Social Media and its Influence on Propensity to Consume

Dhruv Bhatli, ENPC School of International Management

Bhatlidhruv@gmail.com

Chiraz Aouina-Mejri, PSB Paris School of Business

59, Rue Nationale 75013 Paris

caouinam@esg.fr

ABSTRACT:

The flow of information in the age of social media is bidirectional and interactive, hence creating wealth of information. This information is leveraged by the consumer when conducting external search for his consumption decisions. However, only few studies have explored the influence of social media content on decision making act during the consumption process, it hence needs further investigation. In this study, we try to fill the gap by using in depth interviews with 21 participants, to investigate how product information on social media influences consumers' propensity to consume.

The findings of the research propose the "IDEA" model which explains that Social Media Content can influence the decision making process of other consumers (1) by providing Information about products, (2) by instilling Desire among consumers, (3) by sharing of Experience knowledge and (4) by extinguishing Anxiety around a product purchase decision. Our results give the community managers some elements to understand and manage their brand's appearance in different social media.

KEYWORDS: Social Media, IDEA Model, Decision making process, consumer behavior.

1. INTRODUCTION: The last few years have seen a shift of the web towards user driven technologies such as blogs, social networks and video sharing platforms [1]. This movement is dominating the way we use Internet, and the leading social platforms like Facebook, Myspace, YouTube and Twitter have now moved into mainstream. As more and more consumer interactions move online, the interpersonal influences and WOM (Word Of Mouth) are transformed in this new landscape. Hence the consumers can rely on wealth of information on social media to formulate their consumption decisions. A logical interest for marketers and brands from here would be to understand the implications of Social Media on consumer consumption behavior. Earlier studies have examined interpersonal influences, online persuasion, peer to peer recommendation behavior, user generated content, opinion leadership and WOM. However, the pathway between decision making, consumption behavior and social media has remained under researched. Little research has been devoted to understand the influence of popular Social Media such as content sharing platforms like YouTube, Social Networks and blogs in the consumption context. It could be of prime interest for marketers to understand the influence of these social media on consumer´s tendency to consume. To try to figure out the relationship between the content sharing platforms and the propensity to consume, marketers would first have to try to understand what product specific information social media users seek before/during and after engaging in the consumption act. However, these issues require further investigation. This qualitative study is inspired by the dearth of information on this relationship, between Social Media such as blogs, Social Networks or content sharing platforms and their influence on consumption process, particularly on the decision making process. In order to ascertain this relationship

this study investigates two questions: what product specific information is sought by social media users during the consumption process? And in what way Social Media Content can influence consumers' propensity to consume? The comprehension of this phenomenon would help brands to better understand the online consumers' behavior, their decision making process and consumption trends in light of the social media.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: The literature involving social media influence on consumption behavior emerges mainly from the interpersonal influence concept. It further encompasses WOM and the decision making process. All of these three research areas have been extensively studied over the last decades. However, the emergence of the Internet means interpersonal persuasion strategies online need to be studied in a different light. Lazarsfeld and Katz pioneered the interpersonal influence, which describes the flow of information and influence from person to person in social system [2]. Later many research studies have elaborated on other aspects of this important social phenomenon [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9]. Some other studies have inspected the influence of reference group on product and brand purchase decisions [10], which propagate that when consumer is faced with uncertainty he seeks information to be able to make informed decisions. However, since the emergence of the Internet the pace and flow of information has transformed. Some recent works have examined "online interpersonal influence" [4], [6]. Senecal and Nantel, one of the earliest works on online interpersonal influence, proposed a framework for the study of this phenomenon and the role these influences play on consumer decision making. Other studies such as Godes and Mayzlin (2004) [7] examined the impact of online communication in UseNet groups, its dispersion on the success of new TV shows. While, the study conducted by Walsh, Mitchell and Weidman (2004) [8] surveyed German consumers online to ascertain their

value as online information disseminators. De Bruyn and Lilien (2004) [9] conducted a field study to track flow of influence through the stages of referral: awareness, interest, evaluation and final decision. The same year Senecal and Nantel (2004) [5] performed an experimental study of online consumers, their use of online recommendation sources and its influence on product choice. Their results clearly demonstrate that consumers who received online recommendations are twice as likely to pick a product versus consumers who did not consult a recommendation. Bailey (2005) [11] studied consumer use of product review websites where consumers post reviews of consumer products, his survey demonstrated that many consumers consult these sites and place a great deal of importance on the information, opinions found there. Few other studies have focused on motivations of online users/ consumers to share their opinions online [12], [13], [15]. Especially the work of Hennig – Thurau et al. (2004) [12] which identify five categories of eWOM communication motives: focus related utility, consumption utility, approval utility, moderator related utility, homeostasis utility.

As so many studies have examined variety of interpersonal influence aspects associated with online consumers, very few studies have actually pondered upon the emotional behavior of the consumers during the consumption decision making process. As we already know that consumer when faced with a product selection, is required to perform an internal search (e.g. relying on their prior knowledge of the brands) and if necessary, an external search (activities such as gathering more information about brands and seeking recommendations from relevant others) [14]. Few studies have elaborated on the fear, anxiety and other emotional attributes of consumers and their relation to interpersonal influence and their role in the consumption process. This study focuses on the external attributes and emotional attributes together, mainly via the use of social media content and its influence on the consumption process. Consumption behavior is a subject that

requires further attention, especially in the behavioral and attitudinal aspects of decision making process. Hence, the stages of consumption decision making process need further investigation through fresh knowledge in the fields of online interpersonal influence and emergence of new powerful interactive web 2.0 technologies. Hennig – Thurau et al. (2004) [12] explain that "in a web based opinion platform context, consumption takes place when individuals read the product reviews and comments written by others". They further add that "consumers may articulate a comment online describing their experiences with a product and request other consumers to submit problem solving information. This post purchase advice seeking motive is concerned with acquiring the skills necessary to better understand, use, operate, modify and/or repair a product". Some other works which link consumption to online interpersonal influence demonstrate that online interpersonal influence is an important aspect of e commerce. Consumers give and seek opinions online in much the same way as they do offline, thereby affecting sales of many goods and services [15] As internet becomes a hub of daily consumer exchanges, the unique interactive nature of cyberspace allows consumers to access a wealth of information, prior to and even after, making various shopping decisions [11]. The extent to which consumers realy on these online sources of information has been the subject of previous research [16], [17]. This voluminous wealth of information has been shown to impact consumer behavior [18], [17]. Bickart and schindeler (2001) [18] demonstrated how online discussions on communities generated product interest. Dholakia and Soltysinski (2001) [17] demonstrated the herding bias online on auction sites. On the other hand, empirical studies demonstrate that persuasiveness of CMC is equivalent to telephone and Face To Face Communication [19]. With the rise of interactive internet and availability of wealth of information, the concept of user generated content or UGC came into being. In the UGC environment, consumers produce, design,

publish or edit content that makes the medium vibrant and attractive. Consumers thus sit at the center of a UGC advertiser´s strategy planning [20]. Hence this augmented need to study online WOM and UGC in the social media. Earlier studies suggest that this phenomenon of WOM and UGC in social media is unlikely to subside as consumers will continue seeking WOM online and other consumers' information even more importantly than advertising [15] especially on the social networking sites and blogs to consult the UGC. For the purpose of this study, this is of high relevance, as it catalyses the empowerment of online users. As earlier findings have suggested, dissatisfied consumer are now capable of constructing Web sites to tell the world about their dissatisfaction [21] , we believe that all of these phenomenon combined are likely to effect the decision making, online interpersonal influence and eventually the consumption process. Hence this study tries to determine how social media content can influence the consumption process.

At this stage it is relevant to clarify the three key terms related with this study: (a) Web 2.0, (b) Social Media and (c) Social Media Content. Web 2.0 is a new manner of using the World Wide Web in a more interactive and collaborative way. It has largely contributed to the enhanced participatory and sharing capabilities for ordinary internet users. It is hence a shift in the era of Web 1.0, being replaced by blogs, wikis, and collaborative projects of Web 2.0, a platform which ensures that content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals but, instead, are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion. While, Social Media is a group of internet-based applications built on the technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allows the creation and exchange of Social Media Content. It is published on publicly accessible websites or on social networks, and is an activity outside of professional routines and practices, excludes content exchanged in e-mails, instant messages and replications of

already existing content e.g., posting a copy of an existing newspaper article on a personal blog without any modifications or comments [22]. To expand further, there exist various types of Social Media. We take support of media richness theory [23] and distinguish social media in six types: (1) Blogs e.g. Mashable, Boing Boing, Tech Crunch, (2) Online Communities/Discussion Forums e.g. Offtopic.com, Fok.nl, Somethingawful.com (3) Social Networks e.g. Facebook, Orkut, (4) Content Sharing Platforms e.g. Daily Motion& You Tube, (5) Collaborative Platforms e.g. Wikipedia, Digg, Stumble upon, and (6) Virtual worlds which are used for both societal e.g. Second Life and gaming purposes e.g. World of war craft. (c) Social Media Content (SMC) or Consumer Generated Media (CGM) is user generated content online encompassing opinions, experiences, advices and commentaries about products, brands, companies and services generated during consumer interactions, plus postings on Internet discussion boards, forums, Social networks, Usenet newsgroups and blogs. SMC informed by individual experience could embody data in various formats, including texts, images, photos, videos, podcasts and other mediums. Although we have identified six different types of social media it surpasses the capacity of one research to explore all six types of social media in consumption context. Hence, for this study three social media types are selected: Blogs, Social Networks and Content Sharing Platforms. This decision is based on the criteria's (a) that our respondents are likely to be more familiar with these three types of social media that they use in their daily lives, (b) earlier works have focused more on other social media, especially online forums & communities and (c) the researchers themselves are less familiar with other social media e.g. virtual worlds. Blogs are special types of websites / personal pages that usually display date-stamped entries in reverse chronological order. Blogs can be individual blogs e.g. Fakestevejobs.com or collective blogs e.g. Mashable. As earlier studies on Blogs have demonstrated, they have in a true

sense, democratized the human expression on the web, where the highly interactive exchanges exhibit a shift from traditional one-way brand dictation to a two way dialogue around brands and consumers. This shift propels user generated SMC, among others opinions, reviews, usage tips and recommendations. Content Sharing Platforms or Media Sharing Platforms, are platforms intended to provide peer- to- peer sharing of media content among users for a large array of media types such as Power Point presentations e.g. Slide six, open slide, Photos e.g. photo bucket, Videos e.g. YouTube, Vimeo, Pdf / Texts e.g. planetpdf, Scribd etc. Content Sharing Platforms enjoy high popularity amidst users which makes them a very attractive social media type to be monitored by brands. Social Networks are applications that enable users to connect to each other by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages to one another. These personal profiles on Social Network include varied information e.g. photos, videos, audio files, external links etc. One widely used social network is Facebook. As we stated before, it could be valuable for marketers to understand the online interpersonal influence and WOM prevalent on social media networks and how social media content influences the consumption process. Thus, this study, through a qualitative research tries to provide deeper understanding of how consumers access consumption specific information on social media Platforms and how this information shapes their consumption behavior. The next section presents the research framework and methodology adopted to respond to the research questions.

Our research undertakes the task of examining Social Media content and its influence on the consumption behavior of its users. In order to do so, our research is guided by research questions to ascertain, how product information on social media influences consumers decision making behavior and his propensity to consume. If we

consider SMC a sum of peer- to- peer exchanges, opinions and recommendations, it would be of relevance to investigate the influence of SMC on the consumers' decision to consume. Thus, our two research questions are: what product specific information is sought by consumer on Social Media before product purchase? How does SMC influence product purchase decisions and propensity to consume?

3. **METHODOLOGY:** In order to appropriately respond to our research questions, twenty one qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted. The selected research method is suitable to explore consumption behavior queries about a relatively new concept such as social media. Furthermore, as the goal of this study is to understand participant's point of view, attitudes and usage of the Social Media Content to form their decisions, in-depth semi directive interviews are most suited to draw fitting information. For the qualitative interviews, a purposive sampling method gathered 5 Graduate students, 3 PhD. Students and 13 MBA students, mixed from both public Universities and Private "Grandes Ecoles" located in Paris, France. The sample consisted of 9 males and 12 females, all of them residing in Paris with an average group age of 25.8 Years. This sample was chosen after a preliminary research, where these students were identified as frequent internet users, often buying products online, and having strong familiarity with Social Media. This combination of traits makes them ideal participants for our research. Based on the review of existing literature and considering

our research questions, an interview guide was developed, which included six main questions and related probes. The respondents were prospected about what information they sought at different stages of consumption, Social Media content usage behavior, frequency of seeking product specific information, how they process and use that information etc. In the beginning, the interviewers ensured that the use of related probes was dependent on information provided by the participants, that is, a participant's response to the main questions determines which probe is sequenced next. The interviews which ranged from 30 to 90 minutes with two thirds of interviews lasting at least 40 minutes, took place in comfortable environment where participants would not be distracted. All interviews were recorded and then scripted on a daily basis. Further on, a reviewing of the interviews was done on weekly basis, where key words and recurring phrases helped us to ascertain emerging themes. To ensure data consistency, double coding was employed. After the data analysis the emerging themes which form the basis of our findings are presented in the next section.

4. **RESULTS:** The findings section is organized in two parts; first the general observations concerning social media behavior are presented, which explains the influence of SMC on the consumption behavior and purchase decision making. Then, the "IDEA" model is developed, which suggests that the consumers' process, leverage social media interactions to formulate their consumption decisions by resolving four types of dilemmas. In terms of online usage we observe that majority of the participants spend more than 2 hours per day on the internet, while two third of them spend more than 3 hours per day. In terms of online usage specific to the three social media of our study, we observe that all three i.e. Content Sharing Platforms, Social Networks and blogs were unanimously popular amidst most participants. Almost two third of participants

Table 1: Interviewees profile and social media use
MB=MBA Student, G=Graduate Student, P= PhD, N=Never, L1= Less than 1 hour/day, L2= Less than 2 Hours per day, 2+=two plus hours/day, 3+=Three plus

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	TV	Internet	Social Networks	Blogs	Own Blogs	Participate in Social Media Creation	Use Content Platforms
A	F	28	MB	L2	2+	X	X			X
B	M	22	G	N	3+	1+	X	X	X	X
C	M	26	MB	L1	3+	1+	X	2		X
D	M	29	P	N	3+	1+	X	X	X	X
E	F	25	MB	L1	3+	1+	X	X	X	X
F	M	22	G	L1	3+	X	X	2	X	X
G	F	26	MB	L2	1+	X	X			X
H	M	25	MB	N	3+	1+	X	X	X	X
I	F	21	G	L2	2+	X	X			X
J	M	22	G	L1	3+	1+	X	X		X
K	M	27	MB	N	3+	X	X	2		X
L	F	28	MB	L2	2+	X	X			X
M	F	31	P	L1	3+	X	X	X	X	X
N	M	28	MB	N	3+	1+	X	X	X	X
O	F	25	MB	N	3+	1+	X	X		X
P	F	26	MB	L2	1+	X	X			X
Q	F	21	G	L1	3+	1+	X	X	X	X
R	F	30	MB	L2	2+	X	X			X
S	F	28	P	L2	2+	X	X			X
T	M	25	MB	N	3+	X	X	X		X

use all three social media. Social networks are most popular, followed by CSP and blogs.

Leveraging Social Media: Few participants considered CSP as more than a video sharing platform but for searching all kinds of information via key words. Some of these participants see content on CSP as self explanatory and easy to use, they confirmed soliciting helpful videos on CSP when faced with a problem situation. *"I got this new vacuum cleaner and the first time I had to change the dust bag gosh!!....I just looked it up on youtube and followed the video....honestly it's the easiest solution… (Smiles)", "Like many of my friends, I also check online before buying...you know I am student...so I have limited dough...have to be careful with what I get.. When I moved here…. I checked few blogs before buying the furniture for my apartment", "I learnt Photoshop and in design using you Tube, its faster, self explaining and more fun than finding info on tutorial websites", "You know (smiles) I learnt about PayPal and monetization for my website through Daily motion, you can find loads of videos and many versions on the same topic….some are really well explained". The social networks on the other hand are mainly used for* sharing, networking and staying in touch with friends. However, many of our participants share external links with their friends, some of which are about a product or brand. Few members comment about a product or service on their friend's Facebook profile while some others are fans of brand pages e.g. "I love coke" on social networks. Many of our participants have their own blogs; participate in rating, evaluating a product on blogs. The participants elicit that their main purpose for visiting a blog is to seek opinion of others, diversity of information, scan trends and read advices. In addition, most participants find social media content reliable. They do not foresee any ulterior motives of other social media users to misguide them. *"I check blogs all the time….I find them bankable….I don´t see any reason for a bloke to write something wrong, he´s got nothing to gain from it right !…"*.

IDEA Model: Most participants during the interview seemed to seek responses to a broad range of questions before deciding to engage in the consumption process. These responses resolve certain dilemmas, inhibitions in the pre purchase scenario and push the consumers to propagate the brand or product during the post purchase scenario. Some of the responses they seek are to the questions "what do I know about this product or brand", "Am I sure that I need this product", "What problem can this product solve for me", "what problems can I have while I use this product", "Should I share with my friends about this product" etc. The consumers are hence seeking these responses on social media platforms, sharing their experiences and propagating their opinions to other users. Our findings suggest that SMC can influence the consumption behavior of other consumers especially their decision making process (1) by providing ample Information about products and services, (2) by instilling and propagating desire, (3) by sharing of Experience knowledge and (4) by extinguishing anxiety/ uncertainty around a product. This model of influence due to the four factors is termed by us as the "IDEA" model or Information, Desire, Experience and Anxiety model. (1) The first theme of this model, suggests that SMC provide ample, relevant and condensed Information about products and services. As many participants consult SMC for product specific information, i.e. for product reviews, product ratings, recommendations, user opinions, etc. SMC is likely to influence consumption when individuals read the product review, comments written by others, which incite them to write back in return. Consumers articulate a comment online describing their experiences with a product or service, they may further ask other consumers to submit their problem solving information or problems. Writing or soliciting information online hence allows contributors to have better understanding of the product. This sharing and advice seeking motive is concerned with acquiring the skills necessary

to better understand, use, operate, modify and or repair a product, all of which are likely to influence the consumption behavior of consumers. *"It is important for me to get Software for which I find lots of tutorials on you tube… I try checking beforehand coz if not, it´s not so easy to get the hang of it". "I was wondering which DSLR to pick…checked few blogs…found one with comparison charts with all sorts of info…half of it I didn´t even understand…but it was really well made and explained…wow...so in the end it was kinda easy, finally I chose EOS50D by canon".* The second theme of IDEA model suggests that SMC instills desire for its users to consume, when consumers read comments on blogs or pages of their friends on social networks, it instills them to engage in the consumption process. In some cases it even instills jealousy that propels the consumption act. *"You know I wasn´t sure about getting an Iphone, I was a bit low on moolah… but I saw a good friend of mine putting up a pic. On facebook with her status updated, "yuhhuuu… got the new I phone", so I really felt like getting one myself, it´s weird (laughs) but finally I did get one".* As more SM users share external links, their desiderata lists it infuses the readers, friends to engage or possess that product. The third theme of IDEA model suggests that users seek experience knowledge on SMC, especially paying attention to comments, reviews and usage experience as shared by their peers. This experience knowledge when an external source i.e. coming from an outside source (not from personal prior experience) influences the decision to engage in the consumption process. *"Funny thing…I was looking to change my phone…I shortlisted a Samsung handset…but going through all the blogs I realized most people had issues with its battery life and network….so I had my doubts…still not sure coz the phone looks fabulous".* The experience knowledge also encompasses contextual use of the product, or specific environments for which the product is well adapted and suited. The fourth theme of IDEA model suggests that SMC reduces the anxiety associated with the product. *"was*

thinking to change my old Celeron machine for another cheap laptop…so I came across the net book in this local store …it sounded great □…half the price, easy to carry to my classes and all…so I made up my mind…but the vendor tried to sell me a low end laptop instead by giving me all sort of arguments…I felt uneasy so I decided to wait a couple of days…I came back checked few blogs…I understood that its less powerful and slow than a PC but for half the price it solves my problem…so I went a got me one ASUS". The SMC hence extinguishes the pre purchase anxiety as the consumer can access wealth of information which injects confidence in his personal decision. It further removes probability of anxiety after the purchase as the consumer is now aware of related consequences and is likely to feel responsible for his own decisions.

5. DISCUSSION: The undertaken research offers insight into the influence of social media content on the consumption process. The study examines consumer behavior and decision making process in a qualitative manner to provide marketers with a deeper understanding of their consumer mind. As the number of consumers who are engaging in using Social Media is rising, they are more likely to look for consumption related information amidst SMC. A major finding of this research is the IDEA model, which explains the influence of SMC on the consumption behavior of other consumers especially their decision making process (1) by providing ample Information about products and services, (2) by instilling desire, (3) by sharing of Experience knowledge and (4) by extinguishing anxiety/ uncertainty around a product. In terms of limitations of this study, we feel that the small sample size might not be representative of social media users at large, hence a quantitative study with large sample size or a Netnographic study of multiple social media would be advisable to generalize our findings. Our research was conducted with residents of one European city; hence, it could be of interest to conduct similar study across multiple cities to monitor

cross cultural influence of social media on propensity to consume. Any future researches could also extend to different age groups to comprehend their reactivity to social media and organize a comparative study of non-included social media.

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