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*Behaviours of young consumers in a virtual environment
on the example of the fashion industry*

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Abstract

Theoretical background: The use of social media is increasing rapidly. The total number of users has surpassed more than 500 million worldwide. Social media communication is growing faster than any other form of communication. Websites such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat are examples of the social media sites that are popular among all level of consumers, but especially among young consumers. Social media are definitely influencing customer behaviour. Social media has changed the way consumers think, and companies have changed their vision to reflect how it will affect their buying decision process. This article presents the characteristics of young consumers in a virtual environment.

Purpose of the article: The main goal of the article is to identify the role of social media used by fashion brands at every stage of the consumer buying decision process. The authors investigated the impact of social media on changing customer behaviour. The existing literature currently lacks a comprehensive conceptual framework to explain how social media could change consumer behaviour. Only a few studies have been conducted so far, but they have focused on the older generation, not on the youngest consumer. Nowadays, the young consumer constitutes an important but, at the same time, separate part of the market. The authors highlight the most important distinctive features of teenagers representing the so-called Generation Z.

Research methods: The authors used qualitative analysis; more specifically, the technique of focus group interview. Three interviews were conducted, each consisting of eight students from Poznań universities. The main goal of this research was to identify the role of social media used by fashion brands at every stage of the consumer buying decision process.

Main findings: The influence of social media on buying behaviour can be observed for fashion products. Social media play an important role in the decision-making process of young consumers. Social media have changed customer behaviour. They are an invaluable source of information and recommendations for products for young consumers. Furthermore, social media generate new needs and cause unscheduled purchases, mainly impulse purchases – for example, influenced by a discount or an interesting presentation of the product. In addition, social media are a place for expressing opinions and sharing shopping experiences for young consumers. This knowledge about young consumers' behaviour and attitudes to the use of social media in the decision buying process of fashion brands can be very valuable advice for companies to help them adjust tools of social media communications to their target group.

Introduction

At a time of strong media expansion, the importance of social media is increasing rapidly, both in the private space of Internet users, as well as in the business dimension. The growing popularity of social media among consumers has caused direct interest in this medium among companies from various economic fields. The Internet has changed the approach to marketing communication and given companies the opportunity to contact directly with their recipients, who are active users of social media sites. An increasing number of clothing brands appreciate social media, and its functionalities and tools which can be used in social marketing activities. The expansion and dissemination of social media, as well as the growing digitization of Polish society, are the cause of the increasing importance of social media as sources of information in the decision-making process of consumers (Kos-Łabędowicz, 2015; Bartosik-Purgat, 2016). Social media are an integral part of purchasing decisions and shopping experience (Izba Gospodarki Elektronicznej, 2017). Reports show that social media influence consumer behaviour both in a virtual environment and outside it. Information obtained from social media influences consumer behaviour: 44% of social media users bought a product that they had not previously planned due to opinions from social media, while 40% of users changed their preferences and decisions regarding the purchase of a particular brand product based on information in social media (Izba Gospodarki Elektronicznej, 2016). Opinions and information about purchases are shared in social media by 61% of their users. Furthermore, 76% of social media users declare that positive opinions of their friends influence

their purchasing decisions, and 56% of social media users use such platforms as a place of consultation and a place to obtain information about the product or brand considered for purchase (Izba Gospodarki Elektronicznej, 2016).

Characteristics of young consumers

Social media, as a modern promotional tool, play a particularly important role in the segment of young consumers, who constitute an important, but, at the same time, separate part of the market. Young consumers use the Internet widely – not only for entertainment purposes or for communication with peers, but also for their homework and to expand knowledge (Nask, 2016). This generation is known as “digital natives” and “Generation Z”, born in the world of technology that simultaneously lives in the online and offline environment. Studies show that 100% of people at the age of 18–24 use the Internet actively, devoting an average of 20 hours a week for this purpose, which gives an average of three hours a day (CBOS, 2017). Most young people (99%) increasingly use mobile devices such as a smartphone, tablet or laptop (CBOS, 2017) to connect to the network. Access to computers, Internet networks and mobile devices from an early age, growing up with the development of these new technologies, has led to young people being one of the best-performing groups of consumers on the Internet. They are one of the most numerous and also the most active group of users of social media sites. Nine out of ten teenagers declare that they have an account on at least one social media site (Makaruk & Wójcik, 2014). Young consumers use the Internet and social media in the shopping process. Social media are one of the most important sources of information on products for young people, mainly due to the trust in opinions expressed by other users of these portals.

Young consumers as a clothing market segment

On the clothing market, young consumers are a very specific and extremely important market group. In the case of young consumers, the most important influence on their purchasing decisions is exerted by peers and prevailing fashion and trends. Young consumers strongly feel the need to be accepted and belong to a group. For this reason, they consult their purchasing decisions with their colleagues. The peer group is also a valuable and reliable source of information on new products and market trends (Olejniczuk-Merta, 2001). Young people want to look just like their peers. They do not want to stand out from the crowd, in order to avoid criticism from society. At the same time, it is extremely important for them to be fashionable. Paradoxically, they also want to feel original, independent and exceptional all the time. Nevertheless, the majority of young people declare that they shop in popular “chain stores”. These stores give them the security of choice, and – importantly –

they are within their financial reach. Parents and adolescents become increasingly less influential advisors in the case of clothing purchases. As studies show, the most important reason for purchasing clothes is the brand and fashion. Half of the young people in the world, according to research, believe that the brand of clothes worn by them determines who they are and defines their social status (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003). Clothing allows young people to create their identity, image and express their personality.

Research methodology

The study was carried out in 2017. It was conducted using the technique of focus group interview, which included three interviews. This qualitative methodology allows deeper insight into the research problem, but it must be remembered that it has some limitations (e.g. it may not be representative of the entire target market, effects are largely determined by the moderator, and some voices are louder than others). Each interview consisted of eight students from Poznań University of Economics and Business and lasted about 1 hour. The study participants were selected based on purposive sampling; 50% of respondents were women and 50% of respondents were men; they were aged between 19 and 21, they lived in Poznań, and they were active users of selected social media sites and regular consumers of fast fashion clothing brands. The interview scenario was the research tool. In accordance with methodological guidelines, the intervention of the interview moderator in the narrative of interlocutors has been kept to a minimum. The course of interview was directly recorded with the prior consent of all participants of the study. Obtained research material was recorded and sorted, and then subjected to qualitative analysis. All interviews were conducted by the authors in accordance with the methodology of conducting qualitative research. The main aim of this research was to identify the role of social media used by fast fashion brands at every stage of the consumer purchasing decision process.

Research results and discussion

Respondents declared the active use of practically all social websites that were presented to them, i.e. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and Pinterest. The last service was the exception, which for the majority of respondents was something new and unknown. These people could not even explain what the portal is, nor what functionalities it allows.

The most important reason for liking clothing brands' fan pages is the desire to get discounts. Social media allow respondents to learn not only about promotions ("I love to get a quicker promotion") but also to keep up with new clothing collec-

tions and new advertising campaigns. Some respondents also emphasize the role of clothing brand profiles in social media as a source of inspiration and information about current trends (“I click ‘like it’ to know what style is in fashion now”).

At the same time, the research revealed the phenomenon of the passive use of social networks and fashion brand profiles. This is a result of a reluctance to publicize your opinion on the Internet. The focus group participants explicitly admitted that they avoid writing clothing brands’ profiles, because they do not want to be visible to people from their circle of friends. Interlocutors explicitly admit that they are ashamed of their social media activities and preferences of clothing brand. They are afraid of the possible reactions of their friends, and of ridicule: “sometimes the comments of my friends make me laugh”, “sometimes people write such comments that make me shock, but on the other hand I think that maybe I would be in the same situation... so I prefer not to write anything in public”. The only situations in which respondents decide to publicly express opinions about the products they buy is in the case of strong dissatisfaction, disappointment or problems with the purchased product. In addition, in this way, they want to warn other people before making a mistake and buying this product.

Table 1. The respondents’ attitude towards profiles of clothing brands in social media

| Problem | Results |
|---|--|
| Reasons to like or add to your friends or watched profiles of clothing brands in social media | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – seeking inspiration – trend observation – willingness to be up to date with the offer/assortment of the clothing brand – willingness to get and use a discount coupon |
| Activity on the profiles of clothing brands | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – unwillingness to publicize their activities – fear of other people’s assessment (friends and other users of social networking sites) |

Source: Authors’ own study.

Participants of the focus study emphasize that the most interesting content for them published on the fan page of clothing brands are those in the form of photography or video. They are very sceptical about text content (so-called posts). They admit directly that they do not read them – “I scroll them” or ignore them. They think that nowadays “people are lazy, prefer to sit with a coffee in front of the computer screen and watch a video rather than to read long entries”. The clothing brands should communicate with young consumers through images. At the same time, they add that they increasingly pay attention to the quality of this material. Photos should be aesthetic, slightly artistic. They should not look like brochures or advertising leaflets – they cannot be kitschy. In addition, users appreciate when clothing brands share photos of their fans and users of their products, “it shows how different people, representing different styles of clothing, compile specific products and create their own stylizations”. They think that it brings mutual benefits: “clothing brands have more interesting content, additionally present new, interesting styles, appreciating

and distinguishing their buyers, they increase their attachment to the brand. On the other hand, people whose photo has been made available are gaining popularity and new fans”. Video materials, when they are interesting and well done (i.e. good quality, with an idea), attract their attention for a longer time and are more often remembered than other messages, “as I will devote more time to watch the film, it affects the deeper memorization of the brand”, “longer contact with such a message results in better consolidation”. This may be due to the fact that a young generation is often called the “image culture”.

Table 2. Evaluation of selected activities and published content by clothing brands in social media

| Problem | Results |
|---|---|
| The most interesting content published by clothing brands in social media | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – photographs and videos – high importance attached to the quality and aesthetics of published content |

Source: Authors' own study.

Social media means that the purchase of products is unplanned, which is directly admitted by the respondents of qualitative research: “the photo of clothes that interested me, made me go to the store website and buy it, and it also happened that I went to a stationary store to look for it”. Unplanned purchases mainly result from discount coupons, under the influence of which you buy unplanned items more often. The respondents also emphasize that impulsively, under the influence of content in social media, they buy online more often than they visit stationery stores: “Ooo! It is a nice promotion, I did not plan it before, but it is such a spontaneous purchase”. In addition, social networking sites, mainly Facebook, accelerate the process of clothing purchases. This is mainly due to the two functionalities of this portal. First, from the “buy now” button that can be found on the clothing brand profiles, through which the user is redirected to the online store of the brand with just one click. Participants of the focus group confirmed that this is a useful feature for them, due to which they can save time. Instead of entering the name of the store in the search engine and finding the appropriate link to the online store, they can speed up the process with just one mouse click. In this way, they can be sure that they are on the real website of the online store. Secondly, the respondents very often use the possibility of logging in to online stores using Facebook login data. This not only allows them to save time, but also means there is no need to create new accounts and passwords, which later must be remembered: “I do not want to create a new login and password, which I often forget later, logging in using Facebook data makes it easier and faster to buy”. Thanks to the fact that they log in with data (i.e. login and password) from the social network portal, they sometimes avoid the rather tedious process of setting up a new account and setting the right password (fulfilling various criteria: number of characters, number of capital letters or the need to use special signs, etc.) as well as verification of this account *via* e-mail with an activation link.

The interviews show that Generation Z does not use almost any traditional sources of information on products. Generation Z does not watch TV or read magazines. An important and helpful source of information and recommendations are friends and acquaintances. One respondent emphasizes: “the most valued information about clothing products are opinions of other people”. From these, young people obtain information on clothing brands and opinions about products. The respondents look for additional information on social networks, but often use informal sources, which include Facebook groups or private channels of YouTube users. In the first case, group members (closed communities, managed by admins, often with internal regulations) advise each other, and recommend and review purchased products and provide real pictures of products: “When I am not sure which sweater I really like, whether it is worth its price, whether the fabric is not irritating, etc.”. In the case of dissatisfaction with the purchased products in some groups, it is possible to resell the unsuccessful product. In the case of YouTube, quite a few interviewees admitted that they are very keen on watching videos commonly referred to as “shopping hauls”, in which people present clothing products and discuss their advantages and disadvantages. Interlocutors emphasize that such videos are an important source of information for them, because they have the opportunity to see the product on a “normal” person (not a slim, retouched model). This is especially important in situations where buyers do not find the right information on the product on websites, e.g. appropriate dimensions (length of sleeves, legs, waist, and width). In addition, these videos are amateur productions and there is no intrusive product placement. They provide basic information on products; they are also a source of inspiration for how to combine clothes and what to put together, and they show ready stylizations with a given element of clothing.

At the same time, young people declare a lack of trust in the opinions of other people posted on social media. This is due to the belief that sometimes these reviews are not from real product users. Companies employ people who must positively evaluate products and brands for money. Respondents admit that they often encounter such content, but at the same time, they add that it is easy to distinguish them from other comments: “it is easy to notice huge differences in the style among comments and it is easy to recognize who wrote them”. The respondents believe that negative opinions are often exaggerated, perhaps due to the fact they write them in a moment of anger: “People make drama by force”. In addition, the respondents believe that often critical and extreme opinions are created “for popularity and for fame”. In this way, such people want to stand out and get attention. They want popularity at the expense of the denigration of clothing brands on the web. On the other hand, complaining and the public expression of dissatisfaction results from the Polish mentality: “here, where we live is such a mentality that people like to complain and do not need much to start doing it”.

Table 3. Social media and purchasing behaviour of young consumers

| Problem | Results |
|---|---|
| Buying behaviour of young consumers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – classic ROPO effect, inverted ROPO effect – online and offline shopping (depending on product categories) – patient buyers – sensitive to prices – not using traditional sources of information – partial trust in opinions of other people/users of social media |
| The role of social media in the purchasing process | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – source of information about current trends (inspiration) – source of information about products – place of verification; the credibility of clothing store – “research”/overview of the assortment and offers before purchasing – place for expressing opinions and sharing experiences from purchased products |
| The impact of content published on social media by clothing brand profiles on the decision-making process | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – generating new needs – unscheduled purchases – impulse shopping (discount or an interesting product presentation) – recommending a store or clothing brand to family, friends or acquaintances – visit to the stationary and online store |

Source: Authors' own study.

The respondents emphasize the role of social media and opinions posted there primarily for less well-known and new clothing brands on the market: “If there are brands like Zara or H&M, I do not look at the opinion; I do it in case of unknown stores, or e.g. boutiques on Facebook”. In the case of uncertainty about the credibility of the store or clothing brand, the respondents verify this precisely *via* the social networking sites and opinions posted there. They check whether the brand exists in social media, what the comments are and how many of them have already been using it: “in case of a shop that is unknown, I am looking for information and opinions about it on social media to verify whether the purchase will be safe”. They think that it is worth verifying this information, because there is a difference that affects the credibility of brand – whether it has five positive comments and an average rating of 5.0 or else has a slightly lower rating, but many more comments.

When asked about the experience with shopping directly on Facebook, the survey participants mostly expressed their opinions in a negative way. This applies mainly to small stores or clothing boutiques that run their business only through a social network, usually Facebook. The vast majority are afraid of the risk associated with this form of concluding transactions: “such stores are only a fraud”. Uncertainty is also associated with paying in advance for the product – “sending” money without any security – and this is the biggest barrier that causes reluctance to this form of clothing purchases.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it should be noted that social media has an important role in the decision purchasing process of young consumers. Social media have altered customer behaviour. Websites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube are

examples of the social media that are popular among young consumers and they are influencing their behaviour. The social media environment is very easy to log in to and conduct product and brand research on. These benefits give young customers the confidence to search and get what they are looking for. Young customers will, in this environment, pay considerable attention to what their friends and other users are doing and recommending. Posting information on social media sites can lead to the use of information as a part of their decision-making process. Therefore, it is extremely important that enterprises, not only those from the clothing industry, should take advantage of the potential of social media, as it is a powerful tool used at almost every stage of the purchasing process by young consumers.

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