'Social Networking as a Marketing Tool: Evidence from Donegal'

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research was to examine social networking sites (SNSs) as a marketing tool with evidence from County Donegal. This will then help establish how valuable SNSs are for marketing by small medium enterprises (SMEs). By analysing certain literature, it was clear that no handbook currently exists to help SMEs handle their social media presence. It was evident from the literature that start-up businesses tend to choose social media networks that they engage in without much strategy. This research aims to be useful to SMEs within Donegal and throughout Ireland in regards to using social networking as a marketing tool.

Secondary research consisted of a literature review examining SNSs, their use by SMEs, the behaviour of consumers and the management of brands. Primary research was conducted in two phases. Phase one involved 160 surveys distributed online to users of the SNS Facebook. Phase two involved conducting four semi-structured interviews with SME owner/managers located in Donegal in the sectors of retail and travel/hospitality.

The study found that SNSs are a highly effective marketing tool for SMEs and are a cost-effective way for companies to pull in new business from customers. SNSs are influentially powerful platforms that allow SMEs to see who their customers are, resulting in sales and overall profit for business.

Keywords: Social networking sites, Social media marketing, SMEs, Social media, Marketing.

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

B2B   Business-To-Business

B2C   Business-To- Consumer

SNS   Social Networking Site

SME   Small Medium Enterprise

US   United States

WOM   Word of Mouth

Chapter One – Introduction

1.1 Introduction

"On average, consumers devote almost one third of their time to consumption of online social media" (Lang 2010, cited by Laroche *et al*, 2013). Social networking adds another dimension to the way people communicate all over the world and is among one of the most significant business developments of the twenty-first century (Bennett *et al*, 2009). Social networking builds communities of people online who share similar interests or who are interested in exploring activities or interests of others. There are a wide range of SNSs available which include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube MySpace and Linkedin.

SNSs can be utilised by start-up businesses to target markets in order to gain maximum profits. SNSs grow in strength as more people engage in social networking activities whether at home, school, college, or in the work place. SNSs are used as a means of communicating to customers and allow insights into customer's perceptions, their likes and dislikes. This research aims to provide useful reference points for SMEs exploring an entrance into social media. With the increase in people using SNSs, this research aimed to ascertain the effectiveness in using SNSs for start-up businesses.

1.2 Context

As a keen user of SNSs, this research topic was of a high interest as SNSs are changing the way people spend their time online and how people interact within their normal lives. Consumers demand for more and want their voices to be heard and they are the pioneer factors in marketing. SNSs are viral and they are the best platforms for consumers as they allow for communication between individuals. They impact the relationships with consumers as they allow for users to keep in touch with businesses on a more personal note and they allow for businesses to make their products known in a cost effective way. As a user of the SNSs Facebook and Twitter, communicating with others can be done very promptly. Users can keep in touch with close friends, those they do not see often and even meet new friends

They can also have an impact on the relationships with employees. SNSs can provide satisfaction among employees by reducing the feeling of isolation among workers which makes employees feel part of the organisation during long periods of absences from the workplace. Revitalising the culture of companies is crucial to achieving levels of productivity and satisfaction among employees (Bennett 2009). These recessional times make it critical for innovative approaches to business. SNSs enable their users to have their own private spaces where they can share their opinions with those who share similar interests.

For businesses, social networking can be used to connect with customers and to understand the overall product perception to improve companies. As well as the popular sites of Facebook and Twitter, there are also blogs, business pages of companies and review sites that exist. As social networking grows, businesses can not solely relay on radio or TV to create the awareness of their product. Reaching the consumer in these traditional methods is becoming more difficult. Consumers are now becoming aware of what they buy and what they consume and it is a difficult task for marketers (Nielsen,

2013). SNSs help businesses shift power over to the consumer as they are able to engage and influence through social networking.

Social networking allows for businesses to know how their company and products are being perceived in the market place as well as marketing and advertising (Singh, 2011). Organisations can measure their products and brand perceptions from SNSs. They allow for businesses to look at their competitors and to observe how they are utilising the social media tools. It is about participation and engagement with customers and perspective customers. It is important for businesses to be able to maintain contacts and network thorough life and work and SNSs are a crucial aspect for success.

1.3 Proposed Methodology

In light of the objectives posed in this study, the most appropriate methodology comprised of a mix methods approach that incorporated both qualitative and quantitative analysis. It became evident that both methods were needed in order to meet the requirements of the objectives (Creswell, 2013). These will be explored in detail in chapter 3, Methodology.

The aim of this research was to:

Explore how valuable SNSs are for marketing by SMEs.

The five objectives of this study were:

1.   To identify consumer's primary reasons for using social networking sites.

2.   To establish what motivates users to these social networking sites.

3.   To investigate if social networking sites can be used as an effective tool for

marketing.

4.   To discover how social network marketing differ from other marketing strategies.

5.   To examine how social networking sites benefit start-up business.

Objectives one and two were achieved through conducting qualitative research in the form of an online survey using technology. This involved conducting a snowball survey which was sent out to friends through Facebook. Facebook was used to administer the survey research as it was ranked number one out of the top 500 sites on the web by Alexa, a web information company (Alexa, 2013). Objective three was achieved through the examination of literature regarding SNSs and effective marketing tools. It involved studying journal articles, text books and previous dissertations in the field of social networking. In regards to objective four and five, the focus was to conduct interviews. The interviewees included start-up businesses in Donegal that use SNSs to market their small-medium businesses. The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data analysis helped determine the implications of SNSs and its application as a marketing tool for Donegal businesses.

1.4 Limitations of the research project

There are also a number of limitations that can occur when conducting a research project. These include:

- Sample size – if the sample size is too small, it will be difficult to find significant relationships from the data

- An insufficient response of survey – unreliability of survey users completing the survey in a particular time frame.

- Availability of interviewees - being able to conduct an interview with professionals within a specific time frame.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

According to Aveyard (2011) a literature review makes sense of a body of research and presents the findings of available literature in a certain area. Kuther (2012) further adds that a literature review is intended to present and critically evaluate the literature in a given topic and will discuss current or historical research organising the presentation by theme. The literature researched in this study was a combination of academic text books, journals and published articles. The literature commences with a description of SNSs and how they are used, followed by the characteristics of social networking. This allows the reader to gain an understanding into social networking; the main area of focus in this study. The literature follows by the emergence of SNSs and how they can be used as a marketing platform. This topic is aimed to benefit marketers as it provides many advantages on the use of SNSs. The topic of SNSs in regards to SMEs is then researched and how SMEs can adopt social media marketing techniques. Social media marketing is then researched to show how marketers can use social media as an advantage to gain customer loyalty. Following on, the topic of consumer behaviour is then examined followed by consumer's attitudes towards online social networking. This area of research provides many valid discussions on the behaviour of consumers in regards to social networking and online behaviour. The literature then discusses the final topic of brand management and how social media can influence brand commitment.

2.2 Social Networking Sites

Chen (2013, p. 1219) defines SNSs as:

> Web based services that allow users to construct a public or a semi-public profile with a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

A description of a social network is also stated by Bateman *et al.* (2011, p. 78): 'publicly accessible virtual meetings where users present information about themselves and view information about others'

According to Powell *et al.* (2009), cited by Lin and Lu (2011, p. 1152), social media has become a big part of people's daily lives and has become an important social platform for computer-mediated communication. Social networking is a cyber-environment that allows the individual to construct their own profile, by sharing texts and images (Boyd and Ellison 2008, cited by Lin and Lu 2011). Social networking websites allow people to interact with others online by sharing experiences and opinions. Users may participate in the site to interact with friends, family and colleagues and may also wish to develop new relationships (Reynolds, 2010).

Social networking is demonstrating its potential as a powerful communication tool and a collaboration tool in social, political, and educational arenas (Corbeil and Corbeil, 2011). The use of SNSs is increasing daily as more users join the social network phenomenon. According to Bicen and Cavus (2011) Facebook is one of the most commonly used social sharing sites today with over 750 million active users. It is turning into one of the most popular tools in online social communication. In regards to the most popular SNSs, Facebook is ranked number one, Twitter is ranked number two, followed by LinkedIn at number three (Ebiz, 2013). Many organisations have come to recognise the

phenomenon of social networking in using it to conduct online marketing and companies have begun to identify certain users of SNSs to conduct online marketing. According to Tan *et al.* (2012) in order for organisations to better adopt SNSs for cost-effective marketing, they must understand which users are the most valuable customers and should be as the targets, in order to achieve maximum profit.

Winer (2009) states SNSs have generated the most publicity out of all the new media advances. Organisations have used SNSs as a method to invite their customers to create their own advertising for the company. This is becoming a popular way for a company to not only engage in their customers but to also obtain some creative advertising at a low cost. According to a Consumer Behaviour Report by Miller (2011), social networking accounts for 11 percent of all time spent online in the U.S. In the report, a survey was conducted and businesses rated the importance of social media. 43 percent stated it was very important to just 4 percent stating it was unimportant. Social media is like a mirror wherein you can always look to know how your company, its products as well as various marketing and advertising programmes are being perceived in the market (Singh, 2011). Given this information, it is obvious that social media is critical to marketing professionals.

2.2.1 Characteristics of Social Networking Sites

Before social networks, websites were based on content that was updated by one user, today; online social networks are built and directed by the users themselves. Users populate their network with conversation and content. That content is directed by any user that takes part in the conversation. This in turn makes social networking exciting and dynamic for users. Participation in SNSs has many advantages in regards to meeting entertainment, sociability and status needs (Perez *et al.* 2011, p. 61). A major characteristic is that social networks are extremely interactive and they are now becoming a pastime for users. More people may choose social networks over television as they are a way to connect with friends and have fun. They are built on community concepts were members hold similar beliefs and hobbies. Users can discover new friends within these communities and also re-connect with old friends. The more relationships a user has within a network, the more established they will become towards the network. The social network scene can also provide an emotional sense of security and allows users to feel assured that their family or friends are within easy reach. These online platforms allow users to have peer to peer contact, create, share, adapt and engage in digital dialogue. They create linkages, allow for group forming and allow for users to create and maintain their own user profiles. These social platforms are accessible 24/7 from a range of devices and locations. Brenner (2012) claims that the rise of smart phones has made social networking a fingertip away were 40 percent of cell phone users use a SNS on their phone.

2.3 The emergence of SNSs as a Marketing platform

SNSs are among the most popular websites and their popularity is continuing to grow. Their increased popularity could be due to the fact that users are allowed to become the stars of their own production as they create their own profile and observe those of others (Bergman *et al.* 2012, p. 707). Social networking allows users to interact with each other and to maintain relationships among friends. Chen (2013) states that millions of internet users are now members of one or more SNS and the success of social networking has tremendous business implications. Panek *et al.* (2013, p. 2004) also agrees that there has been a dramatic rise in the use of SNSs and they currently account for nearly one quarter of the time spent online and 80 percents of internet users report some social network use. The sites have experienced a rapid expansion in popularity since their inception in the early 2000s. According to Campbell *et al.* (2012 p. 1929) Facebook is the second most visited website in the world after Google.

Social networking offers an abundance of services to online users which make it complicated for companies to know which particular sites to use and how to use them correctly. Whilst the growth of social networking is a common phenomenon, the reasons for using these sites and the way people use them may differ depending on their social and cultural values. In a study conducted by Lin and Lu (2011) it was noted that enjoyment was the most influential factor in people's use of SNSs, followed by the number of peers and usefulness. Whereas Esponiza *et al.* (2008) discovered that the connection and reconnection with friends and family was the most popular reason for using SNSs. Bokhari *et al.* (2012, p. 120) further adds that people use SNSs in a number of ways ; to stay connected online with their offline friends and their new online friends, to share photos, videos and private messages. Din *et al.* (2011, p. 713) states that if SNSs are properly used by organisations, they may encourage, promote and facilitate organisational learning among employees.

In the view of their rapid growth, it can be questioned as to how SNSs can create value for customers and how that can be converted into profit for businesses. Enders *et al.* (2008, p. 201) argues that SNSs create value for customers because they are superior to more traditional methods of communication. They offer new ways of getting to know people and they aid in the management of existing contacts. With the increase in the volume of user-generated content, the most valuable from a marketing perspective is the prevalence of online reviews of products and services which can serve as up-to-the-minute sources of data for research and marketing management (Callarisa *et al.* 2012, p. 73). In April 2006, Facebook opened its registration process to organisations. Waters *et al.* (2008, p. 102) states that Facebook have an average of 250,000 people registering to use the site daily and that organisations cannot ignore this social network phenomenon. The research suggests that social network operators should promote users to have friends in their own social network to join and encourage more people to use such a platform (Lin and Liu, 2011). SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter have become very popular. 47 percent of online adults use SNSs and 73 percent of teens and young adults are a member of at least one social network (Luisa 2010, cited by Li *et al.* 2012).

According to Ljepava (2013, p.1602) Facebook has become one of the fastest developing SNSs on the internet. Panek *et al.* (2012, p. 2004) believe that these sites, however, may contribute to a number of self – centeredness, particularly among college students with increases in narcissism. Narcissism is a complex construct and represents multiple traits, inductive of both healthy and unhealthy behaviours. Bergam *et al.* (2012, p. 706) further agrees that the increase in narcissism is a result of the increase of SNSs and adds that those in college from the early 2000s to the late 2010s are more narcissistic than previous generations. Tan *et al.* (2011, p.211) has also

identified some negative aspects in SNSs as regards to issues of privacy and states

that these issues deserve serious attention. The information posted in public profiles

can lead to risks such as identity theft, stalking, and cyber harassment. Users posting

personal and private information in SNSs can open up the user to public scrutiny, which

may affect the user negatively in the future.

2.4 Social Networking Sites and SMEs

In a business environment, the ability to be available online by users has its

advantages. Companies need to work hard to deliver quality user-service. For SMEs,

this pressure can be intense. It is difficult for SMEs to maintain user loyalty in the face of

fierce competition from larger rivals that have both the manpower and financial

resources to be continuously available. This makes the delivery of fast user service

critical. SNSs are seen as a route to effective communication and should be seen as an

opportunity for businesses. SMEs need to realise that users are not only online but they

are also taking about products and services and sharing opinions with others. If users

have a problem with a particular product or service, they are likely to air their problems

on Facebook or Twitter. SMEs who are not engaged in social networking can be left

behind and may lose business to other competitors who are engaging with customers

through these sites. The smartest SMEs recognise the value of tapping into the wisdom

of the crowd to capture the best answers and the most innovative ideas (Garnett, 2010).

In Ireland, SMEs are increasingly adopting social media marketing techniques.

According to a study carried out by O2 Ideas room, a blog that enables business people

to share expertise and talk, one in ten SMEs now have a Twitter account. The study

found out that 23 percent of SME executives are now a member of a

business/professional social media site. The most was LinkedIn which was used by 18 percent of those surveyed. 15 percent of Irish SMEs now have their business on Facebook (IrishDev, 2013). Considering the differences between the larger companies usage of social media and SMEs, it is believed that social media is more suitable for SMEs (Garnett, 2010). Another reason to use social media in SMEs is word of mouth (WOM), as recommendations from existing customers is an important source of getting new customers. There are a lot of possibilities for SMEs when using SNSs such as building customer relationships and cost effective marketing. Facebook and other social media platforms are a way to reach customers while saving money at the same time. Facebook fan pages are an effective marketing tool which can increase sales, WOM marketing and customer loyalty.

Social media is part of everyday communication for all types of companies. It provides opportunities for small businesses to interact with existing and potential customers and it is cost effective as it costs nothing to set up a Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or YouTube account. SMEs need to monitor Internet buzz about their products or services and have a strategy to maintain online reputation (Hamsa, 2013). In a study conducted by Sage (2013) 57 percent of small businesses use social media to support their marketing efforts. According to the study, the main reason for using social media is to increase brand awareness. In regards to SMEs using social media for business, 19 percent prefer the use of Facebook for business, followed by LinkedIn at 14 percent and Twitter receiving 4 percent. In regards to time spent, 25 percent of SMEs spend 6-10 hours on social media per week (Bennett, 2013). Social media in business and for SMEs is no longer a choice; it can no longer be ignored by SMEs who are seeking to gain competitive advantage over their competitors.

2.5 Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing is 'any forms of direct or indirect marketing that is used to build awareness for a brand, or business and is carried out using the tool of the social web such as social networking' (Mohammadian and Mohammadreza, 2012, p. 58). Social media has caused a change in communication tools that a company uses for communicating with their customers. As companies search for new tactics, understanding customers has become vital for firms. A useful tool for businesses to achieve their goals is by using social media. Social media has time, cost advantages, relations and audiences. According to Kirtis and Karahan (2011, p. 260) social media has become the most popular marketing driver among organisations. Companies have employed the use of social media as the best way to reach their customers. Both small and larger companies have allocated more resources and time to social media. In marketing research, there is the opportunity through social networking for businesses to create a brand through customer's comments. These comments can be valuable to businesses. According to Ward (2010), cited by Kirtis and Karahan (2011, p. 262), social media is a type of online media using conversation through communication in contrast with traditional media which does not allow users to participate in the creation of contents. No longer is advertising placed on web sites for customers to see, those customers are taking the initiative and marketing between themselves. They are communicating between one another about the benefits of products, sharing experiences and posting their own advertisements for the products and services they like (Eldeman, 2012, p. 24).

Marketing through social media can enable companies to gather a better understanding of their customers wants and needs in order to build effective relationships with customers. Social media is also appropriate for small and medium organisations and

not just large companies. An organisation cannot control what consumers are saying on these sites, however, they do have the ability to influence the conversations consumers are having. This can be done by monitoring conversations about their business, looking for feedback, driving traffic to their website and through promotions. Social media helps organisations communicate with consumers which can result in long-term relationships. Companies can use social media to talk to their customer through platforms such as Facebook. It can also act as a promotion-related role as customers can use these sites to communicate with one another (Glynn-Mangold and Faulds, 2009, p. 359). According to Parasnis and Baird (2011, p. 30) the hub of customer activity is located inside a SNS and it holds enormous potential for companies to get closer to customers. This is where customers are congregating and businesses want to be. Patino *et al.* (2012, p. 233) states that social media has changed marketing by influencing consumers in the ways in which they share, evaluate and choose information. Traditional media such as television has lost viewer-ship as the rapidity of online communication makes advertising much less relevant.

Social media aids in the ability to deliver information quickly and reduces costs for the company. Social media shifts the research stage from asking to listening Patino *et al.* (2012, p. 234). Social media interactions help organisations determine customer needs and provide products according to those needs. This results in increased sales, profitability and strengthening the brand name for the company. An organisations social media must attract customers and harmonize them with the organisation's activity (Mohammadian and Mohammadreza, 2012, p. 58). Businesses are now realising the importance of incorporating social media into their business strategies to help with networking. Social media tools are a means of marketing and communicating to an audience. Schlinke and Craine (2013, p.85) notes that there should be an

understanding of the following key considerations prior to committing company resources to a social media presence: goals, strategy, tools, implementations and risks. Before investing in time and money, it is important to understand what is to be accomplished. Social media tools are better suited to brand extension and reputation management. Social media provides a way for companies to educate and inform their audience. It differs from static web presence as it has the ability to allow individuals with similar interest to interact.

According to Geho and Dangelo (2012, p. 61) the number one deterrent of social media for small business is the time commitment required to keep online profiles active. Facebook business pages allows businesses to create a profile that is separate from their own profile, which gives fans of the business a place where they can interact without having to see the owner's own personal Facebook posts. This can be a powerful marketing tool for businesses when leveraged correctly. As regards to Twitter, informing potential customers about the business in only 140 characters can be problematic and prove difficult. This is the challenge that businesses on Twitter face. Simply being on Twitter is not enough for todays' entrepreneurs; they must be seen to stand out among the thousands of hourly tweets particularly among celebrities and random users which accounts for 40 percent of all Twitter traffic (Kelly 2009, cited by Geho and Dangelo 2012, p. 65). A rule in regards to using social media is to stay active. For small businesses though, devoting the time to post on their social media pages daily can prove difficult. Businesses should proceed with caution when implementing certain social media marketing campaigns as they need to keep in mind that social media is not a one-size-fits-all kind of marketing in comparison to other traditional methods. A Twitter feed or Facebook page that is out dated could be detrimental to the overall

brand of a small business. 'Social media must be implemented with a content and marketing strategy that first and foremost builds upon the existing brand of the company' (Geho and Dangelo, 2012, p. 67).

2.6 Consumer Behaviour

Every day we buy things and make decisions. For marketers, understanding the process involved in consumer behaviour is central to establishing policy. Understanding the behaviour of the online consumer is a priority issue for businesses competing in the virtual marketplace (Constantinides 2004, p.111). The internet and social media has changed how consumers and marketers communicate (Wang *et al,* 2012). The Internet is a highly important influence on those consumers who are interested in buying new products or services. Customers are increasingly finding the Internet just as compelling as other traditional advertising methods. Nielsen (2013) revealed that at least half of Facebook and Twitter users state that they have been more likely to talk about or purchase a product after they have been engaged with that company on their SNS. The study shows that customers prefer brands that are actively social on social networking as 59 percent of people are more likely to trust a brand that integrates through social media. The study showed that 63 percent are more likely to buy products or services from companies that are using SNSs such as Twitter and Facebook (Jackson 2011, cited by Erdogmus and Cicek, 2012). Consumers who are Facebook and Twitter users of a certain brand are more likely to not only recommend a product but they are also more likely to buy from those brands. The reason behind the power of social media referrals may lie in the natural tendency of people to want what others have, and the tendency to mimic the behaviour of others

The rise of social media usage by both consumers and companies can affect consumer behaviour. Social media has greatly changed the way in which consumer behave in their consumptions, as consumers recognise new needs when browsing social media sites. They are now able to compare different products by using review and opinion platforms that allow them to make comparisons. Consumers can directly interact with brands and can find out more information on products by directly interacting with brands on SNSs. 42 percent of individuals using SNSs expect an answer to a question that they ask online within one hour (Jaffe, 2010). This brings about new challenges for marketers that have to change the way they interact and communicate with consumers. As consumers are now overwhelmed by marketing messages, they tend to filter them out as consumers tend to trust peers on SNSs rather than companies and this has led marketers to change the way in which they communicate and interact with consumers.

Brown and Hayes (2008) note that SNSs attract millions of users and many of those integrate the sites into their daily lives to create content in ways which were not possible in the past. This content is changing the marketing landscape as consumers can now also control the communication process and marketers are no longer alone in doing so (Hawkins *et al.* 2010). In a study carried out by Wang *et al.* (2012) peer communication through social media positively influences purchase decisions. Chen *et al.* (2011) discovered that satisfaction and dissatisfaction has become a critical motivation for posting reviews online. "Social media websites provide an opportunity for businesses to engage and interact with potential consumers, encourage an increased sense of intimacy with consumers and build all-important relationships with potential customers" (Mersey *et al.* 2010, cited by Wang *et al.* 2012). WOM through online social media can also change consumer processing and can have a profound impact on decision making. Lee *et al.* (2009, p. 473) also agrees that WOM communication affects consumer

attitudes on a wide range of products and that people often make decisions on the basis of online information. SNSs give consumers their own voices and access to product information which can influence their purchasing decisions.

In regards to marketing and consumer behaviour, the key concept is customer centrality; customer-decision making cannot be ignored. Marketers are able to influence thought processes by providing relevant information at the right time (Blythe, 2008). Understanding consumer behaviour is good business as companies exist to satisfy needs. Marketers can only satisfy these needs to the extent that they understand the people that will use their products and services they are trying to sell (Solomon *et al.* 2010). If a product sells well, the satisfied customer can encourage others to purchase it through positive reviews.

Hayden (2009) suggests that there are several factors that influence consumer behaviour, such as external influences, external processes and post-decision making. External influences focus on the different factors that impact consumers as they identify which of their needs to satisfy and which products they are going to use. Internal processes are the physiological thoughts in each individual. Hayden (2009) uses the example of the Apple iPhone. Apple engaged in a promotion strategy months before the official launch of their iPhone. This then led to consumers being willing to engage in behaviour that would lead to them purchasing the iPhone. In the post-decision making process, the consumer is the rational decision maker. The consumer would weigh the pros and cons of each option and then come to a decision.

East *et al.* (2008) suggests that the growth of the internet allows people to make better choices such as more suitable brands and lower prices. According to Hansen *et al.* (2008) marketers must ensure that their products and services provide the proper

benefits so that they reach consumers. Digital technologies allow for greater customisation of products and services than any other marketing tools. Using new technologies can allow marketers to collect and analyse data on consumers buying behaviours and characteristics and can then use this information to target smaller groups of consumers. Hansen *et al.* (2008) notes that the primary reasons for organisations studying consumer behaviour is to understand why and how consumers make their purchase decisions. This can enable organisations to design more effective strategies.

2.6.1 Consumers attitude towards online Social Network Marketing

According to Kotler and Keller (2006) attitude can be described as "a persons enduring favourable or unfavourable evaluation, emotional feeling, and action tendencies towards some object or idea". Services available on the internet for communication effect a consumer's reaction to a particular product or service. A happy and satisfied consumer has many ways of expressing their thoughts. Consumers tend to be interested in marketing that is conveyed by messages through friends or other sources. As social media attracts global users, advertisers now seek to use social media as a venue for their advertising messages. Advertisers are exploring SNSs as a new advertising delivery in terms of interactivity such as shopping experiences, wide information search and greater convenience. Online advertisements tend to be avoided by consumers because of the lack of credibility and trust. Internet advertising allows the consumer to exercise control over advertising exposure. The relevance of a product being advertised is important to consumers. Social networks are a good way to enhance a consumer's

insight about a business and communication through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube is prospering.

The growth of social media has caught the attention of advertisers that hope to find new ways to use these platforms for their advertising purposes. Customer's feeling of enjoyment relating to advertising plays the greatest role in accounting for their overall attitude towards them (Chandra *et al.* 2012, p. 2). However, when advertising resorts to techniques that lead to annoyance, offence or insult, there is a greater possibility that customers will find it irritating (Ducoffe 1996, cited by Chandra *et al.* 2012, p. 2). Spam can also cause annoyance to customers and intrude on their privacy. Social media can have influences on every stage of the consumer decision making process as well as influencing consumer's opinions and attitudes (Mangold and Faulds 2009, cited by Bond *et al.* 2010, p. 2). Akar and Topcu (2011, p. 42) further agree that with the emergence of social media, it is possible for a person to communicate with hundreds of thousands of people about a particular product or service. Consumers perceive information they get from social media to be more reliable than business communication and the opinion of peers becomes a major influence on consumer buying behaviour. Satisfaction has been identified as a key variable for generating customer loyalty towards a service. Studies have shown that satisfied users are likely to continue a relationship with the service provider for longer, in offline and online environments and online satisfaction with users improves loyalty (Perez *et al*, 2011, p. 62). According to Acar and Topcu (2011, p. 43) people search for products and services online before making a purchase. Social media allows customers to reach products and services and every purchasing decision is always affected by social influence.

2.7 Brand Management

"As brands are increasingly imbedded in SNSs, the competition between brands has become a battlefield" (Jin, 2012). Social media has become a major factor in influencing consumer behaviour which then leads to brand commitment as it provides a platform for brands and help consumers make purchasing decisions. The brand is more than a name and is seen as a business entity. Maintaining brand loyalty is a central theme of research for marketers. Businesses have used different means to maintain the loyalty of their customers including social media marketing. Brands help enable people to create trust and a common bond. They offer a linking value by connecting like-minded people and offering cues of tying people together. They present to consumers a way to interact and thus to build social capital.

With the rising popularity of social media, people have a very powerful platform to talk about companies and their products or services. In Business-to- Consumer branding (B2C), company brands represent a strong and enduring asset, a value driver that has boosted the company's success. Hardly any business will neglect the importance of brands in B2C (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006). When a customer mentions a brand in social media, there is more potential for other people to notice. If a B2C brand is not already participating in a social media marketing campaign, the company may be missing the opportunity to spread their message, as well as missing valuable conversations that could be taking place online about a company's brand. Business-to-Business (B2B) brands facilitate the identification of products, services and businesses as well as differentiate them from the competition. According to Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006) brands are important in every industry. A brand is emotional, has a personality and captures the hearts and minds of its customers.

For organisations, brand value is the value of what a brand can mean to consumers. Businesses can build their brand through methods of advertising, product placement and marketing. They know that the public's opinion of an item establishes its supply, demand and market price. Owners cannot automatically assume that consumers will accept the brand's message. Moore *et al.* (2008) claims that companies sell less of the product and more of the experience associated with using the product. Social media sites that contain comments and reviews can affect the brand, providing businesses with effectiveness in regards to communicating their goods or services (Callarisa *et al*. 2012, p. 74). Organisations have encouraged their customers to interact with their brand and to form a relationship with it. Built on trust, some communities have even moved to the internet. For example, eBay created a sense of trust by allowing their users to use a rating system. Amazon also asks their users to review books. Fisher and Vallaster (2010) suggest that in order to strengthen the association with the brand, the brand should create an environment where people can share and experience the brand leaving a lasting memory in the consumer's mind.

Social media marketing differs from other methods of marketing therefore it requires attention to build and achieve brand loyalty and image. Brand loyalty can be built with the help of social media; companies want their followers to admire their products and services and to share positive reviews. Consumers are relying on SNSs to learn about brands that are unfamiliar to them (Walker-Naylor *et al.* 2012). Research by eMarketer has shown that consumers go to social media sites to keep up with a brand's products and promotional campaigns (Mangold and Foulds 2009; Leggat 2010, cited by Erdogmus and Cicek, 2012). Consumers on the site of Facebook will reflect their actual true selves by linking themselves to familiar brands. Facebook also allows users to publicly link themselves to brands (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012). However Jin (2012)

notes that consumers may use brand pages on social media as complaint forums by posting negative reviews about an issue with the company. Naveed (2012, p. 904) also agrees that social media has allowed consumers to form strong opinions and express them more broadly when relating to a brand or product.

The study of Paine (2007), cited by Naveed (2012, p. 905), discovered that consumers depend upon social media websites to gain brand information. Therefore, companies have a great opportunity to increase customer purchasing decisions. Jones *et al.* (2008) cited by Naveed (2012, p. 908), notes that brand owners have invested in brand communities where consumers come together and form a common interest thus SNSs allow for much more consumer interaction.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the literature in this study. The literature review set the scene for SNSs and how they can be used by SMEs as a marketing tool.

In regards to the objectives set up in this study, it has become evident from the literature that SNSs can be used as an effective tool for marketing. They provide opportunities for businesses to improve engagement and relationships with their own audiences by tapping into consumers. Companies have come to recognise this phenomenon of online social networking and have begun to identify users of SNSs to conduct online marketing within the business. Social media marketing enables businesses to gain a better understanding of the wants and needs of their customers in order to build effective relationships. SNSs have grown to be a large part of many people's lives as they serve users with a way of communicating with each other.

In regards to consumer's primary reasons for using SNSs, it became evident in the literature that the primary reasons for using SNSs may differ depending on user's social and cultural values. Enjoyment was the most influential factor in people's use of SNSs followed by number of peers and usefulness. The connection and reconnection with friends and family was also a popular reason among users.

It became evident that users are motivated to SNSs as they can discover new friends and also re-connect with old friends. It can also provide an emotional sense of security and allows users to feel assured that their family or friends are within easy reach. They are motivated to SNSs as these sites allow users to have peer to peer contact, create, share, adapt and engage in digital dialogue.

Social network differs from other marketing strategies as they are built and directed by users themselves. Users can populate their own network with conversation and content. These social platforms are accessible 24/7 from a range of devices and locations. People have a powerful platform to talk about companies and their products.

From the literature, it has been revealed that SNSs are seen as a route to effective communication for SMEs and an opportunity for businesses. It became evident that SMEs who are not engaged in social networking could be left behind. There are a lot of possibilities for SMEs when using SNSs such as building customer relationships and creating cost effective marketing.

It is evident from the literature that social media has grown tremendously in recent years and is emerging into the marketing plans of businesses worldwide. The research revealed the need for businesses to adopt social media into their marketing strategies. It is evident that SNSs are the way forward for businesses, however, the challenges in marketing lie in gaining the attention of SNS users and encouraging them to spread the

word regarding products or services. As consumers spend more time on SNSs, the

information they share with others will continue to evolve. As a result of this, SNSs will

continue to grow in popularity.

Chapter Three – Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology adopted for this research in order to obtain the

appropriate information to meet the research aims and objectives. The research project

is aimed at evaluating the use of social networking as a marketing tool with particular

focus on SMEs in Donegal. Before commencing the research, approval was obtained from the School of Business Research Ethics Committee (see appendix 3). The study was conducted in two phases: **phase one** – survey research and **phase two** – semi-structured interviews. The research objectives in this study are mapped to the chosen research methods.

The research objectives were adapted by a method suggested by Farquhar (2012) by firstly writing down the research question and checking that it included a 'how' or a 'why'. Five research propositions were then drafted that stemmed from the research question based on the readings. Two academic papers were then located that adapted a similar study. The research questions and objectives that were used previously were then noted and how the method had developed from the objectives. The author's limitations were then noted and how they might have been overcome. Five appropriate objectives were then selected for this study.

3.2 Research Objectives

The overall purpose for this study is to: *explore how valuable social networking sites are for marketing by SMEs.*

The following sub-objectives are:

1. To identify consumer's primary reasons for using social networking sites

2. To establish what motivates users to these social networking sites

3. To investigate if SNSs can be used as an effective tool for marketing

4. To discover how social network marketing differs from other marketing strategies

5.   To examine how social networking sites benefit start-up business

Table 1 below maps the link between the research objectives in this study and how the chosen methodology will portray that information.

Table 1: Methodology Map

Objective	Surveys	Interviews
Objective One	X	
Objective Two	X	
Objective Three	X	X
Objective Four		X
Objective Five		X

3.3 Research Design

Both exploratory and descriptive research was considered when designing the data collection. According to Mc Nabb (2010) exploratory research discovers information about a topic that is not clearly understood by the marketer and follows a less structured and more flexible method. It works well when the marketer does not have an understanding of the topic. According to Christ (2012) descriptive research is by far the most popular form of market research. It is mainly used when the research purpose is to monitor, explain and test hypotheses. Educators conduct descriptive research to learn about the attitudes, opinions and beliefs of people (Johnson and Christensen, 2012). Descriptive research was deemed the most appropriate for this study. This method was

chosen as descriptive studies are the best methods for collecting information that will demonstrate relationships.

The mixed methods approach deemed to be the most appropriate method to gather the information for this study which comprised of quantitative and qualitative methods. Mixed methods research provides more evidence for studying a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative research alone (Creswell and Clark, 2011). A mixed methods approach was also adopted in a study by Harrigan *et a*l (2012) in exploring issues of marketing by SMEs. From this, it was evident that both surveys and interviews were deemed a popular method to explore a marketing issue. Surveys and interviews allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding into the use of SNSs and their function in marketing. The first phase of the research study consisted of a quantitative approach using surveys. The survey was designed based on the literature researched (chapter 2). The survey contained four section headings and those headings came from the literature that was researched based on; the profile of respondents, the use of SNS, the how/why/when of SNSs and opinions of company profiles. Each question was then based around these headings. The second phase of research consisted of four semi-structured interviews with owner/managers of SMEs in Donegal.

3.4 Quantitative Research

Quantitative research is based on factual data which is measured and quantified. This research answers research questions from the view of the researcher (Armstrong, 2010). It explains phenomena by collecting numerical data that is then analysed by

using mathematically based methods (Muijs, 2011). The method of qualitative research adopted for this study was surveys. The surveys were administered online through the SNS of Facebook. The reasons surveys were chosen were; they are simple to administer, they provide wide and inclusive coverage and they produce data in a short time with low cost (Denscombe, 2007).

3.5 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research involves collecting data of open-ended information without predetermined response categories (Swanson, 2009). The method of qualitative research in this study took the form of semi-structured interviews with owners/managers of SMEs in Donegal. Semi-structured interviews are a participatory method that are based on open ended questions and have a great deal of flexibility (Mukherjee, 2003). "An interview in qualitative research is always semi-structured because it carries the traces of power that holds things in place and it reveals the interviewee's creative ability to refuse and resist what the research wants to happen" (Klenke, 2008). This research aimed to discover how SNSs benefit SMEs. It also aimed to discover how SMEs are using SNSs as a marketing tool.

3.6 Measurement Techniques

A pilot test is a small scale trail of the proposed procedures and methods. The point of carrying out a pilot test is to discover any problems and to address those problems before the main study is conducted. The survey was pilot tested first online to each age

category in order to ensure that respondents understood the questions and to eliminate errors. A pilot test is critical as it can reveal flaws in the design of the study that may not be readily apparent from the research plan itself (Mackey and Gass, 2005). Some issues arose from this pilot test and amendments were then made before distributing the surveys online.

The type of interview conducted was semi-structured. The researcher formed a theme sheet (see appendix 2) that was compiled from both the survey research and the literature that was explored such as; the marketing functions of SNSs and how they benefit businesses. Pilot testing constitutes the least appreciated phase in the development of an interview but a pilot run is essential (Ghosal *et al*, 2008.) Two pilot interviews were conducted on Monday the 14th of June at 10 am and 1 pm. These interviews were conducted with SMEs in the marketing and hospitality industries in Donegal. The pilot testing process gives feedback as to whether the questions would elicit the required responses and address the issues surrounding the research objectives. The opportunity was taken to obtain feedback from both interviewees on their perception of the interview content and process. Amendments were made following on from the pilot test process before the primary research was conducted.

3.7 Data Collection Methods

The research approaches available were qualitative, quantitative and a mixed methods approach. In a qualitative approach, information gathered is non-numerical and data is not limited to words. A qualitative approach is often time consuming (Creswell, 2013). In

a quantitative approach, the data collected is quantified. It does not include an explanation of "why" and respondents can be limited to a set of response options (Maxwell, 2012). Mixed methods balance efficient data collection. The quantitative data captures large amount of data and the qualitative facilitates understanding of the quantitative data. If the research model includes both qualitative and quantitative information, a mixed methods approach would be recommended (Creswell, 2013). It was deemed that a mixed methods approach would be the best approach and would be more suited to this research. The data collection methods were then divided into two stages; a quantitative approach of online surveys and a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews.

3.7.1 Stage One – Survey Research

The first phase of the research consisted of an online survey (see appendix 1) which targeted the users of Facebook. The decision was made to carry out survey research as it is an efficient way to collect data from a broad range of individuals and variables can be measured without increasing the time or cost (Sage Publications, 2012). The data collected was performed to answer the research objectives posed in this study through a web-based survey tool 'Survey Monkey'. The survey was created on this website and it was sent out through the SNS of Facebook. 'Survey Monkey' was the chosen tool as it is an appropriate solution to communicate with the audience and using web-based surveys can reach and interact with a wider audience (Safko, 2010). As this survey targeted the opinion of SNS users, it deemed appropriate to communicate the surveys through a social network. Facebook was chosen as the site for communication as it is ranked number one in the top 500 sites on the web (Alexa, 2013.) Research has shown

that a link to a survey on an online forum is an effective way to gather a large volume of feedback quickly and easily (Bevan, 2011).

The surveys were decided on for the first stage of data collection and were designed to be easily understood and relatively short in order to gain a high response rate. The survey questions were mapped to the relative research objectives.

Table 2: Survey design to meet objectives

Objective	Survey Question
Objective One	Q 10, 17,
Objective Two	Q 5, 6, 7, 8, 18
Objective Three	Q 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16
Objective Four	N/A
Objective Five	N/A

Objective four and five were not applicable in the survey research stage as these were obtained through the semi-structured interviews with owners/managers

The surveys were enhanced by the web based method 'Survey Monkey' so that all questions were marked as compulsory so that no questions were missed or unanswered. All questions were standardised using a combination of structured and multiple choice questions to allow the respondents to express their views and give their opinions. The survey was divided into four categories; profile, SNSs used, the how/why/when of SNSs and companies using SNSs.

3.7.2 Scaling

The first category was the profile of the respondent which contained questions one to four which had a simple and easy to follow format. It aimed to uncover the demographics of the respondent such as; gender, age, occupation and residency. Creating a profile allows to compare one respondent's response to how the rest of respondent's answered. Questions one, two and four were a nominal dichotomous two answer scale which uncovered the gender of the respondent, their age and whether they resided in Donegal. These fixed-alternative questions tell the research whether they belong to a certain category (Mitchell and Jolley, 2013). Question three was an open-ended question which asked the respondent to list their occupation. This allows the respondent to provide an answer in their own words and to the level they choose (Janicak, 2007).

The second category was SNSs used and aimed at establishing which particular sites were used by respondents. Question five and eight were nominal scales; question five was to establish how many sites that users have their profile on, ranging from one to four or more and question eight was to establish which site users spend the most time on. Question six and seven were nominal multichotomous questions were the respondent had a number of answers to choose from (Merrill, 2011). These aimed to find out which sites users had created a personal profile on and which sites they had been active on in the last 30 days.

The third category aimed to discover the how/why/when of SNSs. Question nine and ten were nominal scales to establish how users accessed these sites and why they use SNSs. Question ten aimed to discover why users participate in social networking. The

options listed were derived from the literature review; to connect with current friends or/and old friends (Perez *et al.* 2011, p. 61), to keep in touch with family or/and to meet new people (Reynolds, 2012), to share photos and videos (Boyd and Ellison 2008, cited by Lin and Lu , 2011), to make business and professional contacts (Akar and Topcu 2011, p. 42), to search for company information, to search for product information (Paine 2007, cited by Naveed 2012), to provide information to others or to promote a business (Bennett, 2013). It is important to link the objectives with the study instruments (survey) to yield data to address the initial aims and objectives (Fahy and Rau, 2013). Question eleven and twelve were ratio scales analysing how long users usually log on for and how much time on average they are logged on.

The fourth category in the survey is based on SNSs and companies and aimed to add to objective three. Question thirteen and sixteen were nominal dichotomous two answer scales. These questions aimed to discover if users ever visited a company profile page on SNSs and if advertisements on a SNS led users to find out more about the product. Question fourteen and fifteen consisted of a nominal scale. These questions asked the respondents to select an option based on why they would visit a company's profile page and what would be the main reason for clicking on an advertisement. Question sixteen was an interval/rating scale which used a five point likert scale where respondents rate their degree of agreement or disagreement with a number of statements (Barrick *et al.* 2011). The statements included; (a) social networking is safe and secure, (b) I could easily live without SNSs, (c) social networking has become an important method of communication for me (d) I am more aware of company products because of SNSs and (e) social networking will continue to grow and grow. Question sixteen was an open-

ended question in which the respondent was asked to give their own opinion on the negative aspects of social networking (Babbie, 2013).

The survey questions aimed to answer objective one, two and three posed in this study. Questions ten and seventeen were used to answer objective one which sought to identify consumer's primary reasons for using SNSs. Questions five, six, seven, eight and eighteen were used to answer objective two which was to establish what motivates users to SNS. Questions one to four, question nine and questions eleven to sixteen were used to investigate if SNSs can be used as an effective marketing tool. When the survey was designed it was pilot tested to all ten age categories. Two people were selected from each category which resulted in twenty respondents. Changes were then made to the wording of several questions and the survey went live from the 23rd May until the 17th of June. Once the responses stopped coming in, it was decided to close the survey at this date which resulted in 160 responses.

3.7.3 Sampling

Target Population:

The target population is both males and females of all age categories who have an account on the social network page of Facebook. As the research is based on social networking, it seemed appropriate to distribute the survey through the social site of Facebook. By creating surveys and distributing them through social networks, researchers can gain preliminary data on trends and can share the results in a short time frame (Wankel, 2011).

Sampling Frame:

Due to the large size of the population of social network users, convenient sampling was used were the research selected the targeted respondents through Facebook.

Sampling Method:

Convenient sampling was selected where information can be obtained fairly quickly and effectively from convenient respondents who are close to hand. The most accessible members of the population where selected, whom were real friends on the SNS of Facebook.

Sampling Technique:

Judgmental sampling was used which consisted of selected population elements based on the judgment of the researcher (Malhotra, 2010).

Sample Size:

The researcher allowed 25 days for survey responses to come in. It was decided by the researcher that when the 25 days were up, the survey would close. This resulted in 160 completed survey responses.

3.8 Stage Two – Semi-Structured Interviews

The second phase of the research was conducted using semi-structured interviews with owners/managers of SMEs in Donegal. The interviews were carried out after the surveys were made so the researcher would have a clear understanding of the research objectives and so that the interview questions could reflect on these. The interviews

took place on owners/mangers premises. The focus of the interview was decided by the researcher with SNSs being the area which was explored. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the preferred method as the semi-structured interview is based around a set of standard questions and the interviewer can expand on any question in order to explore a response in greater depth (Mitchell and Jolley, 2013). In semi-structured interviews, the objective is to understand the respondent's point of view.

A theme sheet (see appendix 2) was prepared from both the survey research and the literature review and consisted of open-ended questions to ensure that the same topics were covered in each interview. With permission from the interviewee, a Dictaphone was used by the researcher to obtain the information precisely and to aid in analysing responses.

Table 3: Interview themes to meet objectives

Objective	Interview Question
Objective One	N/A
Objective Two	N/A
Objective Three	Question 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
Objective Four	Question 2
Objective Five	Question 9, 10

Objective one and two were not applicable during the interview stage as they would become relevant during the survey research.

3.8.1 Sampling Technique

During the sampling stage, the researcher kept the main aim in mind when selecting a target sample:

To explore how valuable social networking sites are for marketing by SME's

Semi- structured interviews were undertaken with four owners/managers of SMEs that are located in Donegal. Interviews consisted of a list of questions, a schedule that covers the research objectives posed in this study.

Theme one to five was designed to investigate if SNSs can be used as an effective marketing tool (objective three). Theme six to eight was designed to discover how social network marketing differs from other marketing strategies (objective four). Theme nine and ten were designed to examine how SNSs benefit start-up businesses (objective five).

3.8.2 Sampling Design Process

Target Population:

The target population can be defined as male or female owner/managers SMEs located in County Donegal in June 2013.

Sampling Frame:

The researcher obtained reliable data from business.ie with a list of all industry sectors in Co Donegal in June 2013. After analysing this data, it became evident that travel/hospitality and retail were the two largest sectors in Co Donegal. The sample frame showed the target population as a proportionate representation required to

answer the research objectives posed in this study. The researcher decided on using judgement sampling by choosing two companies from each of the top two sectors in Co Donegal.

Sampling Method:

Non-probability sampling was used to select the interviewees from the database. Non-probability sampling was selected as the population cannot be identified in advance and it is not possible to obtain a comprehensive list of the study population (Gerrish, 2010).

Sampling Technique:

Non-probability quota sampling was used for this study as the researcher wanted to ensure similarity with the population on characteristics based on social networking. The researcher wanted to ensure that all interviewees were familiar with social networking (Jackson, 2010).

Sample Size:

Four interviews were conducted. Two of these interviews were conducted with owner/managers in the retail sector and two interviews were conducted with owner/managers in the travel/hospitality sector. As these two sectors are the largest business sectors in Donegal, the researcher felt that choosing two representatives from these two categories would be sufficient to answer the research objectives posed in the study.

3.9 Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data collected was successfully analysed. Quantitative data was analysed using the online survey based software 'Survey Monkey' which presented the findings of the survey in graph format. The qualitative data was analysed by picking out the common themes, phrases and keywords (Allen, 2012).

3.10 Conclusion

The researcher sought to answer the objectives in the study by using the relative methodology. Online surveys and semi structured interviews have been deemed to be the most appropriate methods in answering the objectives posed. The online surveys and interviews have been fully described and justified.

Chapter Four – Analysis and Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings and analysis of this research. Two phases of descriptive research were conducted. Phase one presents descriptive findings from 160

online surveys. Phase two presents descriptive research from four semi-structured interviews with SMEs in the hospitality and retail sectors.

4.2 Phase One: Survey

160 online surveys were completed and valid giving a 100 percent response rate. The following information summarises the survey:

Section One: Profile of Respondents

Section one consists of four questions and were designed to discover the profile of respondents.

## Question One:

Figure 1: Please specify your gender
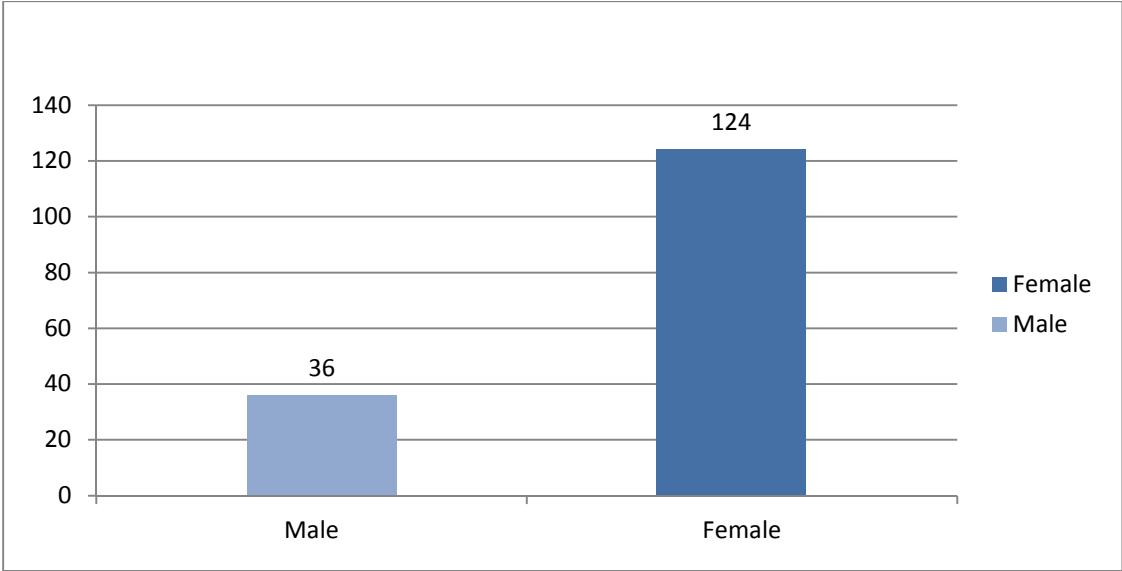
Figure 1 shows the total number respondents of males were 36 (22%). The total number of female respondents was 124 (78%).

Question Two:

Figure 2: Please specify your age
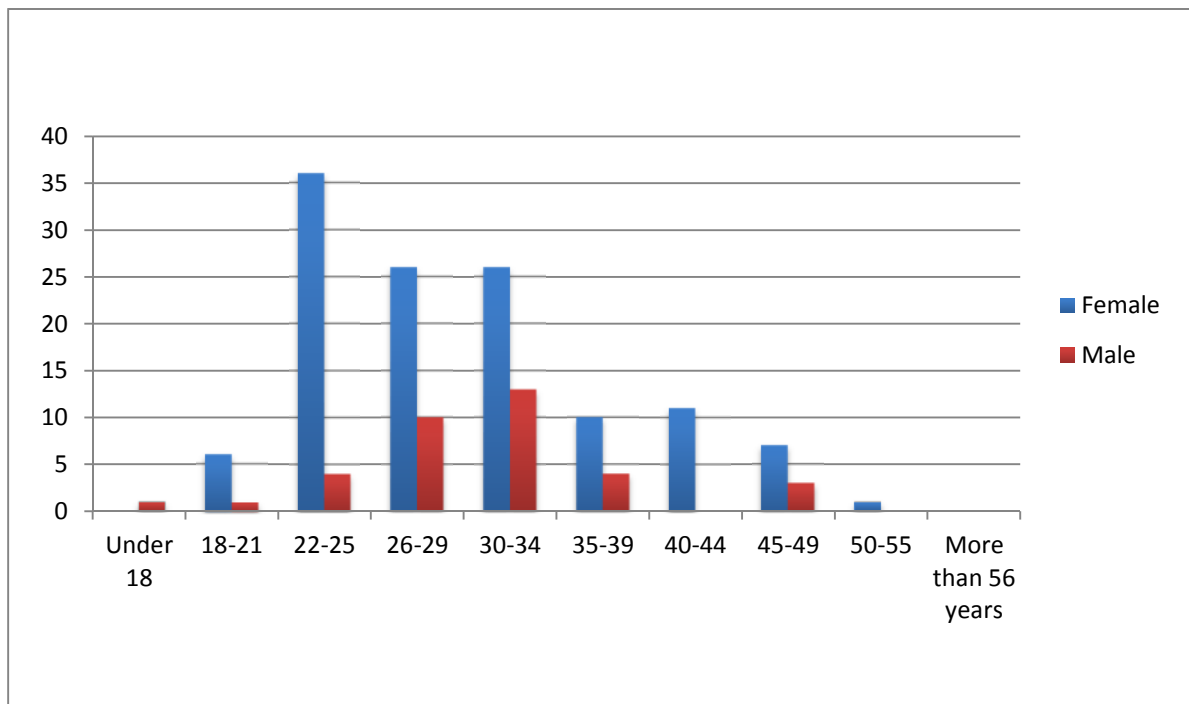
Figure 2 shows the under 18 category received 0.6 percent of respondents, while 4 percent were between the ages of 18-21, 25 pecent represented the 22-25 group, while 23 percent were between the ages of 26-29. At 25 percent were the 30-34 category, the 35-39 group represented 9 percent, while the 40-44 group were 7 percent. At 6 percent were the 45-49 age group, 0.6 percent represented the 50-55 group while there was no respondents from the more than 56 years age category.

Question Three:

Figure 3: Please state your occupation
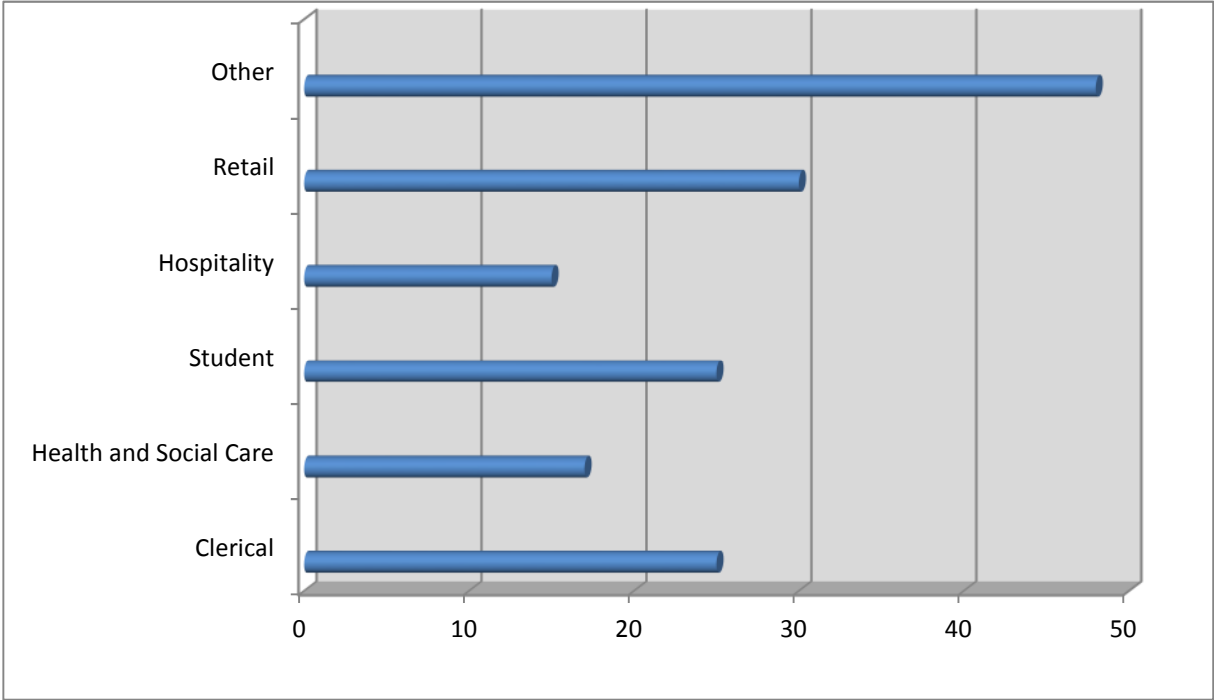
Figure 3 shows that 25 respondents worked in clerical (15 percent), health and social care was represented by 17 respondents (11 percent), 25 respondents were under the category student (16 percent), hospitality was represented by 15 respondents (9 percent) were as 30 respondents (19 percent) were in retail. 48 respondents (30 percent) represented the 'other' categories. Categories in the 'other' section were; hair and beauty, owner/manager, teacher, accountant, physiotherapist, nurse, housewife, accountant, engineer, musician, doctor and unemployed.

Question 4:

Figure 4: Do you live in County Donegal?
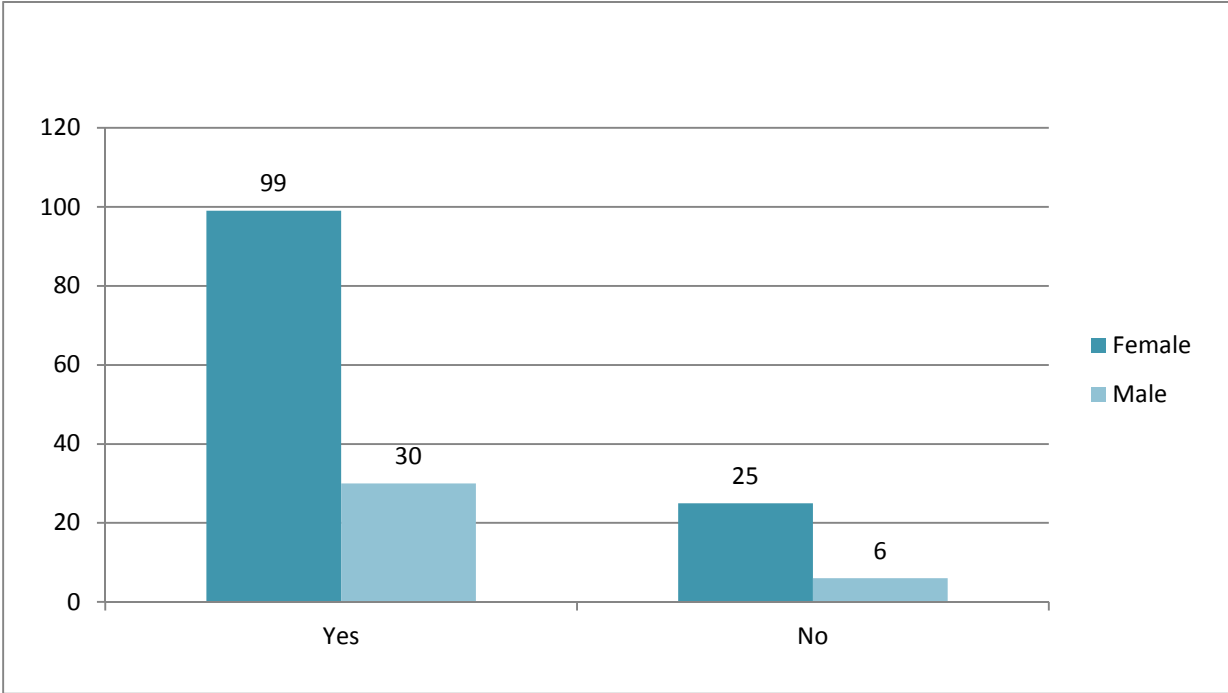
80 percent of the respondents (30 males, 99 females) stated that they lived in Donegal.

While 20 percent of respondents (6 males, 25 females) stated that they did not live in

Donegal (figure 4) This research focuses on marketing with evidence from Donegal so it

was appropriate to establish what portions of respondents were living in Donegal.

Section Two: Social Networking Sites used

Section two consists of four questions and was designed to discover what SNSs are
used.

Question 5:

Figure 5: How many social networking sites have you ever created a profile on?
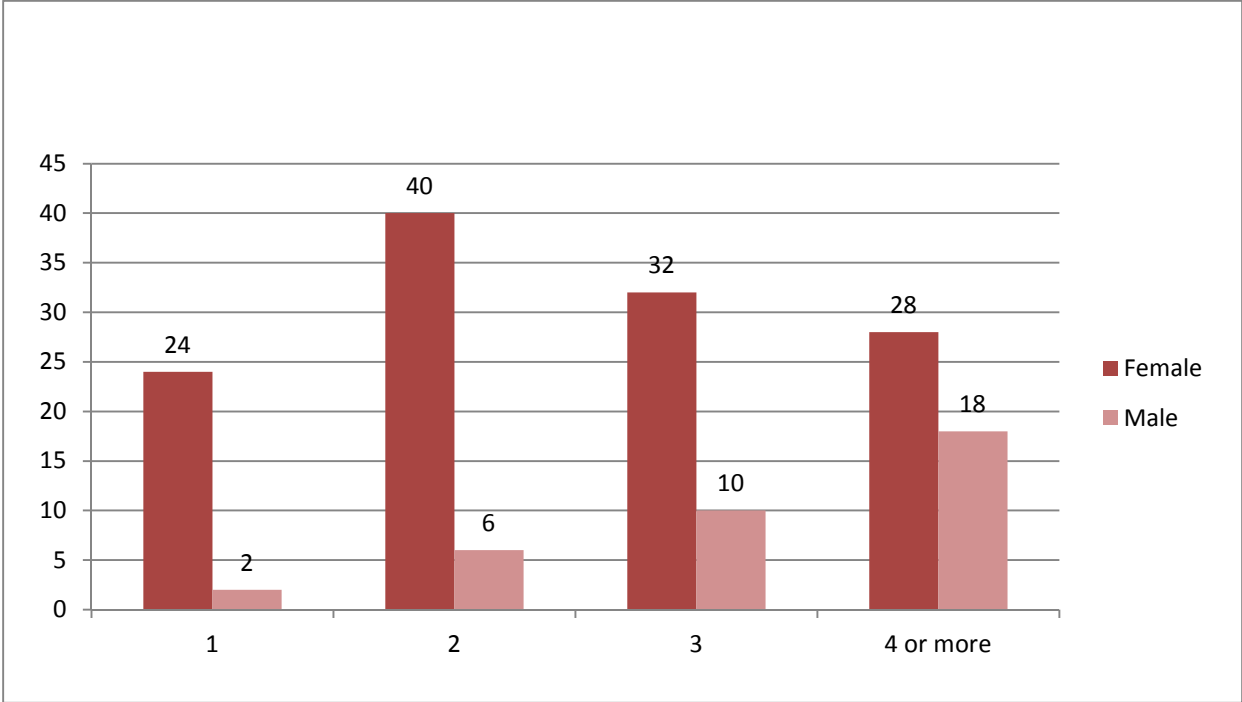
Chen (2013), states that millions of internet users are now members of one or more SNS. This research shows that 16 percent (24 females, 2 males) have created a profile on one site. 29 percent (40 females, 6 males) have a profile on two social sites. 26 percent of respondents (32 females, 10 males) have created a profile on three social sites, were 29 percent (28 females, 18 males) have a profile on four or more SNSs.

Question 6:

Figure 6: Please select the sites of which you have an existing account or profile on
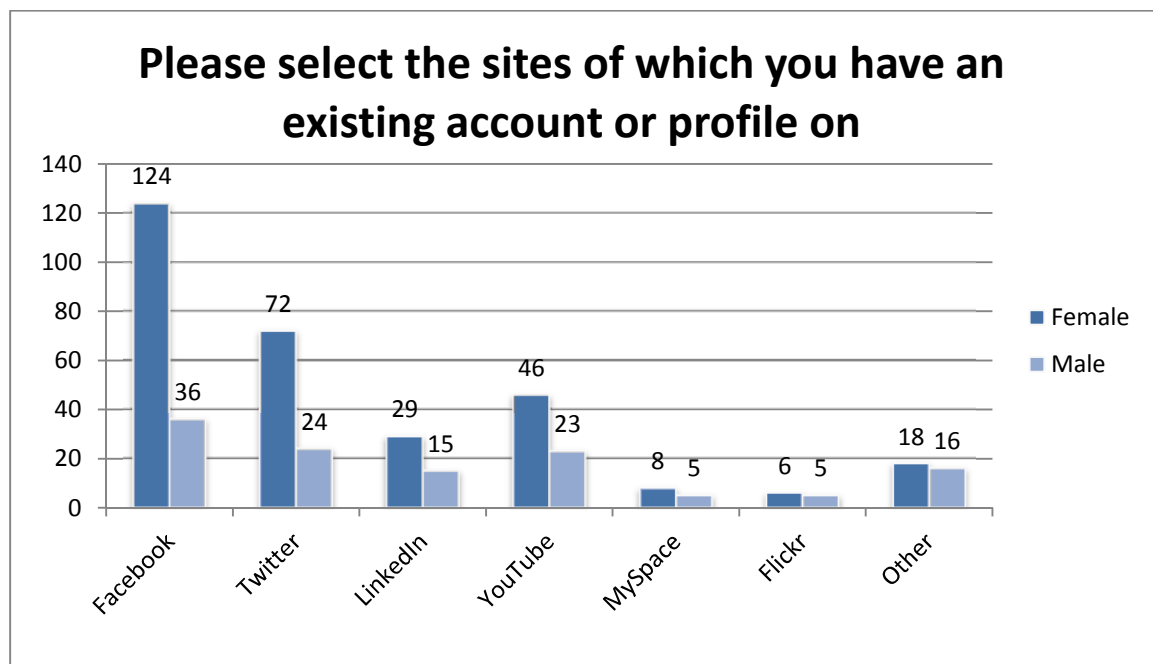
According to Bicen and Cavus (2011), Facebook is one of the most commonly used social sharing sites today. This is evident in the study (figure 6) were all 160 respondents (124 females, 36 males) have a Facebook account. The SNS of Twitter has also become very popular (Lee and Youn, 2009). This is evident in the study as 60 percent of respondents (72 females, 24 males) have a Twitter account. Communication through LinkedIn and YouTube is also prospering (Kotler and Keller, 2006) which is evident in the study. 29 percent of respondents (29 females, 15 males) have an account on LinkedIn, were 43 percent of respondents (46 females, 23 males) have an account on YouTube. Respondents with an account on My Space were 8 percent (8 females, 5 males) while Flickr had 7 percent of respondents (6 females, 5 males). The 'other' category received 21 percent (18 females, 16 males) with 'other' sites being Bebo, Instagram, Pinterest and Google Plus.

Question 7:

Figure 7: Which social networking sites have you been active on in the last 30 days?
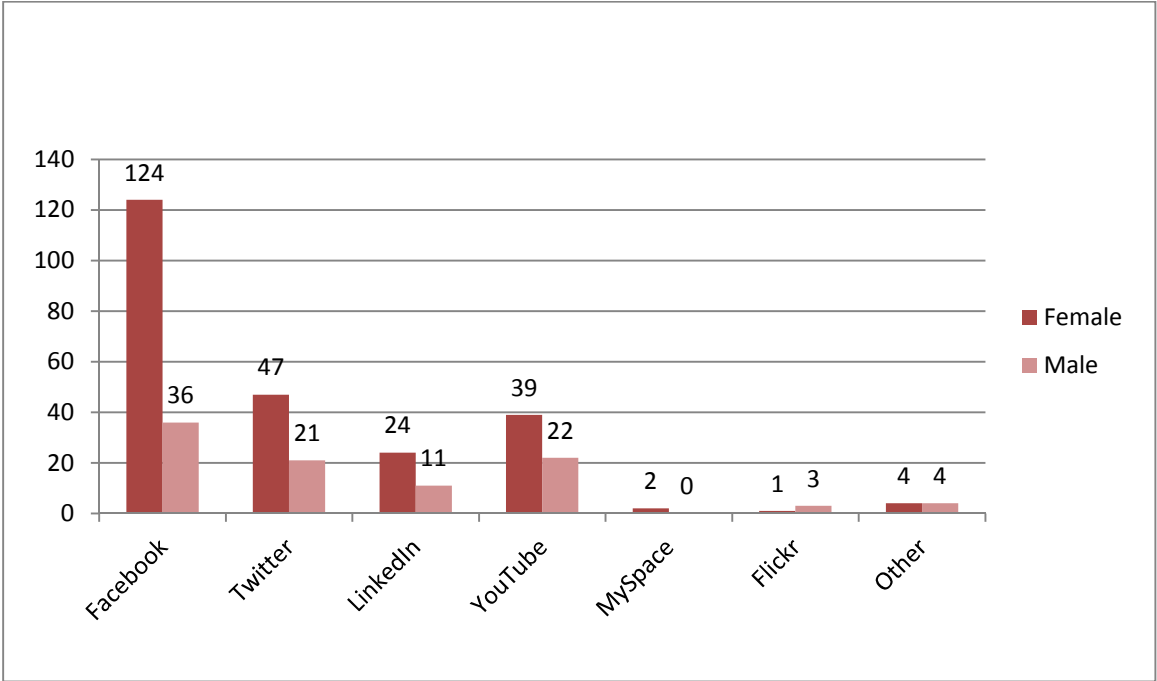
Figure 7 shows the SNSs which users have been most active on. Facebook has been used the most were all 100 percent of respondents (124 females, 36 males) have been active on this site. Twitter had 42 percent of respondents (47 females, 21 males) using the site, LinkedIn users were 22 percent (24 females, 11 males), YouTube received 38 percent of respondents (39 females, 22 males), were My Space had 1 percent (1 female). Flickr received 2 percent (1 female, 3 males) and the 'other' category was 5 percent (4 females, 4 males). Sites used in the last 30 days in the 'other' category were Instagram, Pinterest and Google Plus. From this, it is clear that Facebook is the most used social media site. According to Ljepava (2013, p.1602), Facebook has become one of the fastest developing SNSs on the internet and this is evident in the study were all 160 respondents have been active on Facebook over the last 30 days.

Question 8:

Figure 8: Which of these sites do you spend the most time on?
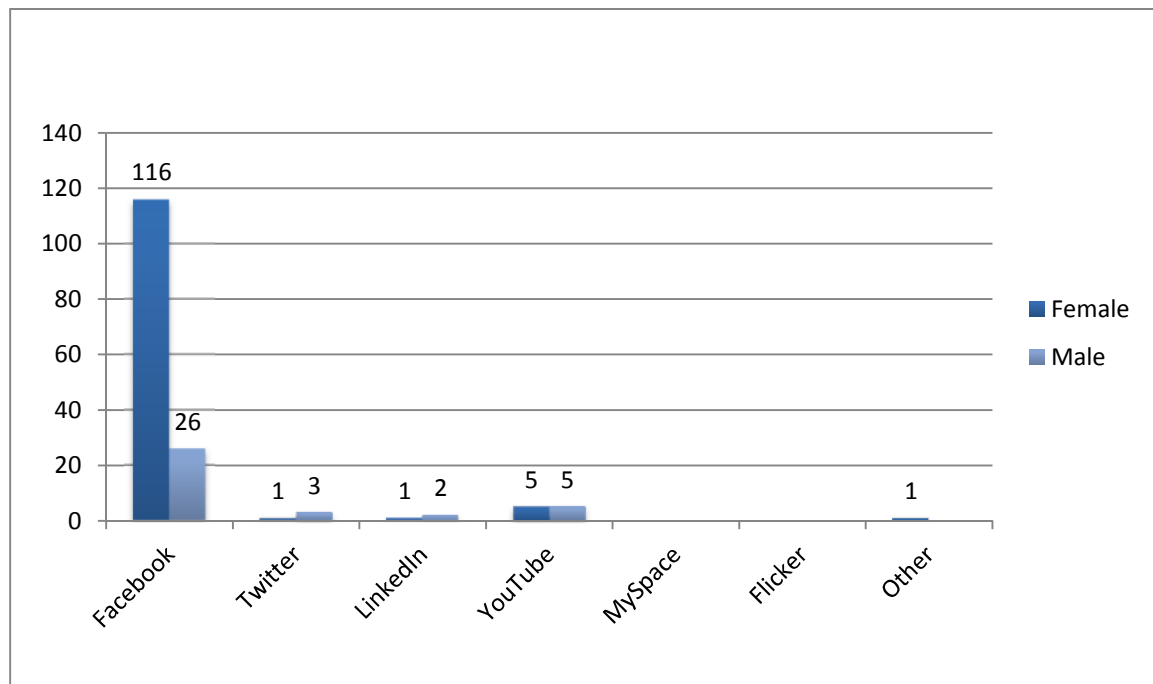
Figure 8 shows that there is a recurring trend of the popularity of Facebook, were 89 percent of respondents (116 females, 36 males) spend the most time on Facebook. This is also evident in the research as Bank (2011) states that Facebook is the most used SNS. In the study, Twitter received 3 percent of the response count (1 female, 3 males), were as LinkedIn had 2 percent respondents (1 female, 2 males). 6 percent of respondents (5 females, 5 males) spend most of their time on YouTube, while no respondents spent the most time on MySpace or Flickr. The 'other' category received one female response which stated both Pinterest and Instagam as the most used site. This evidence is also seen in the literature as Facebook is ranked number one, Twitter is ranked number two, followed by LinkedIn at number three as the most popular SNSs (Ebiz, 2013).

Section Three: The how/why/when of SNSs

Section three was designed to establish how users access their SNSs, why users participate in social networking, how often users are logged on for and how much time they spend connected.

Question 9:

Figure 9: How do you access social networking sites?
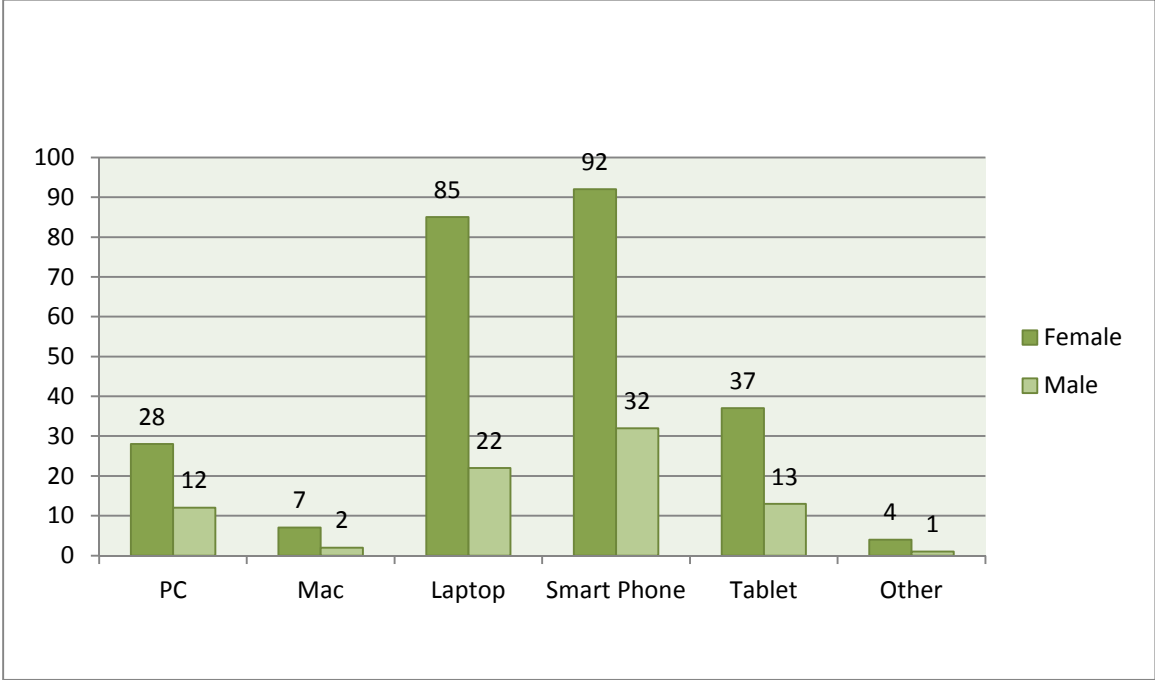
Figure 9 shows that smart phones are the most popular tool were 77 percent (92 females, 32 males) of respondents use their smart phone for accessing SNSs. This is followed by the laptop at 67 percent (85 females, 22 males), the tablet is at 31 percent (37 females, 13 males) and at 25 percent is the PC (28 females, 12 males). The Mac had 6 percent (7 females, 2 males) were as the 'other' category received 3 percent (4 females, 1 male). In the 'other' category, the kindle, ipod and ipad were used for accessing these sites. This corresponds with the literature were Brenner (2013) claims

that the rise of smart phones has made social networking a fingertip away were smart

phones are the most common method for users accessing their social pages.

Question 10:

Figure 10: Why do you use social networking sites?
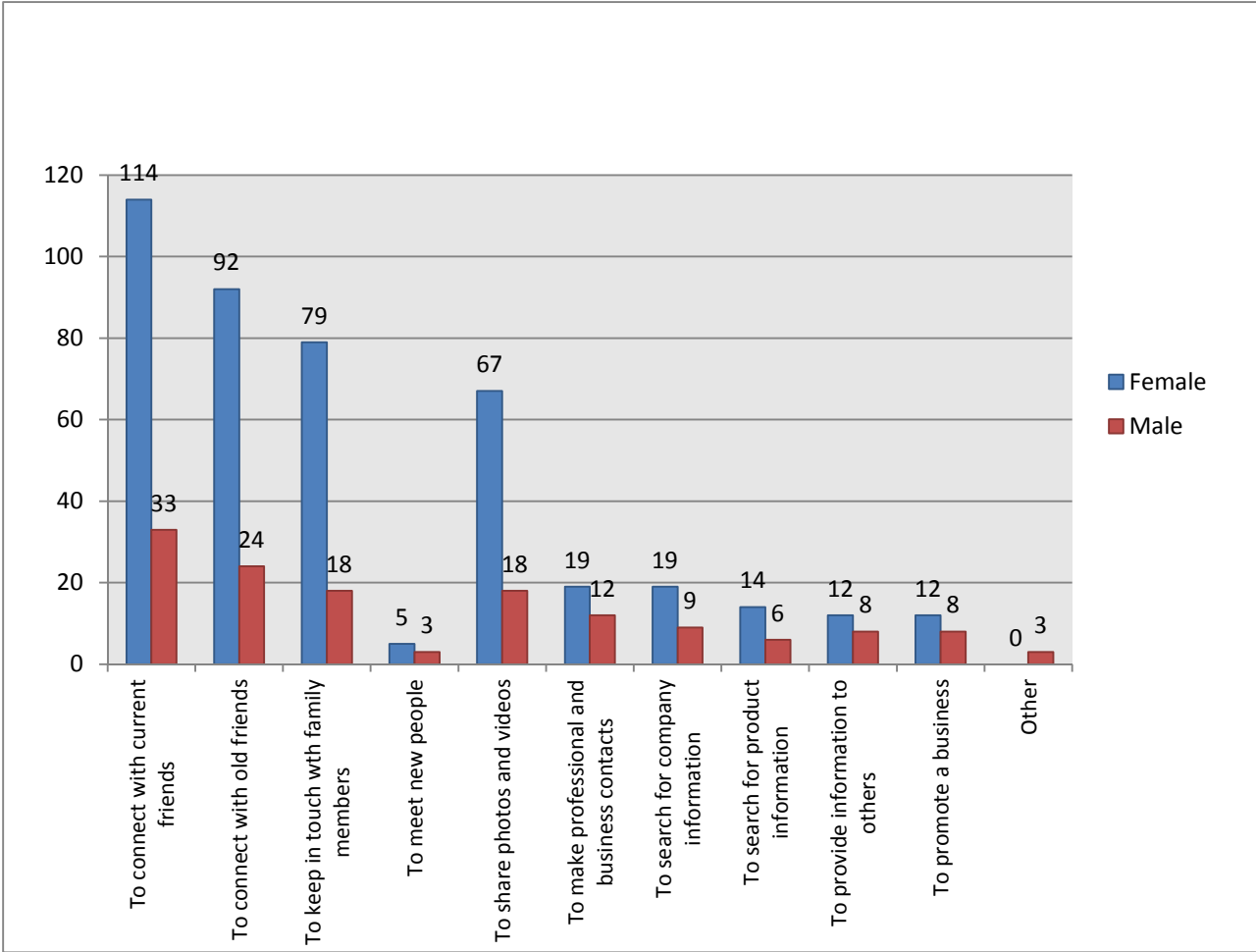
Figure 10 shows that 92 percent (114 females, 323 males) use SNSs to connect with

current friends. 73 percent (92 females, 24 males) use SNSs to connect with old friends,

61 percent (79 females, 18 males) stated to keep in touch with family members, to

share photos and videos was expressed by 53 percent (67 females, 18 males) and 19

percent (19 females, 12 males) use SNSs to make professional and business contacts.

17 percent (19 females, 9 males) use these sites to search for company information, 12 percent (14 females, 6 males) stated to search for product information, 12 percent stated to provide information to others (12 females, 8 males) and 12 percent said to promote a business (12 females, 8 males). To meet new people was the reason for 5 percent (5 females, 3 males) of respondents and the option 'other' was selected by 2 percent (3 males). The other reasons stated were to search for current and breaking news and to search for clubs. Esponiza *et al.* (2008) also discovered that the connection and reconnection with friends and family was the most popular reason for using SNSs. Bokhari *et al*. (2012, p. 120) further adds that people use SNSs in a number of ways; to stay connected online with their friends, to make new friends, to share photos, videos and private messages. As well as members using the site to interact with friends, family and colleagues, they may also wish to develop new relationships (Reynolds, 2012).

Question 11:

Figure 11: Taking the social networking sites you use the most, how often do you usually log on?
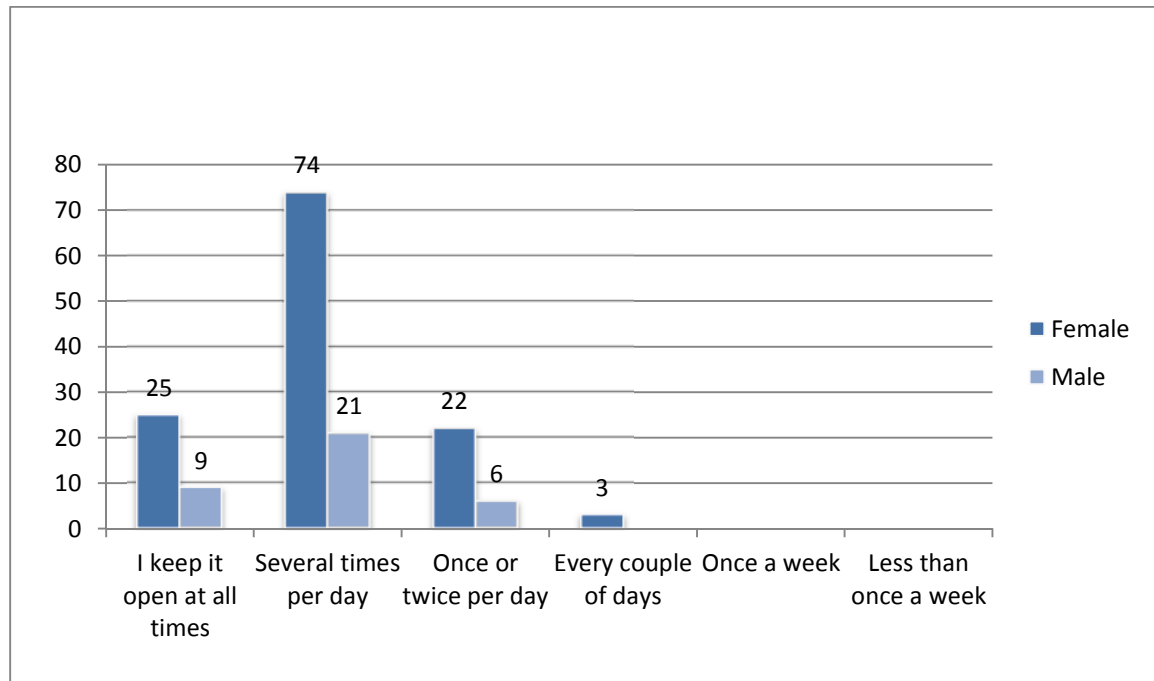
In regards to the site that users use the most, figure 11 shows that 59 percent (74 females, 21 males) log on several times per day. Bennett (2008) stated that users spend an average of 405 minutes on Facebook every month. 21 percent (25 females, 9 males) of respondents stated that they keep it open at all times, were 17 percent (22 females, 6 males) log on once or twice per day, followed by 2 percent (3 females) that log on every couple of days. There were no respondents that log on once a week or less than once a week. This research shows the popularity of SNSs and how often users log on to these sites with the highest percentage logging on once or twice per day. This is also evident in the literature as Nielsen (2013) notes that SNSs account for almost 10 percent of all internet time.

Question 12:

Figure 12: How much time on average are you usually logged on for?
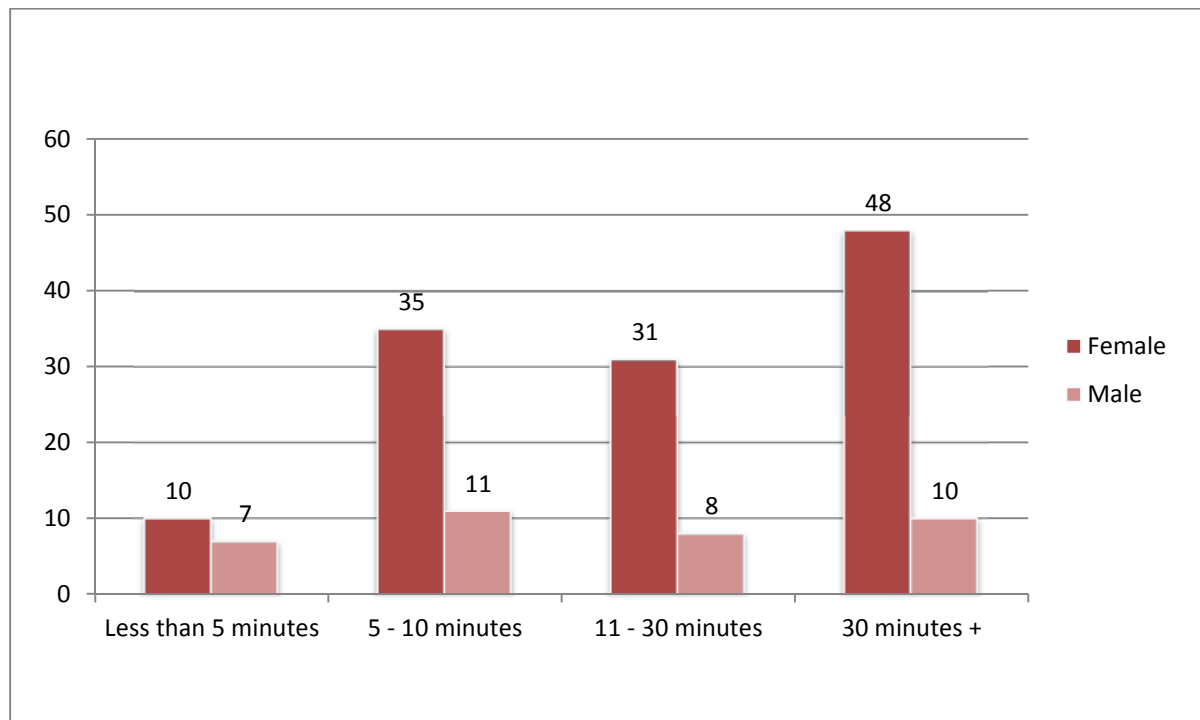
In regards to the time spent logged on figure 12 shows that 36 percent (48 females, 10 males) of respondents stated that they are usually logged on for an average of 30 minutes +. Browser Media (2012) states that the average amount of time a person spends on Facebook per month is 15 hours 33 minutes. The research further revealed that 29 percent (35 females, 11 males) of respondents log on for 5 – 10 minutes, 24 percent (31 females, 8 males) stated that they log on for 11 – 30 minutes, while 11 percent (10 females, 7 males) spend less than 5 minutes logged on.

Section Four: SNS and Companies

Section four contained five questions and was designed to gather information on respondent's opinions of companies using SNSs and the techniques they adapt.

Question 13:

Figure 13: Have you ever visited a company profile page on a social networking site?
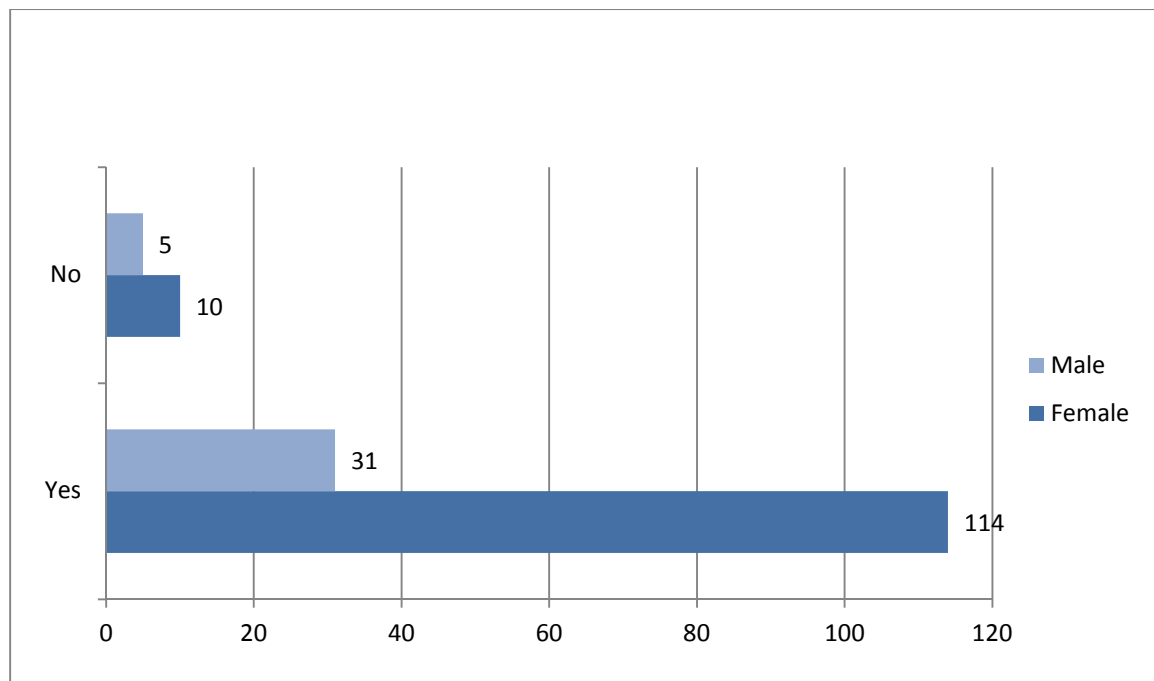
Question 13 asked respondents if they ever visited a company profile page. 91 percent (114 females, 31 males) stated yes, while only 9 percent (10 females, 5 males) stated no. According to Shankland (2011) the power of SNSs and particularly Facebook, means that major companies no longer bother with their own websites. Company interaction with their customers could take place so often on Facebook that company web sites would fall by the way side.

Question 14:

Figure 14: 'I would visit a company's profile page because'...
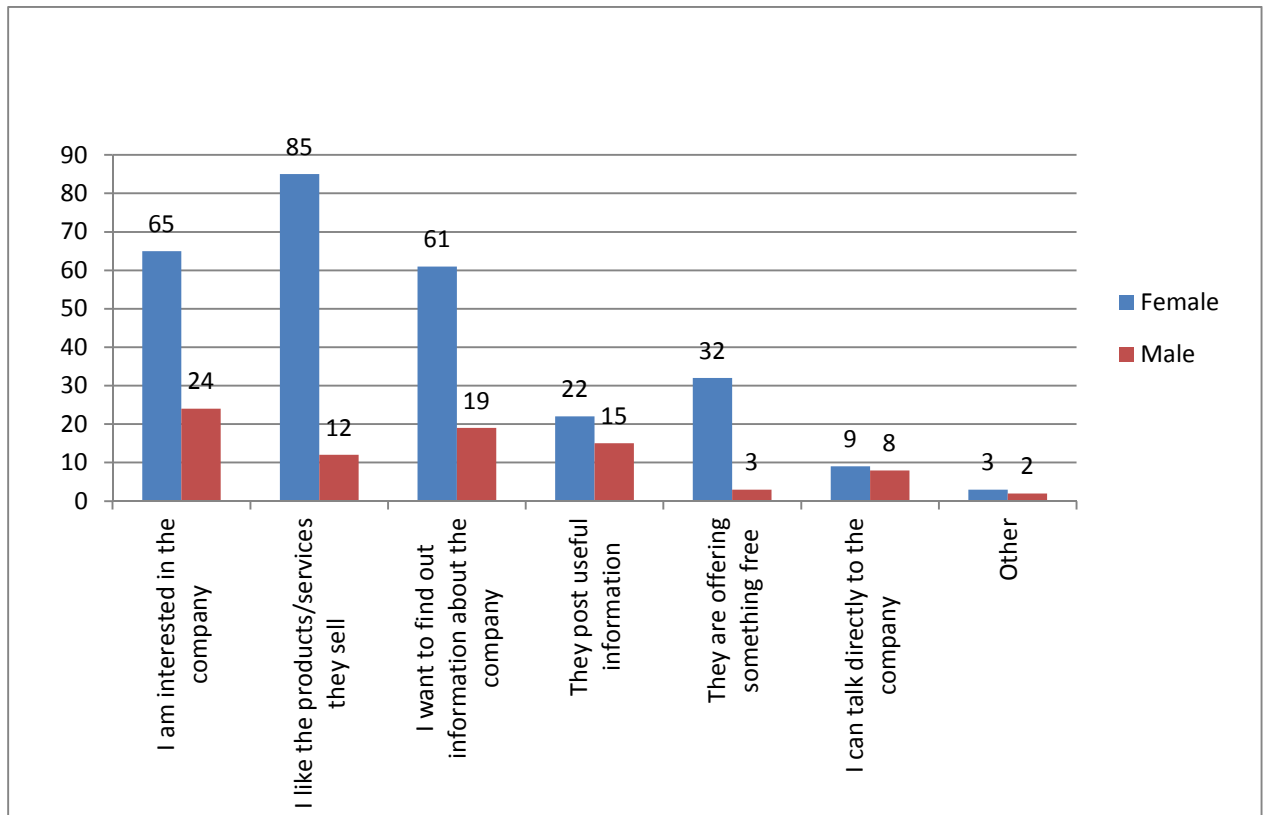
Figure 14 represents respondent's choice options on why they would visit a company's

profile page. 61 percent (85 females, 12 males) of respondents stated that they would

visit a company's profile page because they like the products/services they sell, 56

percent (65 females, 24 males) would visit a company's profile page because they are

interested in the company, while 50 percent (61 females, 19 males) want to find out

more about the company. 23 percent (22 females, 15 males) would visit because the

company post useful information, 22 percent (32 females, 3 males) said if they are

offering something free, 11 percent would visit because they talk directly to the

company, were as 3 percent (3 females, 2 males) choose the 'other' option. Responses

in the 'other' category were to get a company's contact information and if it looks

interesting. According to Acar and Topcu (2011, p. 43) people search for products and services online before making a purchase. This is evident in the study were the largest proportion of respondents listed product/services that a company sells, as the main reason for visiting a company page.

Question 15:

Figure 15: What would be your main reason for clicking on an advertisement?
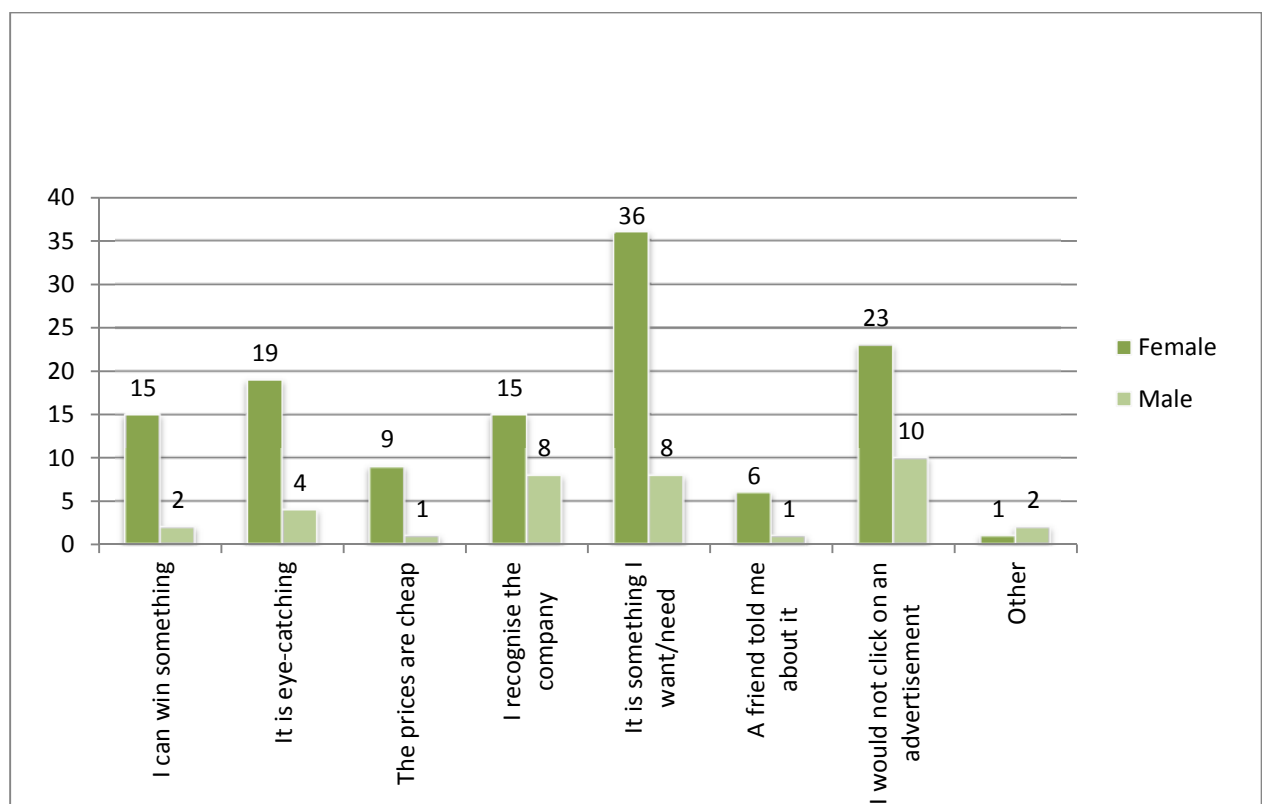
The findings in figure 15 indicate that 27 percent (36 females, 8 males) of respondents would click on an advertisement if it is something they want/need while 21 percent stated they would not click on an advertisement (23 females, 10 males). Jaffe (2010) stated that consumers are overwhelmed by marketing messages; they tend to filter them out as consumers tend to trust peers on SNSs rather than companies. In addition, it is maintained that online advertisements tend to be avoided by consumers because of

the lack of credibility and trust. Furthermore, 14 percent (19 females, 4 males) stated that they would click on an advertisement if it is eye-catching. 14 percent (15 females, 8 males) stated they would click on an advertisement because they recognise the company. 11 percent would click on an advertisement because they can win something (15 females, 5 males), while 6 percent would click on it if the prices were cheap (9 females, 1 male). 4 percent (6 females, 1 male) would click on an advertisement if a friend told them about it. 2 percent (1 female, 2 males) of respondents choose the 'other' option. One respondent stated that they have a general interest in the mobile marketing field and wish to keep up to speed in this arena. Another respondent stated that the advertisements on Facebook can be intrusive, while another noted that the advertisements can become irritating. When advertising resorts to techniques that lead to annoyance, offence or insult, there is a greater possibility that customers will find it irritating (Ducoffe 1996, cited by Chandra *et al*, 2012, p. 2).

Question 16:

Figure 16: Have any advertisements on a social networking site led you to find out more about the product?
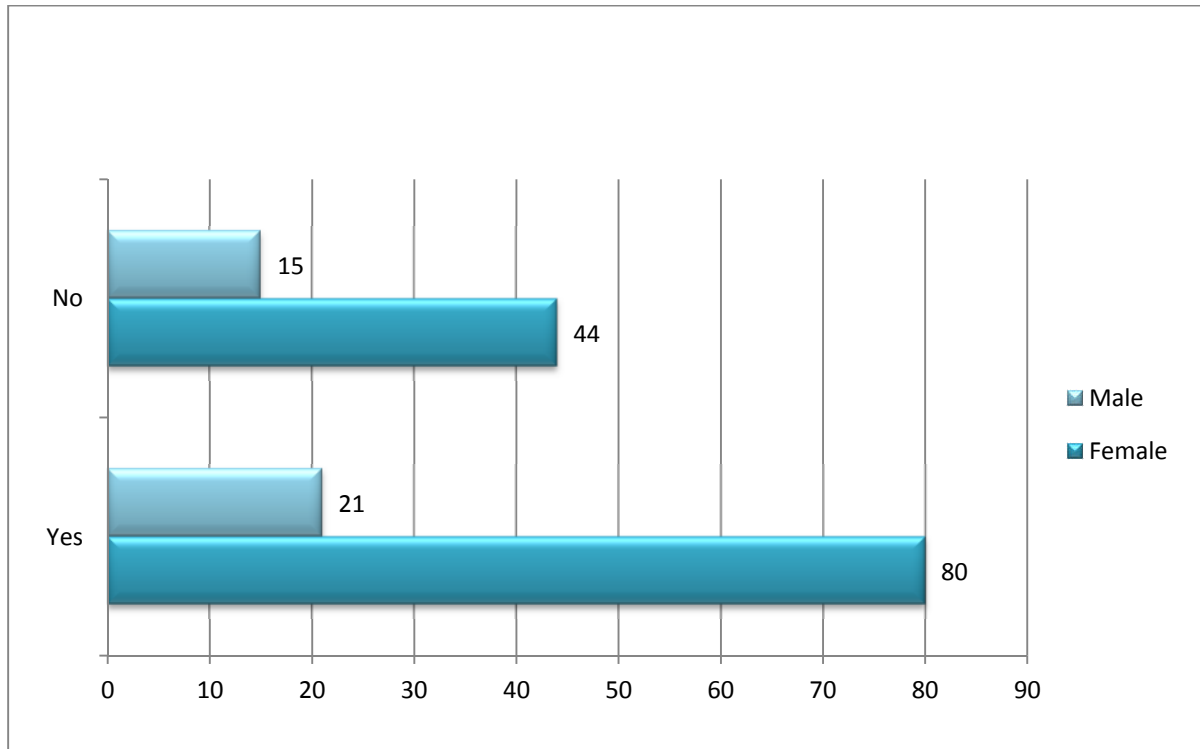
Figure 16 indicates that 63 percent (80 females, 21 males) stated yes in response to advertisements leading them to find out more about the product. 37 percent (44 females. 15 males) indicated no that advertisements do not led them to find out more about a product. Chandra *et al* (2012, p. 2) indicates that social networks are a good way to enhance a consumer's insight about a business. Furthermore, customer's feeling of enjoyment relating to advertising plays the greatest role in accounting for their overall attitude towards them

Question 17:

Table 4: Respondents level of agree /disagreement with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Social Networking is safe and secure	11%	44%	25%	16%	6%
I could easily live without social networking sites	17%	32%	17%	31%	3%
Social networking has become an important method of communication for me	0%	6%	9%	48%	37%
I am more aware of company products because of social networking sites	9%	12%	18%	38%	23%
Social networking will continue to grow and grow	0%	3%	0%	35%	62%

Table 3 shows that 44 percent of respondents disagree with the statement that social networking is safe and secure. 33 percent of respondents disagreed that they could easily live without social networking sites. According to Powell et al. (2009), cited by Lin and Lu (2011), social media has infiltrated people's daily life. They further add that SNSs come with amazing rapidity to become an important social platform for computer-mediated communication and has become an important communication method. This is evident in the research were 48 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that social networking has become an important communication method. 38 percent stated that they are more aware of company products because of SNSs. This is also evident in the literature were a study by Info-Graphics (2012) showed that at least half of Facebook and Twitter users say they have been more likely to talk about or purchase a company's product after they have been engaged with the company on their SNS. 62 percent strongly agreed that social networking will continue to grow and grow. Bergam *et al.* (2012, p. 707) believes that their increased popularity could be due to the fact that users are allowed to become the producers and stars of their production as they create their own profile and observe those of others

Question 18:

In your opinion, what are the negative aspects about social networking?

81 respondents stated bullying as a negative aspect of online social networking and in particular bullying among young adults. One respondent sees social networking as a subconscious but voluntary invasion of privacy. 'The fact that it is voluntary is what is dangerous, you have to be careful of what you share but most people see no threat, and that is where the risk lies'. Another respondent stated that 'social networks increase chances of bullying, identity theft and stalking and for these reasons people should exercise caution with use'. While another respondent discussed how people are being more open than they realise and to a wider range of strangers than they can conceive, and more often their information is being used by third parties/businesses.

33 respondents stated lack of security and invasion of privacy as negative aspects of social networking. One respondent stated that 'maintaining personal privacy can be difficult, you can often be led to view something that otherwise you would not wish to see'. Another respondent discussed issues relating to strangers viewing their profile and how profiles can be easily accessed by others. In the literature, Hsu *et al.* (2011, p. 211) has also identified some negative aspects in SNSs as regards to issues of privacy and states that these issues deserve serious consideration.

9 respondents stated that people using these sites can create false expressions of themselves and they see this as a negative aspect of social networking. One respondent stated 'social networking can be narcissistic in that people can create false impressions of themselves and it certainly can encourage bullying in younger society'. This echoes in the literature as Bergam *et al* (2012, p. 706) states that the increase in

narcissism is a result of the increase of SNSs and adds that those in college from the early 2000s to the late 2010s are more narcissistic than previous generations. Hsu *et al.* (2011, p. 211) has also identified some negative aspects in SNSs as regards to issues of privacy and states that these issues deserve serious consideration.

Other negativity discussed by respondents were people posting inappropriate content and users setting up fake profiles, this was seen as a major concern by respondents as children can become victims of this. Other areas addressed were social networking resulting in lack of communication skills among users. One respondent stated that 'the overuse of these sites on a daily basis has many negative effects on the physical and mental health of students making them lethargic and unmotivated to create contact with people in person'.

4.3 Analysis of Survey

The survey gathered valuable data and the findings were analysed under the main objectives.

4.3.1 To identify consumer's primary reasons for using social networking sites

The researcher indicated that 92 percent of respondents used SNSs to connect with current friends. A further 73 percent of respondents used SNSs to connect with old friends. To keep in touch with family members was the response by 61 percent of respondents. The connection and reconnection with friends and family was echoed through the literature and were the most popular reasons for users using SNSs

(Esponiza *et al,* 2008). 53 percent added that they use SNSs to share photos and videos. This was also evident in the literature as Bokhari *et al.* (2012, p. 120) added that people use SNSs to stay connected online with their offline friends and to share photos and videos. These reasons were echoed in the research and the literature as the main reason for users using these sites.

48 percent of respondents listed social networking as an important communication method. The literature echoed this as social media has infiltrated people's daily lives as it has become an important platform for communication and has become an important communication method for users. By using these sites, 38 percent stated that SNSs has allowed them to become more aware of company products through company page interaction.

4.3.2 To establish what motivates users to these social networking sites

It was echoed throughout the literature that social networks are extremely interactive and are becoming a pastime that more people may choose over television as it is a way to connect with friends and have fun (Perez *et al.* 2011, p. 61). The findings portrayed this and allowed the author to see how interactive users are on these SNSs. 59 percent of respondents stated that they log on to SNSs several times per day while 36 percent of respondents stated that they are usually logged on for an average of 30 minutes. As stated in the literature, this shows that SNSs have become a pastime for users. 29 percent of respondents stated that they have a profile on four or more SNSs.

The literature echoes that the feeling of enjoyment among users plays the greatest role for their overall attitude towards them (Chandra *et al.* 2012, p. 2). In the findings, their addictive traits have also been known to motivate users to these sites as social networking can become addictive for users. One respondent stated that 'once you begin using social networking, it is very difficult to stop'.

4.3.3 To investigate if SNSs can be used as an effective tool for marketing

The literature indicates that for companies to better utilize SNSs for cost-effective marketing, they must understand which users are the most valuable customers and should be as the targets, in order to achieve maximal profits (Lee and Youn , 2012). This research has indicated that the highest rating of age category utilising SNSs was the 20-25 age category which consisted of 25 percent of respondents.

From the findings, it is evident that SNSs can be used as an effective tool for marketing as 91 percent of respondents have visited a company's profile page. This evidence shows the researcher how companies can use these sites for marketing as a vast proportion of users are visiting company pages. The literature indicates that because these sites are so powerful, many major companies no longer bother with their own websites (Shankland 2011). This is evident in the findings as 38 percent of respondents agree that they are more aware of company products because of social networking.

The author noted that advertising on SNSs can be a powerful marketing tool. In the research, 63 percent of respondents stated that advertisements on a SNS led them to find out more about a product. The literature echoes that social networks are a good way to enhance a consumer's insight about a business (Chandra *et al.* 2012, p. 2).

4.4 Summary of Survey Findings

The main findings shows the popularity of SNSs, with users (29 pecent) having a profile on four or more sites and (59 percent) logging on several times per day. SNSs are a popular communication method among users with the connection of current friends (92 percent) being the main reason for their use. They can be utilised by businesses as a tool for marketing as 91 percent have stated that they have visited a company profile. Many major companies are now using social networking as a main method of communication as they are no longer bothering with company websites. Advertising on social networking plays a critical role in enhancing consumer's insight about a business and 63 percent of respondents stated that advertisements has led them to find out more about a company's product. Respondents believe (62 percent) that social networking will continue to grow and grow.

4.5: Phase Two: Semi-Structured Interviews

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviewees were as follows:

Interviewee 1 – female manager of a shoe outlet

Interviewee 2 – male owner/founder of a retailer

Interviewee 3 – male owner of a hotel

Interviewee 4 – female owner of a travel agency

The main findings from the interviews are analysed under the following objectives;

4.5.1 To investigate if SNSs can be used as an effective tool for marketing

All interviewees agreed that SNSs are an effective tool for marketing as it allows them to share information with their followers in the hope that these followers will share information with their friends. This was also evident in the literature that WOM as recommendations from existing customers is an important source of getting new customers (Garnett, 2010). All interviewees use the sites of Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. They all noted that Facebook is their preferred method of contact with customers followed by Twitter. All interviewees use LinkedIn for B2B contact. This coincides with the survey results were all 100 percent of respondents use Facebook, followed by Twitter with 60 percent and LinkedIn with 29 percent respondents. The past literature also indicates that Facebook is the most popular SNS, followed by Twitter and then Linkedin at number three (Ebiz, 2013).

Each of the interviewees stated that *'the growth of Facebook is phenomenal'.*

Interviewee 1 stated:

> '*Facebook is becoming a valuable business tool as Facebook pages and Facebook groups evolve'.*

The literature findings revealed that Facebook is the second most visited website in the world (Campbell *et al.* 2012 p. 1929). In regards to Facebook pages and groups evolving, the survey revealed that 91 percent of respondents have visited a company's profile page.

Interviewee 2 stated:

> '*Digital platforms like web, mobile, and social media currently have the highest efficiency among marketing channels in terms of overall, weighted value compared to more traditional channels such as radio and printed materials*'.

Interviewee 3 stated:

> '*People are looking to social and web-based platforms to inform their decision making process and sites such as Facebook play a significant role as the go-to source for information*'.

This was evident in the literature as (Acar and Topcu, 2011, p. 43) stated that people search for products and services online before making a purchase and every purchasing decision is always affected by social influence.

Each of the interviewees stated:

> '*The most important aspect of social media is learning what others are saying about your business*'.

Interviewee 4 stated another important aspect:

> '*It allows companies the opportunity to address certain issues that could be brewing*'.

The literature revealed social networking can act as promotion-related role as customers can use it to communicate with one another as it is an extension of traditional word-of-mouth communication (Mangold and Faulds, 2009, p. 359).

4.5.2 To discover how social network marketing differs from other marketing strategies

When asked how social networking marketing differs from other traditional strategies;

Interviewee 3 stated:

'Social networking is more accessible to people because it's free or low cost'.

Interviewee 4 stated:

'*Traditional media costs more money, which restricts many business owners from using it'.*

The literature also revealed that Facebook and other social media platforms are a way to reach customers while saving money at the same time (Garnett, 2010).

Interviewee 1 stated:

'Social networking allows businesses to talk to their customers, ask them questions and deal with their issues'.

Interviewee 2 stated:

> '*Facebook fan pages are an effective marketing tool which can increase sales, word of mouth marketing and customer loyalty'.*

All interviewees believed that unlike other media such as print and radio, the mechanisms by which digital messages are delivered and the context within which individual members of the market receive these messages is constantly in-flux.

Interviewee 4 stated:

> '*Social media is more influential than other forms of traditional communication when it comes to spreading your message'.*

The literature also revealed that SNSs are superior to more traditional methods of communication as they offer new ways of getting to know people and they aid in the management of existing contacts (Callarisa *et al.* 2012, p. 73). In the research findings, 48 percent of respondents stated SNSs as being an important communication method for them.

All respondents agreed that past marketing and PR campaigns has gone by the wayside in the age of social media. The literature stated that this is because social media adopts a pull strategy which enables customers to reach products and services related to their own experiences and every purchasing decision is always affected by

social influence (Acar and Topcu 2011, p. 43). This coincides with the research findings were 61 percent of respondents stated they would visit a company's profile page because they like the products and services they sell.

Interviewee 1 stated:

> '*The real-time nature of social networking has made organisations accessible at all hours and in all situations. Unlike traditional media that runs as per a schedule and a plan, social media requires active management and necessitates the implementation of real-time PR strategies, all day'.*

This was also evident in the literature as Jaffe (2010) noted that 42 percent of individuals using social media expect answers to questions that they ask online within one hour.

Interviewee 3 also agreed that:

> '*Before social networking, managers or employees were not accessible outside of the nine to five working day. Today, the real-time nature of digital platforms has made organisations accessible at all hours'.*

4.5.3 To examine how social networking sites benefit start-up business

All interviewees believe that using SNSs such as Twitter or Facebook are a great way for companies to gage what is going on and not work in a vacuum.

Interviewee 2 stated:

> '*Before I create my Facebook page, first I will see what people are saying about me both good or bad and will capitalise on the good and then for the bad I'm either going to clarify and correct it or maybe it's an opportunity for us to actually improve or to develop a new product'.*

The literature states that SMEs need to realise that users are not only online but they are also taking about products and services and sharing opinions with others. If users have a problem with a particular product or service, they are likely to air their problems on Facebook or Twitter (Garnett, 2010). The author believes that SNSs can allow SMEs to rectify mistakes and allows them the opportunity to develop new products.

Each of the interviewees stated:

> '*Social networking allows companies to see who their customers are'.*

Interviewee 4 stated:

'*We are seeing a lot of progress in terms of companies realising they need to be on these social networks. We need to be aware of whom our customers are and our customers are on social media. The power of these sites helps us determine who our customers are*'.

The literature revealed that social media in business and for SMEs is no longer a choice; it can no longer be ignored by SMEs who are seeking to gain competitive advantage over their competitions (Bennett, 2013).

All respondents noted that they prefer to use the social site of LinkedIn for business purposes.

Interviewee 2 stated:

'*LinkedIn is great for B2B. Many people think LinkedIn is just for job seekers but through LinkedIn groups, you can let people get to know you as a trusted expert. This can turn into sales and networking opportunities and had great benefits for us*'.

The literature revealed that that 23 percent of SME executives are now a member of a business/professional social media site. The most was LinkedIn which was used by 18 percent of those surveyed (IrishDev, 2013).

4.6 Summary of Findings

Social networking is an effective marketing tool for SMEs as it allows for businesses to interact with their customers, learn what others are saying about the business and to receive feedback on products and services. These sites are more influential than other forms of traditional media and they are free to use. Companies are aware that they need to be on social media and need to interact with their clients through these SNSs. These digital platforms mean that companies are accessible to customers at all hours per day and not just the typical nine to five working day. This means there is a lot of pressure for companies to remain active and to respond to customers promptly. Facebook is a phenomenal tool for businesses with the growth of Facebook fan pages. All SMEs need to adapt to this phenomenon of social media in order to remain competitive.

Chapter Five – Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion

Social networking continues to add another dimension to the way people communicate in the 21st century and has become a major part of people's daily lives. Social networking is here to stay as they are not the present, they are the future. It was evident from the research that the site of Facebook is the most popular and widely used social site among the survey participants and SMEs. The site of Facebook is becoming a valuable tool for business and is the second most visited website in the world.

It was shown from the survey results that social networking is an important communication method and these sites allow people to find out more about a product or service. A large proportion of respondents log in to SNSs several times per day which shows how these sites have integrated people's daily lives. Companies advertising on social networks are proving effective as these advertisements have led people to find out more about products or services.

SMEs revealed that social networking is an effective tool for marketing as it allows them to share information with their followers in the hope that the same information will be passed on. It was noted that social networking is an effective method of WOM communication. Facebook plays a significant role for SMEs as Facebook business pages are having a tremendous effect on marketing efforts. These sites seem to be more influential than any other form of traditional media when it comes to businesses spreading their message.

5.2 Suggestions for Further Research

Initially, the researcher had intended to focus on more SME business sectors in Donegal. However, due to time restrictions, that was not possible so the researcher focused interviews on the two largest business sectors in the county. Further research could be completed within additional business sectors in County Donegal.

While the survey population was representative of participants on Facebook, it only covered a small amount of respondents and does not represent opinion of all Facebook users. Therefore, there is the scope to target a much wider audience.

The survey only gained limited information for the researcher so therefore if focus groups were also adopted, a more rounded set of results may have been accomplished.

The researcher had noted from the research that the issue of bullying is a serious problem within online social networking. Further researcher in the future could be conducted in to this serious issue.

5.3 Limitations

Although the research was carefully prepared, the author was aware of its limitations. The availability of time management meant that the researcher was restricted to County Donegal. Due to time and finance issues, it was not possible for the researcher to travel outside of County Donegal to conduct interviews.

5.4 Recommendations

From the research, the researcher would like to make recommendations to owner/managers of SMEs who are adapting SNSs as a marketing tool.

It was evident from the research that owner managers believe social media requires active management and time. Social media can seem overwhelming to SMEs as they are under pressure to update their profile every day, keeping up to date with new followers and monitoring the company's brand. SMEs must prevent themselves from becoming overwhelmed with social media. Companies should log into their social profiles every day and not leave their profiles dormant for weeks or months. When a company does this, they will be able to achieve their goals which play an effective role in social media marketing.

SMEs should respond to direct messages that they receive from followers. The research revealed that users of these sites expect companies to respond back to them within one hour of asking a question. Although this time frame may not be not be appropriate for SMEs, these users are engaging in the company's brand and it is important that businesses respond to these messages as soon as they can out of respect to their followers.

Owners/managers using SNSs within their company should seek out new followers and be proactive in building a follower base for the company. This can be done on Twitter by seeking out profiles of authority figures within the company's industry. The business can then follow people who are already following those authority figures. Those profiles

indicate that they would be interested in the company as well, so in turn increasing the

size of the follower base.

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Appendix One: Online Survey

Social Networking as a Marketing Tool

Thank you for agreeing to take the time to complete my questionnaire as

part of my Master's research for a dissertation on Social Networking Sites as a
marketing tool.

The questionnaire is relatively short and will only take 5 minutes.

I appreciate your help and your time.

Profile

*1. Please specify your gender

○ Male

○ Female

2. Please specify your age

○ Under 18	○ 35-39
○ 18-21	○ 40-44
○ 22-25	○ 45-49
○ 26-29	○ 50-55
○ 30-34	○ More than 56 years

*3. Please specify your occupation

[   ]

*4. Do you live in County Donegal?

○ Yes

○ No

*1. How many social networking sites have you ever created a profile on?

○ 1

○ 2

○ 3

○ 4 or more

*2. Please select the sites of which you have an existing account or profile on

☐ Facebook

☐ Twitter

☐ LinkedIn

☐ YouTube

☐ MySpace

☐ Flickr

☐ Other

If other, please state

[   ]

✱3. Which social networking sites have you been active on in the last 30 days?

☐ Facebook

☐ Twitter

☐ LinkedIn

☐ YouTube

☐ MySpace

☐ Flickr

☐ Other

If other, please state

[   ]

✱4. Which of these do you spend the most time on?

○ Facebook

○ Twitter

○ LinkedIn

○ YouTube

○ MySpace

○ Flicker

○ Other

If other, please specify

[   ]

The How/Why/When of Social Networking Sites

∗1. How do you access social networking sites?

☐ PC

☐ Mac

☐ Laptop

☐ Smart Phone

☐ Tablet

☐ Other

Other (please specify)

[   ]

∗2. Why do you use social networking sites?

☐ To connect with current friends

☐ To connect with old friends

☐ To keep in touch wth family members

☐ To meet new people

☐ To share photos and videos

☐ To make professional and business contacts

☐ To search for company information

☐ To search for product information

☐ To provide information to others

☐ To promote a business

☐ Other

Other (please specify)

[   ]

*3. Taking the social networking site you use the most, how often do you usually log on?

○ I keep it open at all times

○ Several times per day

○ Once or twice per day

○ Every couple of days

○ Once a week

○ Less than once a week

*4. How much time on average are you usually logged on for?

○ Less than 5 minutes

○ 5 - 10 minutes

○ 11 - 30 minutes

○ 30 minutes +

Social networking sites and Companies

*1. Have you ever visited a company profile page on a social networking site?

○ Yes

○ No

*2. 'I would visit a company's profile page because'..

☐ I am interested in the company

☐ I like the products/services they sell

☐ I want to find out information about the company

☐ They post useful information

☐ They are offering something free

☐ I can talk directly to the company

☐ Other

If other, please speciify

[   ]

*3. What would be your main reason for clicking on an advertisement?

○ I can win something

○ It is eye-catching

○ The prices are cheap

○ I recognise the company

○ It is something I want/need

○ A friend told me about it

○ I would not click on an advertisement

○ Other

If other, please specify

[   ]

*4. Have any advertisements on a social networking site led you to find out more about the product?

○ Yes

○ No

*5. What are your views on the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Social networking is safe and secure	○	○	○	○	○
I could easily live without social networking sites	○	○	○	○	○
Social networking has become an important method of communication for me	○	○	○	○	○
I am more aware of company products because of social networking sites	○	○	○	○	○
Social networking will continue to grow and grow	○	○	○	○	○

*6. In your opinion, what are the negative aspects about social networking?

[   ]

The survey is now complete. Thank you for your time.

Appendix Two – Interview Theme Sheet

Theme Sheet

Name of Interviewee:

Location of Interview:

Date:

Could you clarify what social media marketing is?

To investigate if SNSs can be used as an effective tool for marketing

- Which online social networking sites do you use in your business?

- Which sites do you think are the most effective?

- Do you think social media is a critical opponent of an effective marketing strategy?

- What tools do you use to monitor your social networks?

- Do you think social network sites have an influence in consumers overall purchasing decisions?

- What is the most overlooked social media tool?

To discover how social network marketing differs from other marketing strategies?

- Do you prefer social network marketing to other forms of traditional marketing such as radio or newspaper?

- Why do you think marketing and communications on social media is so different than marketing on non-web based platforms?

- What risks do you think are involved with a company using social media to interact with clients?

To examine how social networking sites benefit start-up business?

- Do you promote your business on these online social network sites?

- Do you find it profitable?

- Can you communicate better/more effectively with your customer?

- Have you become closer to your customers because of online social networking?

- In what ways have online social networking sites benefited your business?

Appendix Three – Ethical Approval Consent Form

LYIT Application form for Ethical Approval

SECTION A

Project Title

_____

Date of Submission

_____

Name of all person(s) submitting research proposal

_____

_____

_____

Type of Research   Taught Masters ☐   MSc by Research ☐   External Research Funding ☐

Position   Student ☐   Staff ☐

If student,   *Student No.*

                 Programme Title   _____

                 Name of supervisor

Department/Centre   _____

Email Address   _____

Name of Principal Researcher (if different from above e.g., Student's Supervisor)

_____

_____

Position Held   _____

Pre-existing approval and Multi-agency research

1. If your research has pre-existing ethics approval please attach the approval and submit directly to researchethics@lyit.ie.

2. If your research is to be carried out across two or more research centres and ethics approval has already been granted by another agency/institution then please attach the approval and submit to researchethics@lyit.ie.

In both instances there is no requirement to complete the remainder of the application form.

SECTION B

1.   Describe the purposes of the research proposed.

┌───┐
│   │
│   │
│   │
│   │
│   │
└───┘

2.   Please complete the research ethics checklist below:

	YES	NO
Does the research involve human or animal participants?	☐	☐
a) Does the research involve data of a personal or confidential nature? ☐		☐
b) Does the study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent e.g. people under 18, people with learning disabilities, older people, students? ☐		☐
c) Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for access to participants? (e.g. teacher, local council) ☐		☐
d) Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time? (e.g. covert observation of people in non-public places) ☐		☐
e) Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use)? ☐		☐
f) Are there issues of safety for the researchers or subjects, aside form those documented in Institute or Departmental Health and Safety procedures? ☐		☐
g) Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life? ☐		☐
h) Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants? ☐		☐
i) Does the research involve a conflict of interests? ☐		☐

If you have answered 'NO' to all of the questions above there is no requirement to complete the remainder of the form. Please submit to researchethics@lyit.ie

If you have answered 'yes' to questions (c) please continue and complete the remainder of the application form submit to researchethics@lyit.ie

SECTION C

3.   Please give a summary of the design and methodology of the project. **Please note** that copies of proposed questionnaires or a list of questions that will be included in any questionnaire should accompany this application form <u>(Compulsory not optional)</u>. Please also include in this section details of the proposed sample size, giving indications of the calculations used to determine the required sample size, including any assumptions you may have made. (If in doubt, please obtain statistical advice).

4.   Describe the research procedures as they affect the research subject and any other parties involved.

5.   What in your opinion are the ethical considerations involved in this proposal? (You may wish for example to comment on issues to do with consent, confidentiality, risk to subjects, etc.)

6.   Outline the reasons which lead you to be satisfied that the possible benefits to be gained from the project justify any risks or discomforts involved.

7.   Who are the investigators (including assistants) who will conduct the research and what are their qualifications and experience?

8. Are arrangements for the provision of clinical facilities to handle emergencies necessary? If so, briefly describe the arrangements made.

9. In cases where subjects will be identified from information held by another party (for example, a doctor or hospital) describe the arrangements you intend to make to gain access to this information including, where appropriate, which Multi Centre Research Ethics Committee or Local Research Ethics Committee will be applied to.

10. Specify whether subjects will include students or others in a dependent relationship.

11. Specify whether the research will include children or people with mental illness, disability or handicap. If so, please explain the necessity of involving these individuals as research subjects.

12. Will payment or any other incentive, such as a gift or free services, be made to any research subject? If so, please specify and state the level of payment to be made and/or the source of the funds/gift/free service to be used. Please explain the justification for offering payment or other incentive.

13. Please give details of how consent is to be obtained. A copy of the proposed consent form, along with a separate information sheet, written in simple, non-technical language **MUST** accompany this form.

14. Comment on any cultural, social or gender-based characteristics of the subject which have affected the design of the project or which may affect its conduct.

15. Please state who will have access to the data and what measures which will be adopted to maintain the confidentiality of the research subject and to comply with data protection requirements e.g. will the data be anonymised?

16. Will the intended group of research subjects, to your knowledge, be involved in other research? If so, please justify.

17. Date on which the project will begin and end.

18.   Please state location(s) where the project will be carried out.

19.   Please state briefly any precautions being taken to protect the health and safety of researchers and others associated with the project (as distinct from the research subjects) e.g. where blood samples are being taken

20.   Please specify how any data obtained during the course of the research will be stored and how long the data will be retained for.

DECLARATION

Researcher

I confirm I will carry out the research as indicated in the above form   ☐

Research Supervisor

I confirm that this form gives an accurate account of the proposed research   ☐