

## **ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE – A MARKETING RESEARCH**

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### **Abstract**

*The Internet users have the opportunity to communicate easier and much faster with individuals from all over the world. One of the most recent and time important online communication platform is the online social networks (OSN). This paper presents how the online social networks are used in the personal and professional lives of its users. We present the concept, evolution of OSN, and several advantages, disadvantages and aspects related to the private/professional life balance on social media. The paper underlines a quantitative marketing research that aims to understand how the OSN users understand and use the platform in their personal and professional lives, how they connect to it and how they perceive the effects of this tool on their lives.*

**Key words:** marketing, online social networks, marketing research, personal & professional life, awareness

**JEL classification:** M30, M31, M39

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### **1. Introduction**

Communicating with consumer and with potential clients has never been easier. The last two and a half decades have created for individuals and for companies the almost perfect communication tools. Starting from the .com boom of the beginning of the millennium, passing to the strong development of the email communication systems, and jumping to the usage of the online social networking sites and to the highly developed mobile / smartphone

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usage, the companies and the individuals have found it more easy and in the same time more challenging to communicate with each other.

Probably the most important communication tool developed in the last years has been the online social networks (OSN). These platforms have allowed individuals and companies to communicate worldwide, at any time of the day. It has brought together people from all over the globe, it has reunited friends, family, colleagues and at the same time it has given the opportunity to the companies to communicate better, in a more targeted fashion with their clients, especially taking into account their profiles, interests as well as their desires. But at the same time, the important usage of these communication platforms (OSN) have gapped the bridge between the personal and the professional life of the OSN users and the companies.

The companies seem to relate more and more on the information gathered from the online social networking sites and the individuals seem to use them more and more to promote themselves personally and professionally. In this paper we are presenting several aspects related to the scientific literature related to the online social networking sites, their development as well as their professional and personal advantages and disadvantages for using these platforms. We are also presenting the results of a quantitative marketing research regarding the individuals' usage of the online social networking sites in their professional and personal life.

## **2. Literature review**

In this section of the paper we are presenting the concept of online social networks defined by several authors of the last years, its evolution and the main advantages and disadvantages for the users' professional and personal lives.

The development of the communication and information technologies of the last years has offered academics and marketing specialists' new concepts and technologies for them to write and talk about. The new tools offered by the information age have changed the way of life of the consumer in the same way new technological advancements and the development of new marketing channels have increased the business scene (Gray et. al., 2009, p. 11).

One of the most important communication tool that has been in use in the last decade was the online social networking site or OSN. According to

Boyd and Ellison (2007) the online social networking sites “are 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”.

Other authors (Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini, 2007) define online social networking sites as a particular type of virtual community and Richter et. al, (2011) defines OSN as a social software. Social networking sites – SNSs – (Diffley et. al. 2011) are considered to be 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. 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. The same idea as the one presented by Schneider, 2009 is agreed upon by other authors such as Veghes and Pantea, 2009 and Zarella, 2010.

After the analysis of the above mentioned definitions of the online social networks concept, we can observe that most of the authors agree on several common traits of this platform: (1) web based service; (2) brings together friends and acquaintances; (3) existence of common interests, hobbies etc. Some authors (Boyd and Ellison, 2007) consider that the first online social networking site appeared in 1997 and it was sixdegree.com, which is now extinct. Other sources (1stwebdesigner.com, 2016) show that it was geocities.com which appeared in 1994. According to 1stwebdesigner.com, (2016) geocities allowed the users to create and customize their own web sites, grouping them into different ‘cities’ based on the site’s content. The following year, TheGlobe.com launched for the public, giving users the ability to interact with people who have the same hobbies and interests, and to publish their own content.

The first modern online networking site was Friendster.com, which in 2003 was a dating website, and in its first 3 months had more than 3 million users. By 2003, the list of services had grown to include such popular services as Friendster, LinkedIn and MySpace. When Friendster announced in 2003 that it would begin charging user fees to use the website, many users left to join newer, non-fee-charging services, such as MySpace (ebsohost.com, 2016).

As social networks have become the subject of numerous start-up companies in their own right, offering each user the promise of managing her own social network as a valuable resource to be shepherded and grown (Kumar et. al., 2006). From 2003 onward, many new SNSs were launched. Most took the form of profile-centric sites, trying to replicate the early success of Friendster or target specific demographics. While socially-organized SNSs solicit broad audiences, professional sites such as LinkedIn, Visible Path, and Xing (formerly openBC) focus on business people (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

MySpace was begun in 2003 to compete with sites like Friendster, Xanga, and AsianAvenue. While MySpace attracted the majority of media attention in the U.S. and abroad, SNSs were proliferating and growing in popularity worldwide. Friendster gained traction in the Pacific Islands, Orkut became the premier SNS in Brazil before growing rapidly in India (Madhavan, 2007 in Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

The greatest development and evolution was that of Facebook which was launched in early 2004 as a Harvard-only SNS (Cassidy, 2006). To join, a user had to have a harvard.edu email address. As Facebook began supporting other schools, those users were also required to have university email addresses associated with those institutions, a requirement that kept the site relatively closed and contributed to users' perceptions of the site as an intimate, private community.

Starting from 2004, Facebook has become the world greatest online social networking platform and in December 2014, there were more than 1 million Facebook.com users and in May 2005 there were 800 colleges that were part of the Facebook network. According to their website, at the end of December 2015 (more than 10 years since its beginning) there were: (1) 1.59 billion monthly active users; (2) 1.44 billion mobile monthly active users; (3) 1.04 billion daily active users on average; (4) 934 million mobile daily active users; (5) Approximately 83.6% of our daily active users are outside the US and Canada. (Facebook.com, 2016).

After presenting the concept and evolution of the online social networking sites, we will further present several advantages and disadvantages for the users' private and professional life. One of the main questions that we can ask the online users today is: *How do you balance your private and professional life when using social media?* This is an important question that is asked more and more in the last year or so.

According to De La Cruz, (2015) you can't separate the two. She states that "Our lives are made up of personal, professional and private aspects that we pick and choose from when sharing information with others. The moment you choose to elevate your visibility is the same moment you forfeit the ability to be completely private and guarded in your daily life. You must become comfortable sharing your thought process and lifestyle, in order to build authentic relationships with your audience as a thought leader and expert. Transparency helps you build your credibility, boost your reputation and gain trust (De la Cruz, 2016)."

According to, Baer, (2015), "Social media is rooted culturally in showing your real, whole self. The fundamental truth is that your personal life is almost undoubtedly more interesting than your business life. Period. And, associating some sort of noteworthy character trait to your personal brand makes you more memorable in social media".

We agree with these assessment that you must be aware of the costs of using OSN sites for your private and your professional life. At the same time, you have to be informed and take into account several important advantages and disadvantages for using OSN for your private and professional life.

The main advantages for the OSN users' are: (1) the OSN sites are free; (2) it lets you connect to different people from anywhere in the world; (3) is the most convenient tool for finding friends and family from all over the world; (4) it is an easy way to share feelings and what's happening in your daily life (for some OSN); (5) the OSN site has good privacy settings, allowing you to choose your desired level of privacy; (6) future employees can find out what and who you really are by viewing your OSN accounts.

The main disadvantages for the OSN users' are: (1) the OSN are usually addictive for the users; (2) there are on certain OSN platform an important number of fake profiles or activities; (3) there are plenty of groups and fan pages out there that condone extremist, unaccepting points of view; (4) large amounts of time spent on an OSN site has affected the personal and professional life of the users; (5) an individual can be followed and be stalked if your private information is on display or without the proper privacy settings enabled; (6) you can damage your professional image if you post and / or endorse inappropriate material / actions / information etc. (<http://hubpages.com>, 2016).

According to an article on the Queens University of Charlotte website: "Being active on social media can benefit both your personal and professional

purposes, provided you portray a work-safe image in your personal social presence. Many employers consider not only professional skillset, but also prospective employees' hobbies and passions outside of work. Because of social media, people's lives have become more transparent as work and professional boundaries have blurred. Many companies are embracing the value of learning about their employees' personal lives and interests prior to making an offer to determine whether potential employees will be a good fit" (<http://online.queens.edu>, 2016), and we agree with this assessment, that is also what we intend to find out through our marketing research presented below at point 3 in our paper.

### **3. Using online social networking sites in the personal and professional life – a marketing research**

The main purpose of our qualitative marketing research is to identify the usage of the online social networking sites in the users' private or professional life and what is the difference between them is. This paper is a continuation of the authors' interests in the study of online social networking sites and their influence on the consumers' lives (Dumitrescu et al., 2015; Fuciu and Dumitrescu, 2014; Fuciu et al., 2014; Fuciu and Gorski, 2012; Fuciu et al. 2012), and will provide an insight on how the consumers view the usage of OSN in their personal and professional lives.

We have established several specific objectives for our marketing research as follows: (O<sub>1</sub>) – Determining the respondents' favourite OSN account and the main platforms used in their professional and personal lives; (O<sub>2</sub>) – Determining the users' behaviour in terms of time, technology and connection method used for the OSN; (O<sub>3</sub>) – Identifying the main activities undertaken on an OSN account in their personal life; (O<sub>4</sub>) – Identifying the main activities undertaken on an OSN account in their professional life; (O<sub>5</sub>) – Determining the users' perception regarding the impact of OSN on their lives; (O<sub>6</sub>) – Identifying the users' perception regarding the information posted on an OSN and how they can be seen by a potential employer.

The research was developed in two stages, it went through a qualitative research stage, in which we have asked several company users how they view the OSN and how they use it, in order to gather information about their behaviour. This stage was followed by a quantitative marketing research

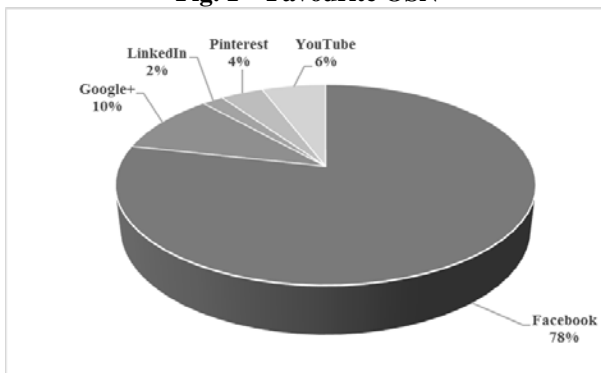
undertaken between November 2015 – March 2016 and was developed in the Sibiu County of Romania.

The questionnaire for the quantitative research is formed of: 22 questions from which: all 22 were closed questions, 11 closed questions using 5 step Likert scale, 2 mixed questions and the rest of the questions are closed demographic questions. We have established an availability sample of 105 respondents representing OSN and Internet users of Sibiu County. We consider the small sample size a limitation of our research, but at the same time it shows some interesting results that can be developed in depth in future research activities and on a larger scale such as the 7 Center Region of Romania (Alba, Brasov, Covasna, Harghita, Mures, Sibiu Counties)

Following the elimination of the invalid questionnaires, the codification of the answers and using the SPSS 19 programme, we have analysed the data collected by the research operators. After the analysis of the data and the interpretation of the information collected we can present the following results of our research:

a) ( $O_1$ ) – Determining the respondents' favourite OSN account and the main platforms used in their professional and personal lives;

**Fig. 1 – Favourite OSN**



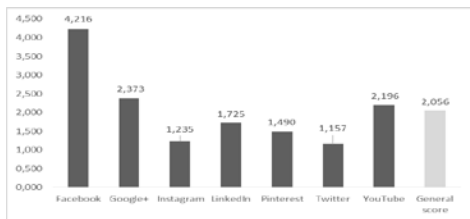
Source: Authors' computation

Figure 1 presents the respondents' favourite online networking sites as follows: the main OSN site is Facebook.com (mentioned by 78%) of the respondents; the second OSN site is Google+ (10%); the video sharing platform YouTube (6%); Pinterest (4%); LinkedIn (2%). Using the 5 step

Liket scale we have asked the respondents which is the mostly used OSN in their private life.

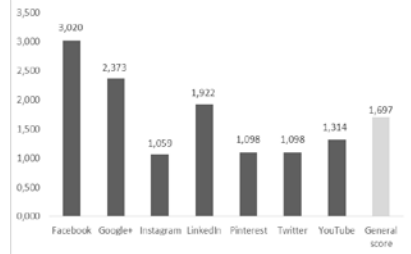
The responses (fig. 2) show the scores registered by the OSN: Facebook.com – 4.26; Google + - 2.73; YouTube – 2.19; LinkedIn – 1.72; Pinterest – 1.49; Instagram and Twitter – less than 1.2. The scores above 3, show a genuine usage of the OSN in their private lives. The general score for this question is 2.05.

Fig. 2 – OSN used mostly in private life



Source: Authors' computation

Fig. 3 – OSN used mostly in professional life



Source: Authors' computation

Figure 3 shows the usage of the OSN in the users' professional life. The scores for this question show a low to medium interest for the usage of online social networking sites in their professional lives (the general score is 1.67). Facebook – 3.02; Google+ - 2.37; LinkedIn – 1.92; and all the others have registered score of below 1.3.

*b) (O<sub>2</sub>) – Determining the users' behaviour in terms of time, technology and connection method used for the OSN;*

Regarding the usage of OSN in terms of time, technology and connection method by the respondents, the research results show the following important information: (1) the respondents use OSN several times / day – 78%; (2) time spent on an OSN – 59% (divided between 3 – 4 h/day, 1 – 2 h/day, permanently connected); (3) main connection environment – 78% (WiFi); (4) main connection technology – 68% (smartphone); (5) most of the respondents have created their favourite OSN account in the last 6 – 7 years.

*c) (O<sub>3</sub>) – Identifying the main activities undertaken on an OSN account in their personal life;*



Figure 4 presents the scores registered by the responses offered by the respondents with regard to the main activities undertaken by the users in their personal / everyday life. The analysis was done with the help of the 5 Likert scale. The main activities are: (1) communicate with friends; (2) search for information about activities / projects; (3) look at photos; (4) stay in touch with offers; (5) comment on friends activity; (6) search for a job; all other activities have a score of less than 2. The general score for this question is of 2.28, which shows a low to medium interest for these activities.

**Fig. 4 – OSN activities undertaken in everyday life**

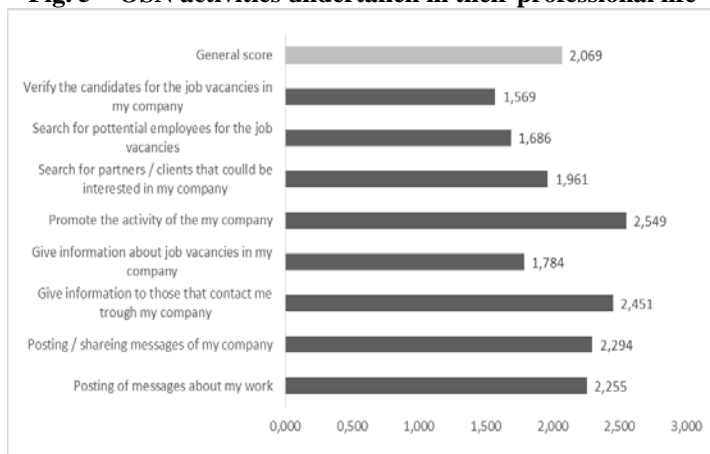


Source: Authors' computation

*d) (O<sub>4</sub>) – Identifying the main activities undertaken on an OSN account in their professional life;*

Figure 5 presents the scores registered by the responses offered by the respondents with regard to the main activities undertaken by the users in their professional life. The analysis was done with the help of the 5 Likert scale. The main activities which registered scores between 1.56 and 2.54 were: (1) Promote the activity of my company; (2) Give information to those that contact me through my company; (3) Posting / sharing messages of my company; (4) Posting messages about my work; (5) Search for partners / clients that could be interested in my company. The general score for this question is 2.06, which shows a low interest in the above mentioned activities.

**Fig. 5 – OSN activities undertaken in their professional life**

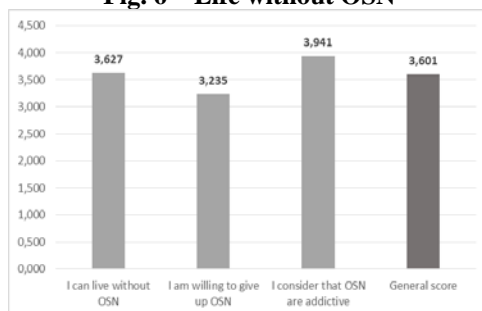


Source: Authors' computation

*e) (O<sub>5</sub>) – Determining the users' perception regarding the impact of OSN on their lives;*

Regarding the users' perception regarding the impact of OSN on their lives, we have asked the respondents if they are willing to give up on OSN or if they can live without OSN. According to the respondents, (1) they consider that they can live without OSN (3.62 – medium to strong opinion); (2) they are willing to give up on OSN (3.23 – above medium opinion); (3) consider OSN to be addictive (3.94 – strong opinion). The general score is 3.60.

**Fig. 6 – Life without OSN**

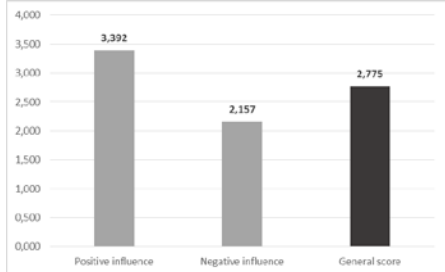


Source: Authors' computation

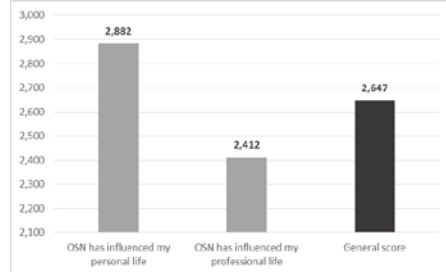
Another aspect that we asked the respondents it to mention if the OSN have had a positive or a negative influence on them in general and whether the OSN have influenced their personal and professional lives. The results shown in figures 7 and 8 show that: (1) there was a positive influence – 3.39; (2) there was a negative influence – 2.15. The general score was 2.77.

Regarding the influence on their professional vs. private lives, the data shows that the influence is below the average level: (1) influence on personal life – 2.82; (2) influence on professional life – 2.41. The general score for this aspect is 2.64. We have also calculated the correlation (Pearson) between the variables presented in figures 7 and 8, and the results have shown that there is an average (medium) correlation of 0.433 between the general negative influence of OSN and the OSN influence on the users personal life.

**Fig. 7 – OSN’s general influence on the user**    **Fig. 8 – OSN’s influence on private vs. professional life**



Source: Authors’ computation



Source: Authors’ computation

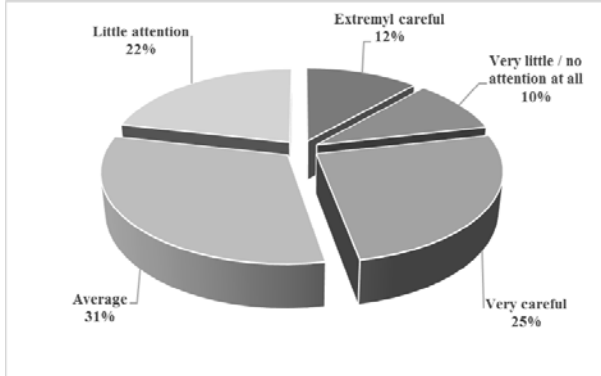
*e) (O<sub>6</sub>) – Identifying the users’ perception regarding the information posted on an OSN and how they can be seen by a potential employer.*

The sixth objective of our research was generated in order to understand the users’ perception regarding the information posted on an OSN and how they can be seen by a potential employer. We have asked the respondents to present their position in relation to the attention that they give to the process and the information that they post on their OSN accounts. Figure 9 shows the following results:

- Extremely careful – 10%;
- Very careful – 25%;
- Average attention – 31%;

- Little attention – 22%;
- Very little / no attention at all – 10%.

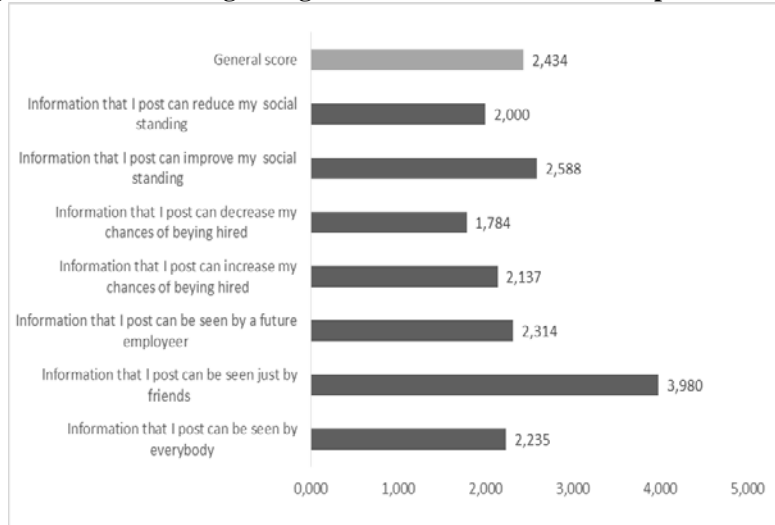
**Fig. 9 – Attention given to the post promoted on ones OSN page**



Source: Authors' computation

Figure 10 shows the answers given by the respondents regarding the question if they are aware of the effects of the information that it is posted on an online social networking site. The analysis was done with a 5 step Likert scale from which we have extracted the individual scores for each variable and we have calculated the general score for this question.

**Fig. 10 – Awareness regarding the effects of the information posted on OSN**



Source: Authors' computation

The results have shown that the respondents are aware that the information posted by them is mostly seen by friends – 3.98 (high level of awareness). At the same time, the respondents seem not to agree that there are several important aspects linked between the usage of an online social networking site and their professional / personal life such as: (1) information that I post can improve my social standing – 2.58; (2) information that I post can be seen by a future employer – 2.31; (3) information that I post can be seen by everybody – 2.23; (4) information that I post can increase my chances of being hired – 2.13; (5) information that I post can reduce my social standing – 2.00; (6) information that I post can increase my chances of being hired – 1.78. The general score for this question is 2.43, which shows a low to average agreement with the above mentioned statements.

Our analysis is concluded by several socio-demographic question in order to make a proper placement within the general usage of online social networking sites users. The results show that: 92% of the respondents are aged between 18 – 45 years old (less than 18, he / she can't work); 74,5 % are female, 25,5% are male; 96,1 % of the respondents are from an urban environment; 64,7% of the respondents have higher education studies

(bachelor, master, doctoral studies); 21.6 % are high school graduates; 29,4% win between 1001 – 1500 lei; 21,6 win over 2500 lei; 19,6% win between 2001 – 2500 lei; 9,8% win between 1501 – 2000lei; the rest of our respondents with no income or with income of less than 750 lei; 751 - 1000 lei.

#### **4. Conclusions and acknowledgments**

The development of the information and communication technologies of the last 20 years has opened the gates for marketers and for the business world to other tools by which they can relate and communicate with current and potential clients. This paper was designed in order to understand how the online social networking sites have influenced and affected the personal and professional lives of their users.

We have presented several definitions of the online social networking site concept, from which we underline that of Boyd and Ellison (2007): “are 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”. We have presented a short evolution of the online social networking sites starting from the first ones Geocities (1994) and Sixdegree.com (1997), to the 2003 Friendster (the first modern OSN) and to the huge development of Facebook from 2004 to 2016.

Another important aspect that we underlined in the literature review section of the paper was the aspect of balancing the personal and the professional lives on the social media sites. It has been discovered that everything that one posts online will always be online, and if they will not be careful, the Internet and OSN users’ private and professional lives will be affected. The OSN users must be aware that the information posted on a social media account can be seen not just by family, friends or acquaintances, but also by head hunters, future employers, colleagues and even people that want to do you harm.

The final part of our paper is represented by the presentation of an online qualitative marketing research developed by the authors in November 2015 – March 2016. The main results show that:

- The preferred online social networking site is Facebook.com;

- Facebook.com is the most used OSN in the respondents' private and professional lives, followed by Google + and LinkedIn;
- The users connect to the OSN several times / day via WiFi and mostly with the help of a smartphone;
- The main activities undertaken in their personal life on an OSN are: communicating with friends, search for information about activities / projects; looking at photos;
- The main activities undertaken in their professional life on an OSN are: promote the activity of my company; give information to those that contact me through the my company; posting / sharing messages of my company;
- Regarding the influence of OSN on their lives the results are: OSN has influenced positively their personal and professional lives, but there is a correlation between the negative impact and the impact on the personal life of the respondents. At the same time they consider OSN to be addictive.
- The majority of the respondents consider that they are careful of what they post on their OSN account;
- The respondents are aware that the information posted by them is mostly seen by friends and at the same time they disagree that the information posted on an OSN can damage their personal and professional lives.

We hope that this paper will raise the awareness about the attention that we give the posting / sharing on an OSN account and at the same time it will drive the challenge of studying the balance of personal and professional lives on social media. At the same time we acknowledge that the small sample size and the research area can have a diminishing effect on the research results and we believe that further research is needed in order to fully understand how the online social networking site can be used properly for both the private and the professional lives of its users.

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