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SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE POTENTIAL OF WEBLOGS IN MARKETING

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Abstract

The Internet evolved from Web1.0 to Web2.0, bringing on frontline the Social Media, with the help of which a double communication advantage can be underscored: between companies and their customers and between customers. Hence, Social Media can be considered a new, hybrid component of the promotion-mix. This complex phenomenon includes also weblogs or more commun expressed: blogs. The blogosphere grows as the number of weblogs multiply in an exponential manner and starts to gain ground in marketing. As consumers search for recommendations on the Internet about trends and products to buy and thus also on blogs, this can only lead to influencing consumer's behavior. Two different types of weblogs are analysed: fashion blogs and travel blogs.

INTRODUCTION

In the technology era the communication environment developed and the Internet started to play an important role in everyday life activities and this is reflected in the number of internet users during the last decade. If in 2006 there were 1 billion internet users, at the end of 2015 it is forecasted that it will triple, reaching 3 billion internet users (Global Internet Report 2014). From this, a total of 1.96 billion is estimated that are social network users (The Statistics Portal).

The dynamic of the online turned consumers from passive receivers to active generators of information, meaning that it permits not only to consume content through downloading, but also to produce content through uploading and then share it.

This can only intensify Thomas Friedman's (2007) statement that "the world is flat" because of the flattening of access on the Internet.

The evolution of the Internet from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 offers the possibility to communicate and reach better the existing and the potential customers (Iversen, Jensen and Jensen, 2013).

Although Web 2.0 is used interchangeable with the concept Social Media, the last one involves different platforms or tools of communication. Among them a type of communication tool that lately caught marketing specialists' attention is the weblog (or simply blog).

The blogosphere continues to expand and this can be seen in facts: from May 2011 till April this year the total of Tumblr blogs grew from 17.5 million to 227.1 million (The Statistics Portal).

The purpose of this paper is to take a closer look at the phenomena Social Media and weblog and also at two different types of blogs covering themes like: fashion and travel.

1. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND WEBLOGS

It can be stated that Social Media has its beginnings in 1978 by the use of e-mail for communication (Biswas and Roy, 2016).

Social Media represents a mean of electronic communication with the help of which users create virtual groups to share information, ideas, opinions, personal messages, videos, photos, music and other user-generated content (UGC).

In time, Social Media evolved, including today the following: commerce communities, content communities, online social networking sites, collaborative projects, weblogs, microblogs, social news websites, and virtual worlds (Markos-Kujbus and Gáti, 2013, as illustrated in *Figure 1*).

There are significant differences between traditional media and Social Media and these can be better observed with the help of *Table 1* (Markos-Kujbus and Gáti, 2013).

The most important facets of Social Media are: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputations and groups (Schertler, Kreunen and Brinkmann, 2014, p.15).

Taking into consideration that through Social Media not only companies talk to their customers, but also customers talk directly to one another, Social Media can be considered a new, hybrid element of the promotion-mix (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Hence, Social Media is a two-way communication tool.

Social Media plays the role of a mediator with the help of which "existing and potential customers can influence a brand's notoriety, sales and even the longevity of a brand" (Schertler, Kreunen and Brinkmann, 2014, p.5). In this sense, Social Media influences the preferences and the acquisition of a product, as this covers both positive and negative statements of consumers.

Choosing electronic information means putting customers face to face to a more extensive and reachable group of "friends" who could influence in the decision making process (Abălăesei, 2014).

Social Media marketing has different advantages, through which can be listed: generating exposure to businesses, increasing traffic/subscribers, building new business partnerships, rise in search engine rankings, generating qualified leads due to better lead generation efforts, selling more products and services and reduction in overall marketing expenses (Neti, 2011, p.7).

Traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) or *advice from friends and relatives* (Pan, MacLaurin and Crotts, 2007, p.35) went through a changing phase with the rise of Web 2.0 turning into a new form of communication, that is electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). In fact, it can be stated that e-WOM is WOM commuted in the digital world, but possessing also distinctive characteristics.

Word-of-mouth influences consumer's behavior in general (Kulmala, 2011), so inclusive in the prepurchase phase (Pan, MacLaurin and Crotts, 2007) and in case of electronic word-of-mouth consumers inform from other consumers' recommendations before making any purchasing decision especially when it comes to buy new products (Wei Li, 2012, p.18).

A type of digital word-of-mouth is the weblog (or blog).

Its origin is in the year 1997 when the American computer programmer Jorn Barger named his internet site weblog (Lankinen, 2014). A blog represents a type of Internet page or online diary (Darwish and Lakhtaria, 2011, Markos-Kujbus and Gáti, 2013) that contains text on a certain topic, but it may also have images, videos and other interactive media files. Its header contains information about the author, title and date of the entry, entry which is arranged in reverse chronological order. Below the post there is a

section of comments as an invitation to interact by conversation with the blog's author and with other readers (Wenger, 2008).

In physical format, diaries have been kept for centuries; the online format of a diary which can be shared with others embodied in the weblog is new (Siles, 2011).

Through dialogue, connection and relationship can be build and by this trust between companies and their consumers (Madile, 2004). Maintained trust on long term can only lead to loyalty of customers.

Having the opportunity to communicate personally with blog consumers, companies can reshape their products according to the needs and wants of their customers. This can only be constructive as marketing's paradigm nowadays is based on focusing on consumer's needs, not only on profit.

For optimization and in order to maintain contact with their audience blogs are often updated (Kozinets, 2010; Darwish and Lakhtaria, 2011). This implies that for more success, bloggers post frequently.

The target group of the blogs can be anyone as they have the purpose to be read whether by a large group or just a few people concerned in the blogger's issue (Allen, 2010).

The influence of blogs has been seen as depending on the extent to which readers and authors share common demographic and psychographic characteristics (Wenger, 2008, p.172). Hence, attributes like: age, level of education, income level (demographic factors) and values, opinions, attitudes, interests, lifestyles (psychographic factors) should be in common for both readers and authors.

Today the weblog is more and more used as a marketing tactic (Allen, 2010; Huang, Chou and Lin, 2010). Taking this into consideration in the following paragraphs two different types of blogs are analysed: fashion blogs and travel blogs.

2. FASHION WEBLOGS

Nowadays consumers guide themselves in the purchase decision process by other consumers' opinions and reviews from the digital world, that is through electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (Manafy, 2010). They perceive these recommendations as more trustworthy than of marketing professionals (Kulmala, 2011).

In a wide variety of weblogs, fashion blogs are one of which readers give a lot of attention (Lankinen, 2014). Consumers focused on writing about fashion in blogs compete with the traditional fashion editors as they have, in some cases, just as much power (if not even more) to catch consumer's interest and influence sales (Schertler, Kreunen and Brinkmann, 2014). In Finland, Sweden and Norway fashion bloggers are even refunded for their writings (Kulmala, 2011).

Fashion blogs are often owned by an individual who started sharing his or her interest through photos or written articles online. This makes it easier for readers to feel connected with the blogger and build a relationship with them; bloggers are both regarded as a fashion idol but also as the voice of a friend (Schertler, Kreunen and Brinkmann, 2014, p.8).

Fashion brands came to the conclusion that fashion bloggers are very promising as a fashion marketing tool, being a low-cost manner in obtaining publicity and reaching potential customers (Lankinen, 2014). Because of the increased number of successful fashion blogs in Sweden and Norway, the global interest in buying Scandinavian brands also rose. Are taken into consideration brands like: Acne Studios, Wood Wood, Cheap Monday and Hennes and Mauritz (H&M) which are acknowledged worldwide (Schertler, Kreunen and Brinkmann, 2014).

Through weblogs, brands can communicate with their audience but also target new consumer groups. As bloggers are considered friends they can influence more the decision to accept or quit new ideas, trends or products than the formal format of a commercial for example (Schertler, Kreunen and Brinkmann, 2014).

The blogosphere and Social Media in general have increasingly become an environment through which fashion consumers seek inspiration for their purchases (Schertler, Kreunen and Brinkmann, 2014, p.10).

In order to influence consumer's behavior, companies act in two ways: either offer free products to bloggers (give-away items) in the hope that they will share their brand experiences with their readers (Dunlop, 2010) or go further and pay bloggers a sum of money in order to confirm that the blogger will incorporate the brand into the blog in a positive and highly visible manner (Schertler, Kreunen and Brinkmann, 2014, p.12). Either way, brands secure their relationship with bloggers (Schertler, Kreunen and Brinkmann, 2014, p.11).

A significant event for fashion bloggers is Regent Tweet. This represents an annual blogger's event which takes place on Regent Street in London. There different street's retailers give away exclusive goodies for the fashion bloggers. In summer of 2014, a total of 2231 mentions of the event were noted on Twitter with approximately 1.88 million readers. This reveals that in short time with the help of Social Media a large number of consumers can be reached (Schertler, Kreunen and Brinkmann, 2014).

3. TRAVELWEBLOGS

Social Media plays a significant role in many aspects of tourism, especially in information search and decision-making behaviors, tourism promotion and in focusing on best practices for interacting

with consumers (Popescu and Georgescu, 2014, p. 534).

It can be stated that gradually blog marketing attracts a considerable number of customers (Kulmala, 2011). This also happens in the case of travel blogs.

Although travel blogs are an important marketing channel in tourism, they are not sufficient studied in the academic research (Huang, Chou and Lin, 2010).

A travel blog shows the experiences of a visitor at a specific destination and taking into consideration the multiplying number of internet users, electronic word-of-mouth is an important accessed travel information source (Pan, MacLaurin and Crotts, 2007). Hence, existing and potential customers inspire for a desired destination from travel blogs. The applications of Web 2.0 or *theparticipative web* (Iversen, Jensen and Jensen, 2013, p.21) enhance the exchange of information between consumers who are geographically far from one another and this changes how word of mouth marketing is perceived in the tourism sector (Wenger, 2008).

Progressively, tourism enterprises became aware that blogging is more economical and efficient than advertising (Akehurst, 2009).

As blog authors are seen as telling the "real" story, this places them in a position of authority and as credible witnesses to the events they describe (Wenger, 2008, p.172).

Just like in the case of fashion blogs, a couple of hotel companies stimulated their customers to write comments on their hotel blogs offering them in exchange discounts and vouchers (Akehurst, 2009). Thus, this can only contribute to a positive image of the hotel and the touristic destination.

In the study done by Pan, MacLaurin and Crotts, (2007) with the help of semantic network analysis and content analysis, results show that blog analysis can be a useful way to find the plus and minus of a tourism destination (Pan, MacLaurin and Crotts, 2007).

The final picture of a destination made by a travel blogger is a mixture of objective evaluations and subjective opinions and this expresses the tourist satisfaction (Tudor, 2013). In turn, consumer's satisfaction of touristic products influences readers or potential customers.

Travel blogs remain a communication tool for destination image, comments or opinions (Huang, Chou and Lin, 2010).

Tourism marketers need to understand blogs as a new technological phenomenon with implications for marketing and promotion of a destination. With the rapid development of Internet technology, it is vital for tourism marketers and the tourism industry in general to understand the nature of travel blogs and their implications for destination marketing (Pan, MacLaurin and Crotts, 2007, p.10).

CONCLUSIONS

In the cyberspace, Social Media will continue to have an important role and influence consumer's behavior. This implies that also its components, inclusive weblogs (or blogs) will have an impact on consumer's buying decision process. Blog marketing is an essential instrument because in comparison to traditional marketing campaigns electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) information is more powerful (Kulmala, 2011). Consumers begin to trust more and more in bloggers' opinions and experiences than in marketing professionals as they are considered their friends. Also it can be underscored that through the comments made below the posts, companies can identify the discontents, but also the needs and wants of their customers and reshape their products so that clients' satisfaction is on first place.

This paper can be considered a starting point for future research in the analysis of weblogs in marketing.

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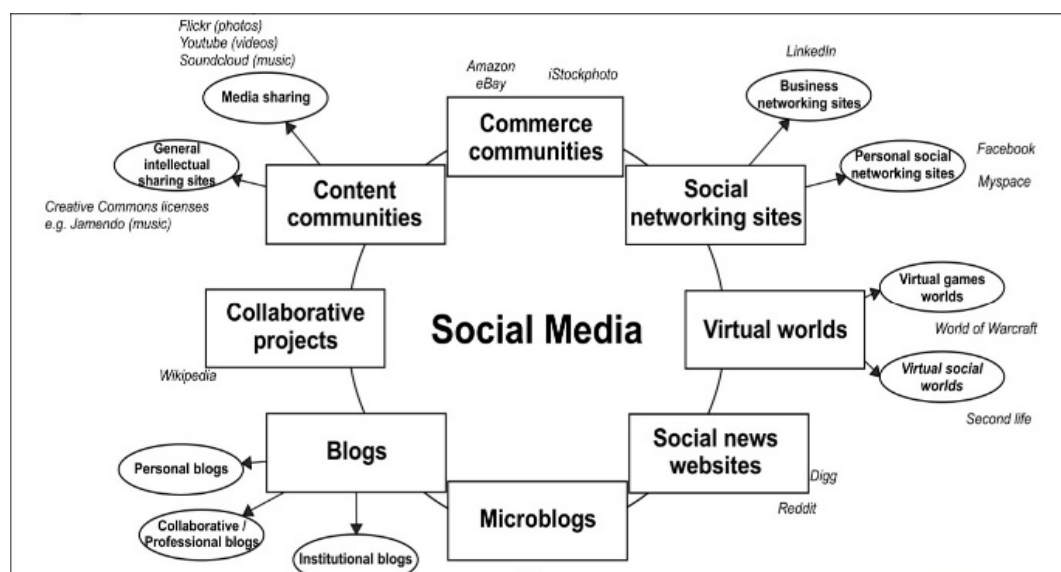
Appendices

Table No. 1
Traditional vs. Social Media

Traditional Media	Social Media
Fixed, unchangeable	Instantly updateable
Commentary limited and not real time	Unlimited real-time commentary
Limited, time-delayed best-seller lists	Instant popularity gauge
Archives poorly accessible	Archives accessible
Limited media mix	All media can be mixed
Committee publishers	Individual publishers
Finite	Infinite
Sharing not encouraged	Sharing and participation encouraged
Control	Freedom

Source: Markos-Kujbus, É. and Gáti, M. (2013). *Social media's new role in marketing communication and its opportunities in online strategy building*, Institute of Marketing and Media, p. 5

Figure No. 1
The Components of Social Media



Source: Markos-Kujbus, É. and Gáti, M. (2013). *Social media's new role in marketing communication and its opportunities in online strategy building*, Institute of Marketing and Media, p. 7