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The Opinion of Facebook Friends as the Most Reliable Recommendation of Products and Services in Poland. The Evolution of Purchase Pathways in Social Media

Summary

Two significant factors, which affect customers' purchase pathways, are recommendation and trust in its sources. The article presents the results of the research studies on trust in the Internet recommendation sources and, considering such a context, on the influence exerted on the evolution of the so called purchasing pathways followed by customers in Poland.

The article aims at the presentation of the results obtained during the research studies on customers' trust in the main social networking sites, viewed as information channels about products and services, with the consideration of their impact on the evolution of purchase pathways followed by consumers in Poland.

As indicated by the relevant research studies, the most reliable social networking site is Facebook (65% of answers). The obtained results explicitly differentiate recommendation sources, and the most reliable ones involve recommendation provided by friends (the term *friends* is applied in accordance with the terminology used by social media). The survey involved 514 respondents (purposive sampling).

Key words: purchase pathways, recommendation, Facebook, trust.

JEL codes: D83, D89

Introduction

As a form of marketing relations, and considering its traditional interpretation, recommendation is defined as direct, verbal communication between two or among more people who share their opinions on products or entities; such a relation is of non-market nature, since its participants do not earn any material gain because of that relation (Goldsmith, Horowitz 2006).

Nevertheless, such a classical definition requires some considerable corrections when it refers to recommendation which takes place in the Internet, especially in the social media. Hence:

- the character of recommendation is not only verbal, and it usually appears as an entry, a comment or a so called thumb-up. Therefore, it has dual nature, although it is conveyed in the digital form, with the consideration of the media code and protocol;

- recommendation does not come as a direct relation. It is intermediated by a media platform (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Thus, the character of the relation is not transparent and media platforms are considered to be transparent by their users;
- the non-market character of recommendation in the Internet is also questionable, because each activity of users comes as a form of media contents creation which allows some entities to collect not only data (e.g. big data), but also to sell the access to users to advertisers through new media organisations. Even if recommendation is not intentionally placed in the market, it becomes an element of the market logic of media.

Such conclusions allow us to formulate a definition of recommendation, identifying it as a form of communication between media receivers and media users, which includes information about products and services, within the framework of the market logic of media.

The need for an analysis of recommendation in the new media environment was recognised as soon as the first large social groups started searching for information on services and products (Goldsmith, Horowitz 2006). Since then, the research studies on the eWOM, that is namely, on the e-recommendation marketing have been mainly focused on the persuasion element and rarely on the mechanisms related to the diffusion of information, in an attempt to understand the essence of viral marketing. There have been studies on the efficiency of e-recommendation (Sussan, Gould, Weisfeld-Spolter 2006), and the role of technologies as the recommendation agents has been also analysed (Wang, Benbasat 2008).

However, the impact of eWOM recommendation sources has been scarcely researched (Yan, Li, See-to 2014). Some research studies have been generally carried out on the scale of the assessment given to products in the Internet during purchase decision-making processes, and it has been emphasized that the lack of opinion affects the increase in distrust towards a particular offer.

Recommendation in social media

More and more frequently, the Internet environment turns into an environment in which users acquire and distribute recommendation on products and services, but they also search for recommendation, since the interest in advertisement messages has been significantly decreasing in general.

So far, a multi-aspect picture presenting the formation of recommendation and its diffusion in new media, especially in social media, has not been presented in any comprehensive research study. Such a research study should include not only interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary holistic interpretation, but it should be also comprehensive enough to consider a dynamic status of media networks and their users' migration behaviour. While searching for the contents they are interested in, users migrate among media platforms and contribute to the instability of branding conditions (Kotler, Caslione, Bakalarz 2013).

Consumers use new media to participate in social networking sites, which allow them to create and share contents, to communicate with each other and to develop relations with

other consumers. Social networking sites come not only as communication sites but also as an environment for relations between customers and companies/brands.

Considering the marketing perspective, it is also important that users assume the role of active prosumers – they not only receive recommendation, but they also create and distribute it. Such a general statement, however, requires some more precise definition; distribution of recommendation is common but active creation of recommendation refers to 8-10% of new media users approximately. It should be added that brands are the subject of approximately 40% of interaction which takes place in social media (Kunz, Hackworth 2011).

Regardless of the way in which recommendation is presented, whether it is a comment under a photograph, a discussion on a forum, an exchange of private messages between current and potential consumers, within the framework of the specific interaction of social media, recommendation which comes from social media is exceptionally well remembered by consumers (McDonald 2016).

The research studies on the role of recommendation in the Internet refer to, among others, relations between customers' satisfaction and their readiness to recommend, the efficiency of recommendation, the issue (Sweeney, Soutar, Mazzarol 2012) and the problems (Bughin, Doogan, Vetvik 2010) related to the measurement of recommendation. Considering such a context, the ratios between the entertainment offer and the offer referring directly to the marketing message have been analysed.

Polish literature on the analysis of recommendation in the Internet presents studies which are mainly of theoretical nature, and they refer to purchase decisions based on recommendation in the Internet (Sorokin 2014). The impact of recommendation provided by bloggers has been analysed, and the viral character of recommendation has been emphasized. Also, the role of the opinion-forming leaders has been studied in the context of word-of-mouth communication as particularly trustworthy. Considering the context of purchasing pathways, the problem of purchasing behaviour has been considered, along with the role of social media.

Trust and the sources of recommendation

The complexity of the issues related to trust in social media involves trust to other consumers and their recommendation, trust to organisations which provide their own messages and trust to new media sites which provide communication tools (Kreft 2016a, s. 146). In such a complex dependency environment, relations with consumers are formed, along with their virtual identities, social capital (SocialMediaLink 2015) and virtual communities.

The research studies on trust towards sources of recommendation indicate that despite a broad access to various information and recommendation for particular products or services placed in social media and other Internet sites, and also despite a tendency towards free exchange of experience related to purchasing, consumers consider their friends' (including virtual friends') opinions as the most trustworthy (SocialMediaLink 2015).

Recommendation is present in blog posts, lists provided by the Internet product comparison sites, posts placed in the Internet forums, comments on e-shops and various Internet sites.

Such forms tend to be changeable in the same way as the profiles and behaviour of potential customers. Consumers who function in the virtual environment spend a lot of time to obtain information about products or services; they are impatient and they wish to save their time (also during the comparison of products and finding detailed information on such products) (Kreft 2016b).

Thus, the communication channels, on-line and off-line recommendation become entwined in the purchasing pathways. A bit of advice provided by a shop-assistant in a real shop becomes more often supported by an opinion taken from social media, and consumers treat real shops mainly as shop windows (Tkaczyk 2012).

Purchase pathway and the strategy of new media organization

A customer's purchase pathway involves all the steps taken subsequently by customers since the moment when a purchase decision is made. The purchase pathway starts with the need that is finally satisfied with a purchased product or a service. It is also significant that the purchase pathway includes all the touchpoints with the brand that customers meet on their way to the purchase (IAB 2015).

In the environment of traditional media, the touchpoints with a brand, which determine customers' subsequent steps, used to be advertisement in press or on television, word-of-mouth recommendation provided by friends or a chat with a consultant at a shop. In the environment of digital media, however, the variety of information and a relatively easy and fast access to the Internet via numerous channels (mobile devices) have contributed to the evolution of the purchase pathway (IAB 2015).

In order to meet the requirements presented by modern consumers and to provide them with the fastest and the most convenient journey along the purchase pathway, it would be advisable to retrace it by a reproduction of a customer journey map (Richardson 2010). It allows brands to adjust communication at the particular touchpoints, to master their sale strategies and to plan their marketing operations.

In the environment of digital media, the most popular social media are: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram and LinkedIn, however, LinkedIn is treated as a typical business web portal oriented towards formation of new contacts (Gemius 2015). Youtube is dedicated to the distribution of video contents, Pinterest and Instagram present photographs and other graphical contents. Facebook is dedicated to the aggregation of friends, formation of relations and sharing contents related first of all to users' private life. Twitter allows users to pass short messages, especially private ones, with multimedia material attachments. Recently, relatively new social networking sites, such as Vine and Snapchat have been gaining more and more interest too. They are operated in the form of mobile applica-

tions. A significant role in social media is also played by Internet forums and blogospheres (Hudson, Thal 2013).

In social media there are numbers of methods to recommend a product or a service, as well as a number of ways to receive recommendation or opinions provided by other users. For instance, on Facebook it is possible to place a comment at the profile of a particular brand. The comment is followed by stars given to a product or a service. The recommendation also takes the form of a comment placed under a post which refers to a particular product or service, and – similarly to Instagram – a photograph of a purchased product, followed by an opinion about it.

The profile of a consumer has evolved with the development of social media. A growing need of personalisation, individualisation, a change in the way of spending free time, a need for entertainment and a specific form of narcissism have affected the evolution of an offer provided by social media, and consequently, the operational strategy of media organisations, that is namely: the particular social networking sites (Szpunar 2016).

In order to keep users' interest and to attract advertisers, social media modify their operational strategies, and they adjust them to dynamically changing trends and requirements.

The aim and the method of the research

The article aims at the presentation of the results obtained during the research studies on customers' trust to the main social networking sites, viewed as information channels about products and services, with the consideration of their impact on the evolution of purchase pathways followed by consumers in Poland.

For prosumers, the fundamental value of the functioning in the on-line environment is interactivity – such an opinion is indicated mainly by people aged between 19-34, who most often purchase products and services via the Internet, and who are involved in various activities in social media. Considering the above-mentioned facts, the survey sample includes women and men aged between 20-35, who are mostly city inhabitants (95%), with higher education degrees, who are mostly employed in the marketing sector. The survey was carried out in the summer 2016, and the sample involved 514 respondents (in which the purposive sampling method was assumed (Churchill 2002)). The sample is made up of women and men aged 20-35 as they are the largest part of active social media users. The relatively large age range gives users the opportunity to explore different ways of using social media. They are decisive enough to purchase on their own, which in turn involves searching for information about their interests (products or services) in social media. The study only concerned social media.

In accordance with methodology recommendation, the research involves the survey method, which is suitable for analysis involving descriptive, explorative and explanative objectives (Gruszczyński 2002). Furthermore, the survey comes as a proper tool to measure attitudes and opinions presented by a large population. For the requirements of the sur-

vey, a three-part questionnaire form has been developed and applied, as recommended by (Babbie 2009).

The results of the research

As indicated in the research study, all the respondents have their accounts or profiles at more than one social networking site. The most popular social networking sites are respectively: Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and Instagram, however the group of respondents also includes the users of some less popular sites, such as Snapchat and Vine.

The survey allows us to draw the following conclusions:

- According to 23% of the respondents, information found in social media definitely affects purchase decisions; 56% of the respondents think that such information *fairly affects purchase decisions*. Only 3% of the respondents express an opinion that information acquired from social media does not affect purchase decisions at all.
- Among social networking sites, the most trustworthy source of information about products and services is Facebook (indicated by 65% of the respondents), then far less frequently indicated: YouTube (17% of the respondents) and LinkedIn (8%); the respondents have been allowed to choose one social networking site.

Consumers look for information about products and services in various social networking sites. The most frequent choice of a particular site in their search for information depends on several factors, for example on how attractive a particular site is for consumers, how often it is visited and how much reliable it is in terms of the information provided to consumers.

The most reliable recommendation source is direct recommendation provided by friends (the term *friends* is applied in accordance with the terminology used by social media). This source reaches an average result of 4.16 on the scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 means most and 5 least trusted source). The second most reliable source in social media involves opinions given by people who have already used a product or a service (an average result of 3.82). Information about promotions and sales is considered to be even less reliable by the respondents (3.49), as well as the assessment in the form of granted stars or points (3.24), opinions provided by bloggers, vloggers and other influencers (2.60) and recommendation of products or services provided by the companies which offer such products of services.

The respondents who are Facebook users have declared that they use that social networking site more than several times a day (51%), whereas only 11% of the respondents have stated that they use LinkedIn as often as that. Only 3% of the respondents have declared that they do not use Facebook at all, and 25% have stated that they do not use LinkedIn.

As indicated by the research study, apart from the respondents' trust in the information acquired in social media, their purchase decisions are considerably affected by the time when they are looking for information about products and services. In the questionnaire form the respondents have been asked to indicate when they look for information about products and services: before, during or after the purchase. It has been possible for them to select

more than one option. Most of them (501 out of 514 respondents who have participated in the survey) look for the required information before the purchase.

Conclusions

Recommendation provided directly by sellers, shop-assistants and word-of-mouth recommendation provided by other consumers is often replaced by recommendation provided in social media which become a basic environment where new purchase pathways are formed.

Considering the context of digital purchase pathways, users declare different levels of trust towards various social networking sites and towards various sources of recommendation published in such sites.

Among social networking sites, the most trustworthy is the most popular one: Facebook; among the sources of information the most reliable ones are: direct recommendation provided by friends (the term *friends* is applied in accordance with the terminology used by social media) and opinions provided by people who have already used particular products or services. A surprisingly low level of trust has been declared for bloggers and vloggers.

An analysis of relations between the popularity of social networking sites and trust declared for recommendation which is published there, in the context of the phenomenon referred to as the social proof, would come as a considerable complementation of the published research results.

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Opinia przyjaciół na Facebooku jako najbardziej godna zaufania rekomendacja produktów i usług w Polsce. Ewolucja ścieżek zakupowych w mediach społecznościowych

Streszczenie

Dwoma istotnymi czynnikami, które wpływają na ścieżki zakupowe klientów, są rekomendacja i zaufanie do jej źródeł. W artykule przedstawiono wyniki badań nad zaufaniem do internetowych źródeł rekomendacji oraz, biorąc pod uwagę taki kontekst, nad wpływem wywieranym na ewolucję tzw. ścieżek zakupowych, którymi podążają klienci w Polsce.

Artykuł ma na celu prezentację wyników uzyskanych w trakcie badań nad zaufaniem klientów do głównych portali społecznościowych, postrzeganych jako kanały informacji o produktach i usługach, z uwzględnieniem ich wpływu na ewolucję ścieżek zakupowych, jakimi podążają konsumenci w Polsce.

Jak na to wskazują badania, najbardziej wiarygodnym portalem społecznościowym jest Facebook (65% odpowiedzi). Uzyskane wyniki wyraźnie różnicują źródła rekomendacji, zaś najbardziej godne zaufania dotyczą rekomendacji przyjaciół (termin *przyjaciele* jest stosowany zgodnie z terminologią używaną przez media społecznościowe). Badaniem objęto 514 respondentów (dobór próby celowy).

Słowa kluczowe: ścieżki zakupowe, rekomendacja, Facebook, zaufanie.

Kody JEL: D83, D89

Мнение друзей на портале *Facebook* как наиболее достоверная рекомендация продуктов и услуг в Польше. Эволюция «зakupочных тропинок» в социальных медиа

Резюме

Двумя существенными факторами, которые влияют на так называемые «зakupочные тропинки» клиентов, являются рекомендация и доверие к ее источникам. Статья представляет результаты изучения доверия к интернет-источникам и, учитывая такой контекст, влияния на эволюцию «зakupочных тропинок» (англ. *purchase pathways*), по которым следуют клиенты в Польше.

Цель статьи – представить результаты, полученные по ходу изучения доверия клиентов к основным порталам социальных медиа, воспринимаемым как каналы информации о продуктах и услугах, с учетом их влияния на эволюцию «зakupочных тропинок», по которым следуют потребители в Польше.

Как указывают существенные обследования, самым достоверным порталом социальных медиа считают *Facebook* (65% ответов). Полученные результаты четко дифференцируют источники рекомендации, наиболее же достоверные касаются рекомендации друзей (термин *друзья* применяют в соответствии с терминологией, используемой социальными медиа). Обследование охватило 514 респондентов (целевое семплирование).

Ключевые слова: zakupочные тропинки, рекомендация, *Facebook*, доверие.

Коды JEL: D83, D89

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