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Abstract: *Social networking sites (SNS) have been experiencing a growth boom in latter years, consequently drawing marketers' attention as an important medium for meaningful interaction with the consumer. But achieving brand effectiveness on SNS begins with understanding users' motivations for online social networking. This paper sought to explore Romanian users' motivations, and reports findings from a qualitative study consisting of face-to-face in-depth interviews and participant observation. We determine the main differences in motivations for using four major Romanian social networking sites. Implications in terms of brand communication within the context of SNS are also discussed.*

Key words: social networks in Romania, social networking motivations, social media motivations

JEL classification: M31

1. Introduction

According to Boyd et al. (2007), social networking sites (SNS) are defined as "web based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and transverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system". Today, there are many SNSs differing in functions, features and users, but we can observe a high degree of commonalities. Common to most social networking sites are user profiles - information fields for projecting characteristics of the individual, such as age, sex, location, interests, description and profile photo. Users have full control of their profile. They provide content according with what they wish to display to the public. Most SNS also contain various other options such as photo albums, videos, music and applications such as games or friend rankers, groups of shared interests, etc.

SNSs allow individuals to meet new people through the site, articulate connections with them by simply listing those users as "friends", but also to learn more about offline acquaintances and to keep in touch with them.

According to Lampe (2006), while some people use SNS especially to make new online connections, others can use social networking to support their offline connections. For example, so-called social searchers would use the site to investigate specific people with whom they share an offline connection to learn more about them, whereas social browsers would use the site to find people or groups online with whom they would want to connect offline.

Previous research also concluded that impression management is a common practice among users of SNSs (Dwyer, 2007; Ellison et al., 2006; Ellison et al., 2007; Rosenbloom, 2008). Impression management can be described as the personal goal of managing one's image through self-presentation strategies. Moreover, Ellison et al. (2007) stated that a major benefit of social networking sites is building types of social capital, or staying in touch with friends while gaining new ones. Findings in Boyd (2004) revealed that practising impression management on social networking sites enabled users to negotiate their presentation of self in order to better connect with other users.

Nezlek and Leary's (2000) measured users' motivation to practice impression management based on what degree participants wanted others to perceive them as likeable, friendly, socially desirable, competent, skilled, intelligent, ethical, moral, principled, physically attractive, handsome and pretty and how much users thought about how other people were evaluating them throughout communication.

The literature review indicates impression management, networking, socializing as motivations for SNS use. For these reasons, this study will explore in-depth which motivations are the strongest drivers of using SNSs in Romania and indicate which motives are the most significant for using a certain SNS.

In addition, an important aspect of social networking sites is their interactive nature. Hanjun et al. (2005) suggest that the dimensions of interactivity occurring most frequently in literature are the human-message interaction, which is important for Internet advertisers, and human-human interaction. Hanjun et al.'s (2005) findings showed that consumers who interacted more evaluated the Web site more positively, leading to positive attitudes toward the brand and increased purchase intent.

Companies must connect with users accordingly to establish a committed relationship with their customers. Users' expectations towards brands presence and communication within the context of each social network must be known for adopting a proper social media strategy. Therefore there is a need to identify user's core usage motivations for different SNS.

This study explore motivations for using social networking sites in Romania and reveals commonalities and differences between the most popular SNSs among Romanians: Hi5.com, Neogen.ro, Facebook.com, Twitter.com. Study findings enable companies to adopt a proper social media strategy for addressing Romanian users.

We focused our study on Hi5.com, Neogen.ro, Facebook.com and Twitter.com because of the exponential growth of Facebook.com and Twitter.com in 2009 and because usage data indicated Hi5.com and Neogen.ro as SNSs with the biggest number of registered users in Romania (over 2 millions for each of them).

The importance of these four SNSs for exploring the social networking phenomenon in Romania was also confirmed by the registered internet traffic in 2009 (by unique visitors). The top social networking site by unique visitors was Hi5.com. Other top 10 SNSs were Facebook.com, Neogen.ro and Twitter.com (Realitatea.net, 2010).

2. Methods

This paper reports findings from a qualitative study conducted in order to explore Romanian users' motivations of online social networking. Our exploratory study used face-to-face in-depth interviews and participant observation. The interviews were semi-structured, lasting approximately 1.30 hrs.

Participants were selected from a poll conducted on Neogen.ro on the following 3 criteria: the selected subjects should have been 18-30 y.o. adults that were experienced users (at least 1 year experience with social networking), and used minimum three of the investigated SNS. The same age group was used also in another exploratory study conducted in 2009 by the market research company Daedalus Milward Brown for investigating users' perceptions of Hi5, Facebook and Twitter.

An invitation to participate to the in-depth interview was sent to the users matching the selection criteria. Fifty subjects expressed their will to take part in the research, and we consequently arranged an the interview schedule telephonically.

All 50 participants answered a fixed set of questions to find out whether there are some SNS used mostly for social browsing and other SNS used especially for social searching. They were also asked about their preferences for using one SNS or another, and we talked about what prevails in their motivations for using each SNS: information, product inquiry, entertainment, discussion, connecting with friends, meeting new people, games, or impression management facilities. They were also stimulated to talk in-depth about their practices, attitudes, perceptions and self impression management habits. They were invited to argue their answers by accessing their SNSs profiles during the interview and point out on the computer what motivates them to use a certain social network more than others, what aspects or features they enjoy compared to what is boring or disturbing.

3. Results

All interviewees created social profiles out of curiosity and because they thought it was trendy. All indicated connecting with people, entertainment and time spending as common goals for online socializing no matter the network. Younger participants (18-24 y.o.) reported heavy use of Tagged.com which was depicted as very funny, like a game, while most of the older ones (23-30 y.o.) use NetLog.com, Facebook.com or Twitter.com.

Both categories, younger and older users, reported losing their engagement with Hi5.com. The older ones kept their Hi5 accounts opened not to lose contact with old friends or with acquaintances from the city of birth. On the rare occasion when they wanted to *"kill some time"* they followed an e-mail link from a Hi5 friend. Upon accessing the network, they had fun while browsing *"some profiles with ridiculous photos"* or viewed funny ads.

"Hi5 is Hi5! The showcase for macho men and ludicrous women, but it's funny sometimes to look at them, to see how proud they are to show off there." (Ciprian, 28 y.o)

Younger users (18-22 y.o) used to set up a customized profile and upload their photos - not any photos, but *"cool photos in the Hi5 spirit"* because all their colleagues did the same. However, they started disliking Hi5 because *"it's lame now and crowded with cheap people"*. They are looking for new places to *"hang out"*.

"I'm accessing Hi5 now especially when I'm bored, and watch funny videos or play stupid, relaxing games. Of course I'm also browsing my friend' profiles. They are not so active lately. Me also. I have a lot of colleagues in my Hi5 network but I don't feel really good there any more. Hi5 is full of untrustworthy people now. They just contact you to make bad jokes. Recently I deleted a lot of my photos because of this. You know, those special Hi5 photos. It's not ok for me anymore since it's so crowded with cheap and macho people." (Adina, 18 y.o. girl)

For all interviewed users we found a common motivation for losing their engagement with Hi5 but also a common motivation for still using the site. Users lost their engagement with Hi5 because they consider this SNS increased in the number of not-ok people and disrespect among users. Interviewed users decreased their presence and content contribution to Hi5 from impression management considerations - they don't want to be seen or treated as *"all those cheap people showing off on Hi5"*.

The common motivation for still using Hi5 was keeping the contacts network even if they rarely interact within their network but rather find entertainment by watching ads or movies or by browsing funny and intriguing profiles of strangers. They spend time browsing strangers' profiles but mostly for watching and laughing, without any intention to connect offline with them. Hi5 users therefore behave like social searchers, oriented to their offline acquaintances, but in a very passive way, without investing too much time to learn more about them.

Most of the people we interviewed use Neogen especially to find people online to expand their offline network of connections. They behave like social browsers, and learned from experience that Neogen is the right place to find new people from their country and especially from their town, with whom they would easily be able to connect offline for dating, friendship or other activities based on common interests. They trust Neogen like a source of reliable and interesting strangers opened to offline connections, and consider Neogen it a *"springboard to real life"*.

"I'm using Neogen.ro ever since I came to Iasi to college, 4 years ago. In the first months I spent hours and hours on this site talking with people. I was missing my friends from my own town and I was looking for new friends here. I met a lot of interesting people online. Some of them stayed just online connections, but others became my friends in real life: some football team-players for Sunday mornings and even my actual girlfriend." (Claudiu, 23 y.o.)

Most of the time spent on Neogen is dedicated to finding new people, while relating to old friends (especially ex-coleagues and users group members), and entertainment/fun are less important.

"We start playing cards on Neogen.ro. We made our group and a championship. It was a lot of talk between group members, not only the game. After a few months we organized our first offline championship. We spent 3 days in the mountains playing cards, but also socializing and having fun. We decided to organize at least 2 meetings every year. Till now we organized 3 offline championships with 15-20 participants." (Cristina, 29 y.o.)

Neogen.ro user profiles contains more information (news, comments, links to blog updates, announcements, etc) and fewer pictures than Hi5 profiles. Most of them practice a form of impression management based on mystery. A kind of not telling too much about themselves but giving some clues is meant to make them interesting to other people.

Another important point is that Neogen.ro users use three kinds of communities for interacting with and receiving updates from their friends' network, their groups of shared interests (rock lovers group, football supporters group, poetry group, etc) and their town channel. In this way they are maximizing their primary goal of finding people online to expand their offline connections.

Oppositely, Facebook is used only for relating with close friends. Especially for keeping in touch with relatives, ex-colleagues or friends who are living outside Romania. In fact, that was the reason for most of them to open a Facebook profile.

"My best friend from high-school lives in Canada." said Nico, a 25 old user during the interview. *"I didn't talk with her for almost 5 years. But since I received an invitation to join Facebook, I can poke her every day, I see what she's doing by messaging and watching her photos. She is updating every week! In fact we have our group with high school colleagues on Facebook. I love that group and I hope other colleagues will join."*

"The most difficult with setting up my Facebook profile was to choose the first photos to share. You know, I wanted to look fresh and smiley, to look at least as likeable as I used to be in high-school.", she added.

Similar care for their Facebook presence was common for all interviewed people who were using it. An impression management orientation to fit themselves with their network of friends.

"I'm updating my Facebook profile and I'm writing weekly on my wall since I came back in Romania", said Ana a 30 y.o. *"It's an easy way to stay connected with friends I made during my one-year USA internship. Sometimes those friends gather for a home party in the weekend. If I'm online, Facebook helps me feel like being with them. Anyway, in general I have the feeling that I know more about what they are doing than I know about most of my Romanian friends. Because their Facebook profiles are full with their daily life things. Most of the friends I have here don't use Facebook and we keep in touch usually by phone. And, you know, we don't have time to call each other so often."*

Only a third of our sample consisted of Facebook users, but all of them were social searchers using Facebook to support a limited number of offline connections, to investigate their friends's lives and learn more about them. Connecting with close ones, discussing, getting information and relaxing were their motives for using Facebook.

Only 3 people from the sample were Twitter users. A student, a marketer and an IT professional (also bloggers, all of them). All 3 were Twitter addicted. They said they use it all over the day because of the valuable people they can network with, and also for the fresh and useful information. They also pointed towards the real-time communication and help they receive from other Twitter users, even experts. They also said they are using Twitter for promoting their ideas, their findings and blog posts. In contrast with all other 3 SNSs, shopping and product inquiry are indicated as motivations for using the network. This indicates that Twitter can be used as a marketing tool or as a sales channel much more directly.

"With an appropriate network of followers on Twitter it is just enough to announce a tempting offer and you'll generate sales. What can I say about events? You just have to twitt about them!" said Cristi, the marketer (26 y.o)

From impression management perspective, Twitter users pay a lot of time and effort to deliver useful information and competent help to others in order to achieve recognition and social power. Infact, information sharing, collaborating, and being perceived as competent and available to help others are the principles of Twitter networking. From a social searchers vs social browsers perspective, Twitter works in both ways: networking to support offline connections and finding new people online for connecting offline.

4. Limitations

The major limitation of our study is that we interviewed only users located in Iasi. Because of the logistic restrictions the study consisting of face-to-face in-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted in Iasi. Consequently, the exploratory study captured the motivations of people residing in Iasi (currently or for a long time). Motivations may differ from one region of the country to another. Future studies may want to investigate SNSs users from other Romanian cities.

Secondly, the sample of Twitter users was quite small, only 3 participants. Though very revealing, future research could be conducted on a larger number of members of this network.

5. Conclusions

The findings indicate that impression management, networking and socializing are the common motivations for the use of all four networks. But going deeper, only information, discussion, connecting, and impression management are common significant motives for Romanians to use the four sites: Hi5.com, Neogen.com, Facebook.com and Twitter.com.

Entertainment and playing games are significant motives mostly for using Hi5.com, but also for the use of Neogen.com and Facebook.com. In contrast, for Twitter.com the motives shopping and product inquiry are significant.

In an effort to increase the likelihood that SNS users will behave desirably towards brands, advertisers can benefit from understanding what motivates audiences to socialize on a certain site. From a brand communication standpoint this means that brands must invest in impression management on Twitter to gain an appropriate network of followers. If they are successful on this, in order to generate sales they just have to have a good, honest offer and regular promotions.

On the other 3 SNSs, Hi5.com, Neogen.ro, Facebook.com brands must invest in impression management according to the profile of each SNS but the main challenge for brand communication is tailoring the brand presence and the brand messages to find adequate tools to match users motivations like connecting, entertainment, or playing games. For example, Facebook applications allow outside developers to create applications. An application promoting a product or service can allow users to interact with the product or service on Facebook. More than that, this can be done in an entertaining way or even as a game to play with friends.

Maybe St. John (the game industry veteran and new Hi5 president and chief technology officer) is right and his vision of moving Hi5 from being a general-purpose social network like Facebook to one that has gaming at its core is correct and this change can provide also new efficient tools for brand communication to Hi5 users.

Another example of gaining user's attention and engagement is using funny ads for promoting the brand or announcing a specific offer. This would be an efficient tool for all the 3 SNSs but will go viral especially with Hi5 as time as watching funny ads and sharing them is a common and strong motivation for all Hi5 users.

Regarding connecting (networking and socializing) which is the general motivation for all SNSs use, this paper also finds differences in the preponderance of social browsers or social searchers among Romanian users. Twitter.com users are social searchers and social browsers in the same time. They use Twitter for investigating their acquaintances and supporting connections with them, but also for finding new people and expanding offline connections. While Facebook.com and Hi5.com are used especially for social searching, Neogen.ro is mostly used for social browsing, for finding reliable and interesting strangers opened to offline connections.

Information about social browsers or social searchers preponderance in one SNS is useful from the brand communications perspective. For example, a company can decide her brands' presence within a social browsers dominated SNS like a series of campaigns related with events designed to support specific offline communities, even local ones.

Overall, our results may prove beneficial for a better understanding of motivations for using SNSs in Romania enabling companies to connect properly with users for gaining their attention and commitment.

6. Acknowledgements

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