend to think more in the mindset of a group.

Respondents in the **14-17 age group** stated they have watched those advertisements and videos recommended by friends and have been influenced by their friends' opinions in relation to companies, products and brands. Three respondents in the **35+ age group** said the recommendations of friends had influenced their opinions about companies, products

and brands on their SNSs and would encourage them to learn more about a company and its offerings. Furthermore, if friends were to recommend that they stay away from a product or service, they would listen. Members of the **35+ age group** stated it all came down to the fact they would trust their friends more than companies.

Reaching and Engaging Customers on SNSs

Advertisements that did not take respondents to a new webpage, were more relevant to respondents' needs and wants, and were more trustworthy, noticeable, interesting and eye-catching were highlighted by respondents as means by which companies could effectively reach and engage them. All groups felt SNSs had become over-commercialised and advertisements were being pushed onto them, disrupting their online activities.

Respondents in the **14–17** and **35+ age groups** suggested knowing they would be taken away from their online activities would discourage them from clicking on advertisements and perhaps a mini-window that opened on the same page of the SNS would be effective. This would mean respondents could stay where they were and could easily close the advertisement if they wished. The **student group** argued familiarity with the advertiser was a key element influencing trust in advertisements and the **25–34 age group** said advertising on a medium such as television and radio could achieve this as these media are more trustworthy. These advertisements could then direct people to the SNS. A female respondent stated she had heard a radio advertisement directing her to a website so this had worked for her.

Possible means of making advertisements more eye-catching and attention-grabbing suggested by the **25–34 age group** were placing a price on the advertisement and offering free gifts and incentives to click on advertisements. The **non-student group** felt profile pages that could be used by respondents for their own personal profile pages are attention-grabbing and a good way of advertising, and they are also funny and different. They also stressed the importance of control and choice in the advertisements that they are exposed to. The **35+ age group** also felt permission-based advertisements would be more effective, particularly if respondents' profile information was to be used in targeting advertisements.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The focus group findings illustrate clearly that SNSs represent a means of communication for their users, primarily to keep in contact with both strong and weak ties, but also to reactivate latent ties and generate new ties. The majority of respondents use their SNS on a weekly basis, and so communications with those in their network are made and updated frequently. Respondents were highly connected in terms of the number of friends they had accumulated on their SNS. Few respondents had less than 100 contacts as friends on their SNS, thus illustrating the extended network of contacts a company has the potential to reach (Barabási and Bonabeau, 2003). However, as SNSs serve as just that, social networks, focus group findings highlight that the vast majority of marketing tactics employed by companies on-site serve only to irritate consumers, therefore engaging consumers to participate in marketing on SNS may prove extremely difficult.

The focus group findings highlight the fact that marketing issues in relation to SNSs centre primarily on control. Literature shows that tools such as social media signify a move to the empowered consumer, who has control over the extent and type of messages they are exposed to. As control is increasingly in the hands of the consumer, creating and conveying the right message – one consumers want to receive and one to which they will respond positively – is necessary.

As Kozinets (1999) maintains, consumers will increasingly use social media to say no to forms of marketing that are being pushed upon them or that they do not agree with. This activity is taking place on SNSs as messages are continually pushed onto consumers. They are being denied control and are responding negatively towards these marketing tactics. Pop-ups, roll-overs, and flashing and noisy advertisements were prime examples divulged by respondents. These advertisements grabbed their attention but in all the wrong ways and served only to disrupt the user experience. All groups felt SNSs had become over-commercialised and served only to clutter sites.

In addition, the influence of friends is highly prevalent on SNSs. Respondents react and listen to their friends' comments, which in turn affects their attitudes. This point is illustrated in the dynamic of groups on SNSs, whereby if a respondent's friend joins a group and recommends it to friends, they are likely to enquire about the group and also join it. This influence extends to products and services. Thus, connections do have the capacity to influence others' opinions and attitudes towards companies, products and brands. This influence rarely happens as often companies fail to grab the attention of users sufficiently so that they might pass their messages on to their connections. Referring to Eccleston and Griseri's (2008) influencer groups, the **14-17 age group** takes part in the most connector behaviour in SNSs. As noted by respondents in the **student group**, this may be due to a group mentality or may signal that when consumers do respond positively to marketing on SNSs they will tell others about it. The strength of influence between connections on SNSs is clearly evident, yet while this potential exists, it has yet to be realised by the marketer.

In effect, focus group proceedings highlight that SNSs do hold potential as an effective marketing tool for reaching and engaging consumers, but only if utilised in the correct manner. If they are not, the complete opposite occurs, with consumers quickly forming adverse opinions not only towards the advertiser but advertising on SNSs in general. If this continues to occur, the potential of SNSs as a marketing tool may be diminished permanently. Therefore, more research in the area of SNSs and marketing and developing the correct approach in utilising them as a marketing tool on behalf of companies is essential.

Managerial Implications

Companies must seek to integrate advertisements and engage consumers rather than infringe on their privacy or irritate customers. If a company can engage consumers, they will choose to listen to the messages that are being conveyed and potentially pass these messages on to others. Engagement and dialogue are essential, yet rarely utilised.

Relevancy and timing are key factors in gaining the attention of SNS users. It must be remembered they are on these sites to communicate with one another, so if marketers are to grab their attention the advertisements must appeal to users' needs and wants at that time. Yet advertisements are often deemed to be irrelevant by users, who are of the consensus that they are just randomly placed. A significant number of respondents from focus group proceedings were open to the use of their information as a means of targeting more relevant advertisements at them. All respondents, although quite wary of advertisements on SNSs, would be more inclined to click through on those advertisements that were relevant to them. However, as consumers value ownership over their SNSs, to some the use of this information may be regarded as an invasion of their privacy. A possible means of counteracting this would be to communicate to users that the use of such information would result in more relevant advertisements. Assurance that data will not be misused is also appropriate.

Ceding control to consumers may provide a more effective means of reaching and engaging consumers. Permitting consumers to participate in advertising when they want, on their terms, without taking them away from what they are doing and rewarding them for their participation may be a potential technique for achieving this. These rewards must also be of value to consumers, whether it is recognition, information or incentives. This point signifies a constant between social and traditional media – knowledge of your consumers and their needs and wants is essential. Groups and company pages demonstrate the value of understanding customers. Using groups and company pages is at the discretion of members and company pages allow them to engage in conversation with a company itself, feel like they are involved with that company and make themselves heard in relation to that company. It creates an all-important dialogue between consumer and company through which trust can be created, which is a crucial element that emerged from the focus group proceedings. If familiarity can be created between respondents and companies, they will be more likely to click through on advertisements. Mixed media advertising, advertising design, honesty and personable, localised advertisements were suggested by respondents as possible means of achieving this.

Marketing on SNSs to date has adopted the traditional approach of attempting to engage a presumably passive consumer, whereas company pages and groups appeal to the empowered and active consumer and allow them to take part in the medium itself. SNSs can be used as an effective marketing tool for engaging customers if this is done in the right way.

The implication here for companies appears to be a more 'friendship'-based approach to consumers on these sites. As SNSs are built on relationships, companies should work to achieve just that – a relationship with their consumer. This relationship would see the company 'pull' consumers in rather than 'push' messages on them, which is what has been occurring in the majority of cases. This relationship will be one where company and consumers are on an equal footing and can engage in a proactive relationship with both the company and the consumer benefiting equally.

Research Limitations

Qualitative research was carried out in order to gain insights into the extent to which SNSs can be used as a marketing tool. Given that focus groups comprise a small number of members of the population of interest, whose member interactions and opinions may have an impact on responses, they do not afford statistical analysis (Stewart et al., 2006).

Also, the 35+ age group should be further expanded into older age categories. As the usage of SNSs continues to grow, those over the age of 35 are becoming increasingly active users. In the United States, more than 50 per cent of the population between the ages of 35 and 44 are users of SNSs and those in the over-44 age group are growing in terms of their SNS usage (Bernoff, 2009).

Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the focus group findings, quantitative research should also be undertaken to allow the generalisation of results in relation to the population of Irish SNSs users as a whole, thus enabling more definitive conclusions to be drawn. This qualitative approach was adopted in order to build a more holistic picture of how SNSs can be integrated effectively into marketing strategy.

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