

QUALITATIVE MARKETING RESEARCH ON THE INFLUENCES OF ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES ON CONSUMERS

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Abstract

This article, which is part of a larger study, presents a qualitative marketing research, based on an in-depth interview regarding the influences that online social networking (OSN) sites have on the consumers. The paper underlines the concepts of OSN, consumer, consumer behaviour and the main influences that impact them. We are presenting the importance of OSN, the main reasons for having an OSN account and their influences on the consumers and their behaviour. Other presented aspects include several positive and negative aspects of having an OSN account, the impact that the networks have had on the users' lives.

Keywords: *consumer behaviour, online social network, marketing research, influences*

JEL classification: *M30, M31, M39*

1. Introduction

The new developments of the information and communication technologies in the context of the new business environment of the first decade of the 21st Century have created on one hand, new methods of reaching the clients and the consumers and on the other hand new means for the companies to be reached by the consumers. These new technologies have brought the consumer and the process of consumption to new levels. In order for the companies to be successful and to be efficient on this new global

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market, the managers and the marketing specialists must embrace and use these new technologies and new means of reaching the clients.

In the last 10 years a new communication platform has developed for the individuals and companies to use: "the online social networking sites" (OSN). Our paper underline the concept of online social network, as well, points out the concept of consumer behaviour and the influences that the consumer is subjected to. In the second part of the paper we are presenting a the results of a qualitative marketing research that shows how online social networking sites influence the consumer and its purchase behaviour.

2. The concept of online social networks

Online social networks have become more and more important in the last decade for the individuals and for the organizations. But, what are the online social networks? If we look closely to the structure of the OSN we see that it has similar attributes as the concept of social networks. A social network consists of all the people — friends, family, colleague and others — with whom one shares a social relationship, say friendship, commerce, or others. According to the Oxford Online Dictionary, social networks are all the social network interaction as well as the personal relationships of the individual. Traditional social network study can date back about half a century, focusing on interpersonal interactions in small groups due to the difficulty in obtaining large data sets (Wasserman and Faust in Hu and Wang, 2009).

The online social networks are considered by certain authors (Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini (2007) on one side as a particular type of virtual community and on the other side, a social software (Richter et. al, 2011). However, as is common for rather new phenomena related to the Web 2.0, there is neither one generally accepted term nor one well-established definition for OSNs (Heidemann et. al., 2012). There rather exist numerous similar terms such as social networking service, social networking site, or social network site.

Social networking sites are instruments for building virtual communities, or social networks, for individuals with similar education, lifestyles, interests, or activities (Bolotaeva and Cata, 2011). The online social networks are defined (Boyd and Ellison, 2007) as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a

connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. According to Beer (2008), the above mentioned definition of Boyd and Ellison is far too generous and should differentiate between the online and offline relationships.

Social networking sites – SNSs – (Diffley et. al. 2011) are tools that provide people with the ability to collaborate and communicate with one another online. They facilitate the creation and sharing of knowledge, information, media, ideas, opinions and insights, and allow people to actively participate in the media itself. Social networking sites are online collections of registered users who share information with other registered users (Trusov et al., 2010), have become extremely popular recently. This popularity is mainly given by the fact that SNSs “allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others”. Take into account the usage of these characteristics, certain SNS users establish hundreds or even thousands of friendship links with other users (Viswanath et al., 2009).

Most social networking sites ((Bolotaeva and Cata, 2011)) also provide other means of online communications, such as email, instant messaging, chat, blogs, discussion group, and others. Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini (2007) underline in their comparative study regarding Facebook and MySpace, that the main motivation for social networking is the communication and maintaining of relationships. Other authors stated that an OSN is a site through which people connect with friends/acquaintances, either people they know from outside the virtual or the online environment, or the ones only from the virtual environment (Veghes and Pantea: 2009, Zarella: 2010), whom they have common interests, activities, needs and aims.

Other authors (Schneider et al, 2009) define online social networking sites as: OSNs form online communities among people with common interests, activities, backgrounds, and/or friendships. Most OSNs are Web-based and allow users to upload profiles (text, images, and videos) and interact with others in numerous ways. Adamic and Adar (2005) define social networking as services that gather information on users’ social contacts, construct a large interconnected social network, and reveal to users how they are connected to others in the network. As we can see from the above mentioned concept definition, the authors agree on several important common characteristics of the social networking sites. Some of the most important ones are:

- existence of an online environment;
- existence of a public or semi public profile;

- ability to communicate instantly or almost instantly;
- the existence of common hobbies, interest, activities, friends, desires etc.;
- development of the relationships.

3. Consumer behaviour and its influences

Before seeing the influences that act upon the consumer during the decision making process, we consider it necessary to underline the concept of consumer behaviour and its place in within the marketing process.

Modern marketing starts from the premises that any economical activity has to be guided towards satisfying the clients' or customer's needs with maximum of efficiency. Any type of organization which has within its functions, marketing has to firstly know the market, to be able to adapt its activities with the objective of satisfying the present and potential needs of the customer (Catoiu and Teodorescu, 2004).

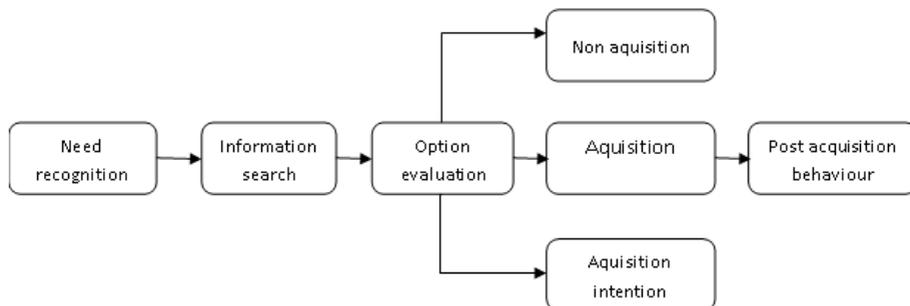
According to the American Marketing Association (AMA), the consumer represents in traditional manner the ultimate user or consumer of goods, ideas, and services. However, the term also is used to imply the buyer or decision maker as well as the ultimate consumer. In the same time, the marketing dictionary (Florescu et al. 2003) presents the consumer as any economic subject which has a behaviour that can be directed towards satisfying the individual needs or of the group. Cătoiu and Teodorescu (2004) define the consumer behaviour as: (1) the conduct of individuals during the acquisition or consumption of goods and services; (2) the complete conduct of the final user of goods and services.

Other authors (Solomon et al. 2006) define the consumer behaviour the study of the processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires. Schiffmann and Kanuk (2007) present the concept of consumer behaviour as the behaviour that consumers display in searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services that they expect will satisfy their needs.

The consumer decision making has long been of interest to researchers. Beginning about 300 years ago early economists, led by Nicholas Bernoulli, John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, started to examine the basis of consumer decision making (Richarme, 2007 in Bray, 2008). The decision making process contains (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2010, Kotler and

Armstrong, 2008) the following components: (1) Need recognition; (2) Information search; (3) Option evaluation; (4) Decision making and (5) Post acquisition behaviour. As follows we are presenting in figure 1, the graphic representation of this process, with the addition that in the fourth stage we have several option of the decision making.

Figure 1: Decision making process



(Source: Designed after: Cătoiu and Teodorescu, 2004 and Kotler and Armstrong, 2008)

As we can see it is extremely important to understand the place and the concept of consumer and consumer behaviour before passing on a discussing the main influences that act upon them. There are 2 important types of influences (Cătoiu and Teodorescu, 2004) that are considered essential in understanding the behaviour of individuals: (1) directly perceivable influences – demographical factors; economical factors; marketing mix factors; situational factors and (2) deduced influences – endogenous and exogenous influences.

Regarding the endogenous and exogenous influences on the consumer behavior, they are very well defined by the specialized literature:

- Endogenous influences on consumer behaviour – the perception, the motivation, the learning / personality / information and the attitude (Cătoiu and Teodorescu, 2004).
- Exogenous influences on consumer behaviour – the family, the membership groups, the reference groups, the social class, the culture and the subculture (Kotler and Armstrong, 2008).

The external and internal influences that act upon the consumer are extremely important because they define the manner in which the consumer buys a product or a service. After a short presentation of said influences it we are presenting the research methodology and the results of a qualitative marketing research in order to understand how the new online social networking sites are influencing the decision making process of a consumer.

4. Research methodology

The aim of the qualitative research is to understand how the usage of online social networking sites influences the consumer and their buying behaviour. The research that we developed was qualitative marketing research based on a marketing research in-depth interview that was quarried out on a number of 14 individuals of Sibiu County that are frequent users of at least one major online social networking site (eg. Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+).

This qualitative marketing research has an exploratory character and is part of a larger marketing research and is designed to understand and clarify several attitudes, influences and behaviours of the OSN users. We have developed a recruitment questionnaire (Cătoiu et al., 2003) which was based on several statistical figures that describe the users of online social networking sites of Romania (www.socialbreakers.com):

- Male / Female user ratio – 51% vs. 49%;
- Age groups: 25 – 34 years old – 33%; 18 – 24 years old – 27,7%; 35 – 44 years old – 17%; other age groups – 22,3%.

For the development of the research we have created an interview guide which contains 9 main open questions that are related to the fulfilment of the main scope of the qualitative research. The duration of each interview was between 20 and 40 minutes.

In order to quarry out the research we gave developed several specific objectives:

- O_1 – Identifying the importance of owning an OSN account has on the respondents.
- O_2 – Determining the length of time since the creation of an OSN account.
- O_3 – Determining the main reasons for owning an OSN account.
- O_4 – Determining the impact of owning an OSN account has had on the respondents' lives.

- O₅ – Identifying the impact of the OSN on the level of information held by the respondents.
- O₆ – Determining the main influence factors that OSNs have on the respondents as consumers.
- O₇ – Determining the impact and the influence of an OSN on the decision making process.
- O₈ – Determining the main products / services that are present / promoted on the respondents' account.
- O₉ – Determining if the respondents have ever bought a product or a service following the information of an OSN.

After the completion of the interviews, each response was transcribed, mentioning the breaks in the research process. Following the previous stage, we have analysed the content of the responses based on a response grid and following the specific objectives of the research. The content analysis of each interview followed three main steps:

- each interview was divided in units following each objective;
- each unit was identified and grouped in homogenous and exclusive categories;
- each category is analysed according to frequency, importance and other pre established rules.

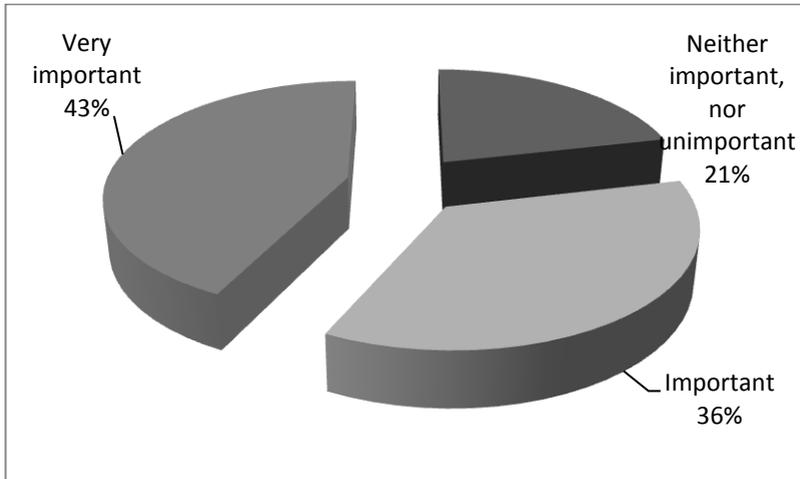
Without a doubt, we must be aware of certain errors and limitation of our research such as the lack of clear statistical data regarding the usage of online networking sites in the Sibiu County area, due to the ever-changing structure of the users. Another limitation could be taken into account are the deliberate or unintentional distortion of the information given by the respondents. The deliberate distortion was reduced by selecting the participants that were willing to take part in the research, but unfortunately the unintentional distortion of the responses could not have been avoided and some of the respondents might have offered information that would present the situation in a more favourable light even thou the purpose of the research was presented to the respondents.

5. Research results

Analysis of the responses offered by the 14 participants to the study, several important responses could be drawn in order to respond to the specific objectives and the purpose of our research. The first 2 questions of the interview

guide were related to the importance of owning an OSN account and since when do de respondents have such an account. The results for these two questions can be seen in figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2: Importance of owning an OSN account

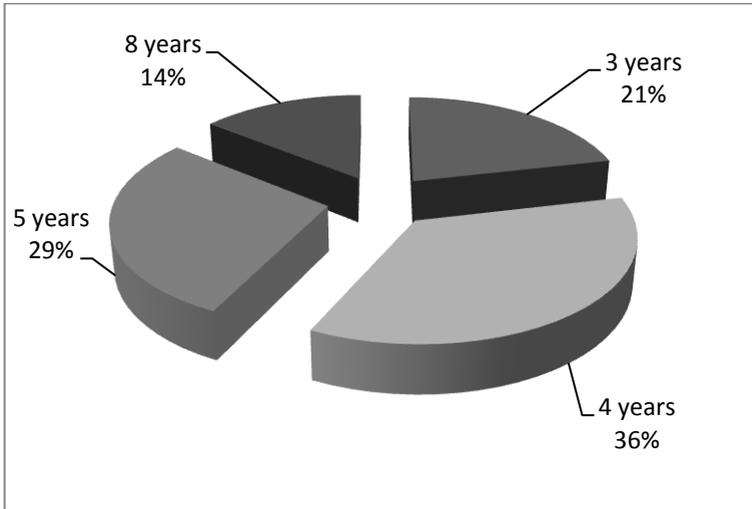


(Source: Authors' computation)

As we can see from the result of figure 2, the great majority (79%) of the respondents consider that owning an OSN account is important and very important. The rest of 21% of the responses are assigned to those that consider that owning an OSN account is neither important nor unimportant; you just have to be there and have such an account. Regarding the second question (figure 2), 36% of the respondents have an account since 4 years ago; 29% since 5 years ago; 21% since 3 years ago and 14% since 8 years ago.

Associated to these answer, we received several important information regarding what OSN they usually use. According to the responses offered, all of them have an account on Facebook.com; other networking sites include LinkedIn.com, Google+ or Twitter. The respondent do not usually differentiate between the types of online networking sites and generally consider Twitter as an OSN, which in reality is associated with a micro blog. Following the responses we consider that the first and second objective of the research was reached.

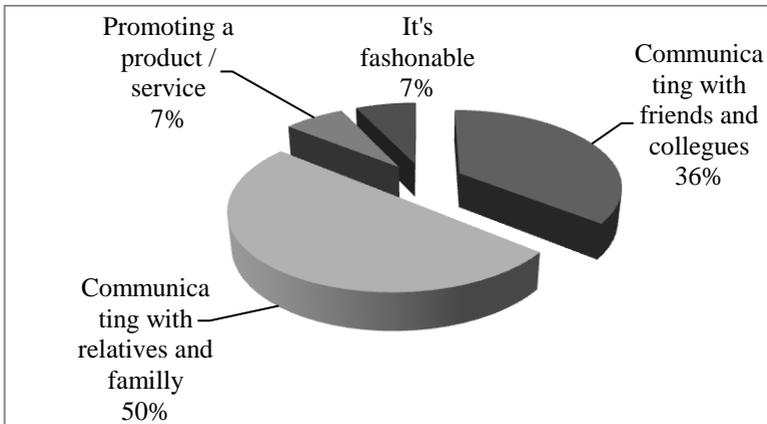
Figure 3: Age of the OSN account



(Source: Authors' computation)

The third objective of the research was to understand the main reasons for creating an OSN account, therefore the responses offered by the 14 participants were analysed and can be observed in figure 4 of our paper.

Figure 4: Reasons for owning an OSN account



(Source: Authors' computation)

The results shown in figure 4, underline that the great majority of the participants to the interviews are using their favourite online social networking site mainly as a communication platform, either with family and relatives (50%) or with friends and colleagues (36%). The rest of the respondents use an OSN account in order to promote a product or a service (7%), and 7% of the respondents have an account because it is fashionable. What we consider important is the fact that the respondents communicate because most of the respondents communicate with friends, relatives due to the fact that they are not close to one and the other.

There are a large number of studies and researches conducted in the last years have dealt with the impact that the usages of online social networking sites have on the users lives. In that order of ideas we have asked the next question in order to assess the positive or negative impact on the respondents lives. The majority of the respondents (85%) have stated that the usage of an OSN has had a positive impact on their lives, on their families' lives as well as in relation with friends and colleagues.

The positive impact consisted on the fact that the respondents connected much easier with their friends and families, especially when owning a tablet or smart phone which is connected 24/7 to the internet. Other positive aspects were revealed when discussing the communication with long forgotten high school or university colleagues, some of which were living abroad. Several respondents stated that they planned their reunions with the help of OSNs. Also some of the respondents (15%) have stated that a network like LinkedIn (which is a specialized network) has had a significant influence on their professional life.

But in the same time several negative aspects of owning an online social networking site were underlined by more than 75% of the respondents. There are also some negative effects of OSN on ones' lives such as:

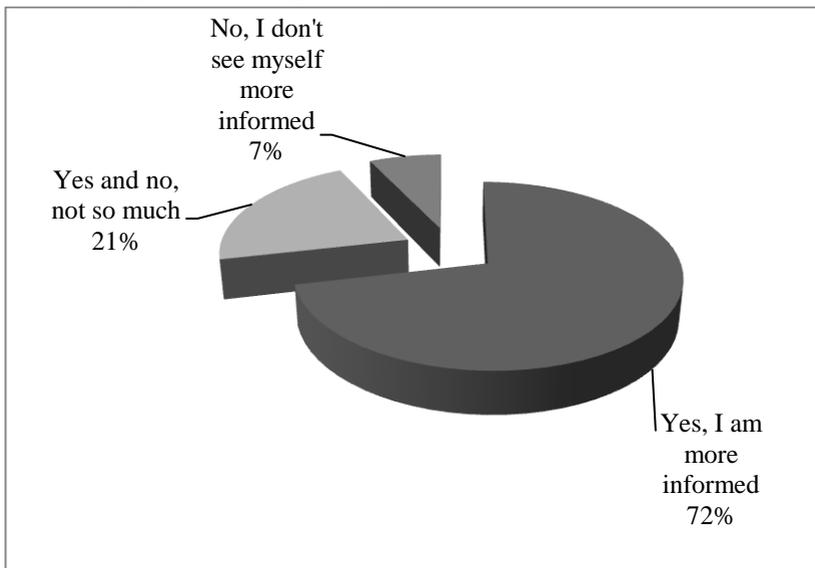
- large amount of personal information that is out there for the general public to see;
- sometimes it is a waste of time and the individual spend large amount of time on an OSN, especially young individuals (high school students, secondary school students etc);
- it can become a play ground for criminals, that follow you around, or follow your activities with mal intent;

- the individuals no longer socialize directly, they no longer meet face to face, but through a virtual environment.

The next objective relates to the impact that the online social networking site has had on the level of information that the user has in relation to different aspects of his / her life. The results of the research can be seen in figure 5.

The results show that 72% of the respondents consider that they are more informed, especially with regard to the personal information (birthdays), various events and activities in the community, news, promotional activities, sales etc. 21% of the respondents state that they maintain their level of information and 7% of the respondents consider that they do not see themselves more informed, underlining the fact that there is a large quantity of information that it is not necessary to be presented in general online social networking sites.

Figure 5: Feeling of being more informed due to OSN



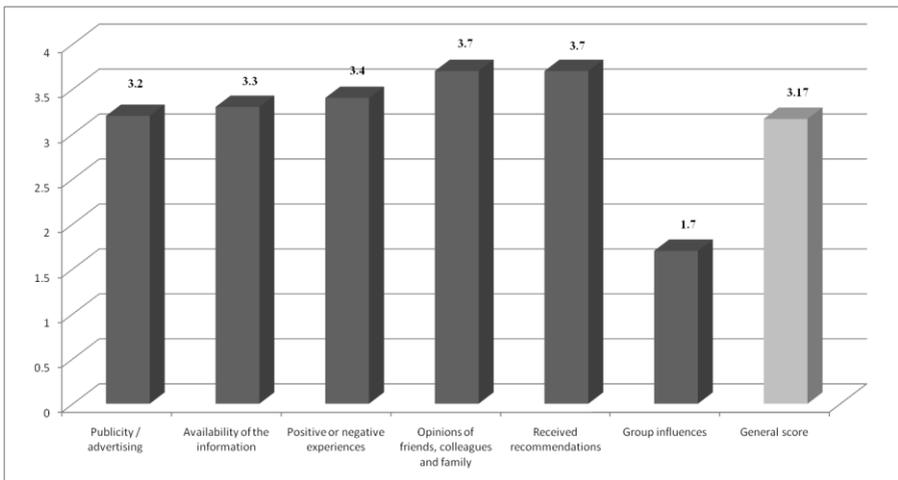
(Source: Authors' computation)

Cumming to the next objectives of the research, we have asked the respondent to state the main influence factors that are exerted on themselves

as clients / consumers by online social networking sites. After stating the influence factor we have asked them to award each influence factor a grade from 1 to 5, where 1 – Poor influence and 5 – Very strong influence. The main influences presented by the participants to the interviews are: (1) publicity / advertising (either paid or placed on the users’ timeline); (2) availability of the information; (3) positive or negative experiences with products or services; (4) opinions of friends, colleagues and family; (5) received recommendations; (6) group influences. A graphical presentation of the responses can be seen in figure 6.

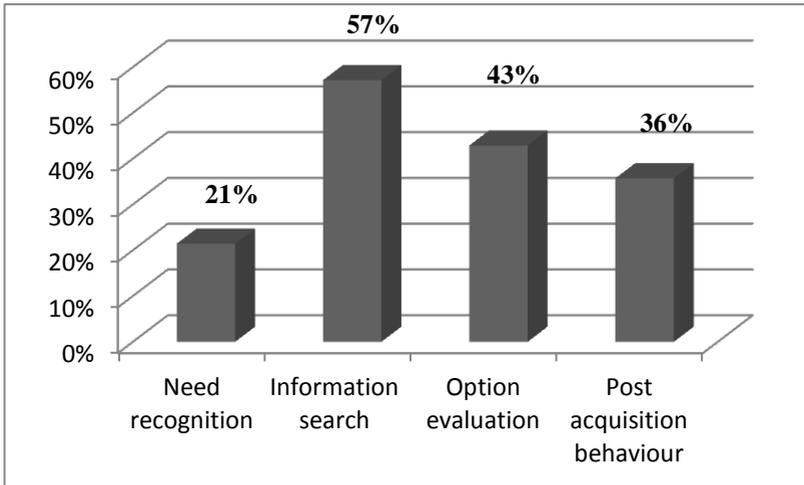
From the analysis of figure 5, we can see that the strongest influences that the users / consumers receive from the OSN sites they use are: opinions of friends, colleagues and family – 3,7; recommendations received about products or services – 3,7. The next level of influences on the is represented by the positive or negative experiences expressed on an OSN after consuming / using a product or a service – 3,4; availability of the information about a product or a service – 3,3; publicity or advertising on an OSN – 3,2 and last but not least the influence of a certain group – 1,7. The general score for this question is 3.17 which point out an average level of influence of the above mentioned factors on the users in their quality as consumers of a certain product or service.

Figure 6: Main influences present on OSN sites



(Source: Authors’ computation)

Figure 7: Influences of OSN on the decision making process



(Source: Authors' computation)

Regarding the influence of the online social networking sites on the process of acquisition a product or a service, the next question and objective was developed. After presenting a graphic description of the decision making process, the participants were asked to underline one or more stages were the online social networking site influences the consumer. The answers offered by the respondents focused on the following elements as shown in figure 7.

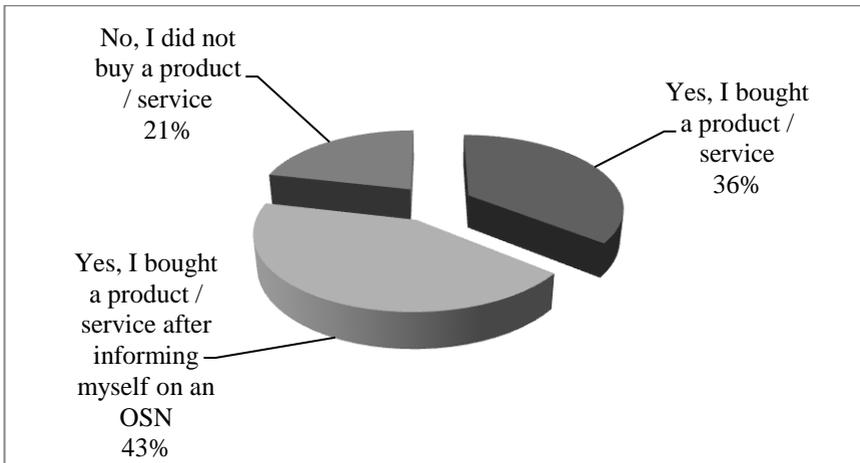
The results shown in figure 7, underline that 57% of the respondents search information regarding a product or a service on an OSN; 43% of them state that they evaluate their option with the help of an OSN; 36% of the consumers mention that sometimes they post pictures, opinions and impressions of a product or a service and last but not least 21% of the participants say that messages and posts by others may lead to a decision making process in order to fulfil a need.

Next on the line is the eighth objective of the qualitative research, which required of the respondents to mention the main products or services that are promoted or presented on the online social networking sites they use. The responses can be divided in two main categories: (1) Products or services promoted on their own timeline by friends and connections; (2) Products of services advertised by various companies.

On the first category the respondents underlined the following products or service promoted on their own timeline: flower arrangements, handmade objects (ear rings, brooches), photo services, event organizing, hair styling, charity and volunteering events and others. On the second category, the main products advertised by companies (those accepted by the users and paid advertising - banners) include IT products, footwear, clothes, body care products, vehicle sales, estate sales etc.

The last objective of our research requires the participants to the qualitative marketing research to mention if they ever bought a product or a service after finding out about it on an online social networking site or being advertised on such an online platform. The responses can be seen in figure 8.

Figure 8: Acquisition of a product or a service



(Source: Authors' computation)

The results presented on figure 8, show that 43% of the respondents have bought a product or a service after informing themselves on an online social networking site; 36% of the responses show a definite result of using an OSN is an acquisition and finally 21% of them stated that they have not acquired a product or a service after viewing an online social networking site.

6. Conclusions and acknowledgments

As we have seen, the online social networking sites have become a new instrument that can be used by marketers and managers alike in order to reach and attract the consumers to their products or services. This new communication tool has created an environment where million and hundreds of millions of individuals or organization can communicate faster, better, permanently and most of the time instantaneously due to the fast paced world wide development of the smart phones and tables of the last 5 to 10 years.

The explosive development of the online social networking sites in the last 10 years, has created for companies new opportunities to increase their revenues and client base, by approaching them using OSN sites. But in the same time it has created the need for said companies to understand how such a online environment influences the consumer and the decision making process. In our paper we have presented a theoretical part that contains on one hand, several definitions of the online social network concept and on the other hand the concept of consumer and consumer behaviour. We found it necessary to shortly underline de decision making process and the main influences that act upon the consumer in this process.

In the second part of the paper we have presented a qualitative marketing research regarding the influence of online social networking sites on the consumer and their behaviour. We have developed an interview guide and we have asked 14 users of OSN sites to answer our questions. The main results of the qualitative research underline the following:

- The great majority (79%) of the respondents consider that owning an OSN account is important and very important.
- More than half of the respondents created their OSN account more than 4 years ago. The main accounts are on Facebook, LinkedIn, Google +, Twitter.
- The main reasons behind creating an OSN account are: communication with family and relatives; communication with friends and colleagues
- The majority of the respondents (85%) have stated that the usage of an OSN has had a positive impact on their lives, on their families' lives as well as in relation with friends and colleagues.
- The main negative elements of owning an OSN account are: large amount of time spent on an OSN, increasingly amount of personal information available for the general public etc.

- The great majority of the respondents consider that they are more informed, especially with regard to the personal information (birthdays), various events and activities in the community, news, promotional activities, sales etc.
- The influences identified that act upon the consumers are: (1) publicity / advertising; (2) availability of the information; (3) positive or negative experiences with products or services; (4) opinions of friends, colleagues and family; (5) received recommendations; (6) group influences.
- The stages of the decision making process on which the OSN have influences are, in the respondents opinion, the following: (1) information search; (2) option evaluation; (3) post acquisition behaviour and (4) need recognition.
- The majority of the respondents have said that the following of an online social networking site has led to the acquisition of a product or a service.

Of course due to the small sample of the research, we can't extrapolate and generalize the results of the research to the total population of online social networking sites users of Sibiu County or of the 7 Center Region. But this is an important first step in identifying several important influences that the OSN sites have on the consumer and its decision making process. It is necessary to further the research by developing and applying a quantitative marketing research with the same aim.

Following this qualitative marketing research, previously conducted researches (Fuciu and Gorski, 2012, 2013; Fuciu et. al: 2012) together with a quantitative marketing research conducted on a representative sample level for the Sibiu County or of the 7 Center Region, especially taking into account the patterns of the OSN users, can reveal an important indicator and can validate a possible model that underlines the influence of online social networking sites on the consumers' buying behavior of the said geographical region.

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