The Influence of Social Media on Lebanese Students' Buying Decisions

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Abstract: Basically, social media is an "open media for intuitive correspondence driven by ordinary individuals." (Goyette, Ricard, Bergeron & Marticotte, 2010). Dissimilar to the restricted creation and exchange of news, data, and entertainment from principle media outlets by means of the broad communication methods, social media enables anyone to connect directly to the creator of such material, and convey the material through different communication channels.

Social media presence on the web continues to grow both in popularity and in application use. Nowadays, social media users come from different demographic backgrounds such as gender and age. Moreover, utilization of the web and online networking services, portable applications, and other computerized correspondence advancements have progressed towards becoming a major activity in billions of individuals' everyday lives (Coulter & Roggeveen, 2012).

This paper sheds a light on the importance of social media and the usage of social networking among Lebanese students in a private university. The paper will explain how social media has an impact on university students' buying decisions and behavior, and how university students are increasingly dependent on social media in their lives. A random sample of business students was selected, and a structured self-administered survey was distributed to the students. Their answers reveal first, the type of social media the students most frequently use, the pattern and purpose of using the social media, and finally the level and type of dependency on the social media when the students are making purchasing decisions. In this paper, we identified the attributes that drive students to use online social networks such as Facebook. Particularly, we conceptualized that social media is used intentionally as a social interaction tool and we assessed relatively the impact of social influence on students' buying decisions (Brown & Broderick, 2007). Statistical empirical tests were used to study the users, and those tests revealed that there is a strong relationship between the students' use of social media and the decision they make when purchasing products. In the light of these findings, conclusions are drawn, recommendations are formulated, and future research is recommended.

Index Terms: Keywords: Social Media, Social Network, Buying Behavior, Brand Awareness, Virtual Community.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social Media can be defined as web based programming and interfaces that enable people to associate and communicate with each other, trading insights about their lives, such as real-life information, proficient data, individual photographs and up-to-the-minute contemplations (Stelzner,

2010).

Web-based social media started out entirely as an individual device that allowed individuals to collaborate with friends and relatives [1]. However, later on, social media was received by organizations that needed to exploit a prominent new specialized strategy to connect with clients, for instance, by illuminating them on offers and offering them exceptional coupons [2].

Web-based social networking itself is a catch-all term for destinations that may give profoundly extraordinary social activities (Eccleston, 2008). For example, Twitter is a social site intended to give individuals a chance to share short messages or "updates" with others [3]. Facebook, conversely, is an online social media and social networking platform that is considered as an informal communication site that is used usually to share updates, photographs, meetings, occasions and an assortment of different exercises [4].

Web-based social networking produces a gigantic abundance of ongoing material at a perpetual rate. From all the information that individuals create and share, just a few of the themes are considered interesting enough to be shared with others. The topic of what factors cause the development and industriousness of patterns is an essential one that has not been addressed yet. In this paper, the researcher leads a concentrated investigation of inclining points on social media and gives a hypothetical reason for the development, industriousness, and corrosion of patterns. We find that the reverberation of the substance with the clients of the interpersonal organization assumes a noteworthy part in causing patterns.

In the new millennium, social media has become the new trend. Individuals from all over the world are now connected to social media. Even for businesses, social media has become a marketing opportunity that surpasses the traditional intermediaries and connects organizations directly with their clients [5]. Nowadays, almost every business on the planet, ranging from small enterprises to multinational companies, is discovering social media marketing inventiveness [6]. Not long ago, businesses were not aware of the potential that social media presents. These days, companies are quickly accepting social media marketing.

II. SOCIAL MEDIA

Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) argue that social media started with 'Open Diaries,' an online diary system that was used to connect users in a form of a virtual community.

Cheon E. and Ahn J. (2009) define virtual community as the "various social networks interacting via digitized communication". The term is frequently used to describe various forms of computer mediated communication among large groups that exchange information, enjoy hobbies, chat, etc., as people do in the real world (Igbaria, 1999). Virtual communities are also defined as networks of individuals or business partners that share common interests and satisfy their own needs in the form of digitized communication on a technical platform [7]. On the other hand, Chung and Austria (2010, p. 581) see social media as "the media that is published, created and shared by individuals on the Internet, such as blogs, images, video and more as well as online tools and platforms that allow Internet users to collaborate on content, share insights and experiences and connect for business or pleasure". According to Manglod and Faulds (2009), social media is the platform that permits the social exchange of online content pertaining to information and opinions about different products, services and any general information that customers produce and share with others to educate them. From a technical point of view, social media can be explained, as Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), and Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silverstre (2011), as "a collection of Internet based applications built on an interactive platform, driven by the web-based and mobile technological foundation, also called Web 2.0, (Alexander, 2006) that enables the exchange and co-creation of user created information in various forms amongst users". On the other hand, Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson and Seymour (2011) describe social media as an electronic communication medium, that permits different users to willingly share information, ideas and messages by using a sort of "interconnected communities". Social media is all about engaging different people online by using the Internet [8]. Social media is an Internet-based tool for sharing, distributing and discussing information among people of common interests. It is all about networking and connecting people, while promoting trust amid the different participants and the parties involved in the virtual communities [9].

Therefore, any site which enables users to share their opinions, visions, and information and boosts communication and group building can be considered as social media. Some mainstream web-based social media examples are: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter [10].

At an earlier stage of the Internet life, websites and emails gave power to businesses, provided a mean of communication with current and potential customers, as a marketing tool, while social media is the next marketing wave. Social networks, blogs, online communities, and many other tools are used nowadays in social media marketing strategies by companies that seek to engage with their customers through online platforms [11]. The burst of the social media phenomenon and the speed at which it is spreading and growing is global. According to Fogel (2010), trust and goodwill are the premise of social media marketing, and by marketing in this domain, these central considerations should be followed. Social media, as a marketing platform, encourages trustworthy communication and interaction between sellers and customers [13]. Global companies have identified social media as a potential marketing platform, put social media into use, and invented new ways and methods to harvest social media power in advertising campaigns.

In the last ten years, all types of people, young and old, men and women, are connected to the Internet. Most of them are using social media to exchange ideas, feelings, personal information, videos and pictures. According to Dave Chaffey (2017), internet users in the world surpass half (3.7 billions) of the population, and about 37% (2.7 billion) are active on the social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others. About 66% (4.9 billion) of the population use smartphones and 34% (2.5 billion) are active on social media using mobiles. More than 73% of American teens are now using social media websites (Oberst, 2010). Schill (2011) believes that social media has a negative impact on teens since it encourages negative behavior, such as procrastination, and in his opinion, social media might encourage smoking and drinking (Bayton, 1958). Every day, many students are spending many hours connected to the social media. At first glance, it might seem like a waste of time, however, most of those students are developing their social skills, acquiring new important knowledge, exchanging useful ideas, being exposed to new cultures, and at the same time, being introduced to new products and services. Moreover, whether or not we consider social media as a constructive or destructive tool in the hands of our students, social media is continuing to grow in popularity, and we have to agree that in the present, technology is a vital part of students' lives and has to be considered as a part of their success equation.

In the present, various research is conducted on how social media influences the students' decisions in many areas of their lives. The goal of this paper is to study the influence of social media on business university students' buying decisions and whether social media creates brand awareness among these university students. Brand awareness is the degree to which the company's name is known and familiar to people. A brand name is a major step in promoting company's products and services or launching a new product. It helps in growing businesses and differentiates similar products and services from its competitors the brand is the name, term, symbol, design, or combination of all of these. It identifies what one seller offers and what differentiates this seller from others. For the consumers the brand is seen as an important part of the product, and a value that is added to the product. The merchant can charge more if the brand is more known. A brand name can help buyers in identifying the quality of the product. Customers expect to receive the same quality and benefits each time they buy from the same brand. The brand is an intangible asset that has a value[12].

In general, social media can benefit businesses in different ways, such as enabling companies to share their expertise and knowledge and enabling customers to help other customers. Social media can be used to provide an identity for the companies and the products or services that they offer. Social media can help in creating relationships with people who

might not otherwise know about the products or services or what these companies are offering. Social media makes companies "real" to consumers.

III. SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Social media marketing can be defined as the attempt to use social media to convince consumers that the products and/or services of a company are valuable. Social media marketing is a form of marketing using online communities, social networks, blog marketing and more. However, Lazer and Kelly's (1973) describes social marketing as "concerned with the application of marketing knowledge, concepts, and techniques to enhance social as well as economic ends. It is also concerned with the analysis of the social consequences of marketing policies, decisions and activities." Social media marketing is a strategic and methodical process to establish the company's influence, reputation, and brand within communities of potential customers, readers or supporters [16]. In a study entitled "The State of Small Business Report", and sponsored by Network Solutions, LLC and the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business a recent study, the study stresses on the economic interaction as the impetus for social media fast growth.

The results of the study demonstrate that the usage of the social media by small business owners increased recently from 12% to 24%, and almost 1 out of 5 small business owners is using social media as a main platform for the company's marketing strategy. Furthermore, in 2009, around 23% of marketers were using social media. However, the number has grown to almost 42%. The breakdown of what the small businesses reported as the main uses of social media marketing is summarized hereafter: 75% of the companies have a company page on a social networking site, 69% of the companies post status updates or articles of interest on social media sites, 57% of the companies create a network through a social media site such as LinkedIn, 54% of the companies monitor feedback about the business, 39% of the companies maintain a blog, 26% of the companies tweet about areas of expertise, and 16% of the companies use Twitter as a service channel. Moreover, the same study reports that different companies are accepting social media marketing at different rates, and although many companies are already using social media marketing in order to connect with more customers, many other companies are still not considering social media marketing as a top priority (Admin, 2017). Finally, social media marketing can be viewed as a personalized way of advertising. Promotions can be targeted to particular groups sharing common interests in certain areas compared to the conventional advertising.

IV. RELATION BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND BRAND AWARENESS

According to Sisira Neti (2011), organizations use social media as communication channels to persuade customers that the company's product is important to them. Organizations use methodical processes to establish their brand and reputation [20][21].

According to Shruti Arora (2013), social media can help

customers build trust in brands by building a relationship between the organization and its customers [22][23][24]. Also, social media can help differentiate the brand to become unmistakable through emotional connection [14][15]. For Stegner Wallace (2015), the steps to create brand awareness through social media are:

Giving enough means to excite the buyers: The company should excite the customers to ensure that their company stays in the competition among several other competitors that share the same objectives for using social media.

Balancing content in social media: Although the objective of using social media is to promote products and increase revenue, the company should post the nuance of the brand like its history instead of posting an aggressive promotional campaign.

Focusing on the right channels: The company should choose the right channel wisely to find the most target users.

Interaction and involvement: The communication should be bi-directional, meaning that the company should answer the inquiries posted by customers. In this way, the company will be able to build a positive brand image on the long run.

Involving people with mass appeal: Involving these people in social media profiles can help the company better connect to its clients.

Using paid advertising: Paid advertising can help the company reach a larger population.

Sponsoring a giveaway: The company may give a ticket for a gadget giveaway for every user that shares the company's profile.

V. RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY USED

Methodology doesn't explain only the method used, but it also states several processes that must be followed. In order to assess the impact of social media on university students' brand awareness and buying decisions, the researcher has chosen to use both qualitative and quantitative research with a higher emphasis on qualitative research. Qualitative research allows the subjects being studied to give more affluent answers to questions asked by the researcher, and gives more important insight which might have been missed if another method of data collection is used [17][18][19]. Moreover, to be able to quantitatively measure the university students attitude towards social media, the researcher has conducted a survey on a sample of graduate Lebanese university business students of different demographic profiles.

After going through the Literature review, the researcher has consolidated the findings of major studies and articles and analyzed the situation of social media and its effects on consumers' behavior accordingly.

The main contribution this paper makes compared to previous ones analyzing social media, brand awareness and buying decision is that this paper is analyzing the topic from the Lebanese business students' perspective.

A. Research Question

Does social media have an impact on creating brand awareness and influencing buying decisions among graduate Lebanese business students?

B. Hypotheses

H1: Social media has an impact on creating brand awareness and influencing buying decisions among graduate Lebanese business students.

H0: Social media has no impact on creating brand awareness and influencing buying decisions among graduate Lebanese business students

C. Data Collection

Random sampling technique was used in this study. In the random sampling process, every element of the population has an equal chance to be selected as a subject. In order to collect reliable data for the analysis, every individual was requested to answer all the questions. The questionnaires were directed to 60 graduate business students from a private Lebanese university constituting the sample size.

Primary data was mainly gathered from several interviews with Lebanese business students at private universities and from a survey which was conducted on a considerable sample of graduate Lebanese business students covering the perspectives of the study [32].

Secondary data was collected from different previous research and studies done on this subject.

Bearing in mind the scarcity of the resources, the author collected findings of empirical studies in addition to recommendations and results of qualitative research and consolidated them in the literature review part.

The secondary data was mainly extracted from books, papers, studies, articles and websites

D. Data Analysis

The interviews conducted on the graduate Lebanese business students from a private university provided the researcher with arguments as primary data concerning social media and its impact on the creation of brand awareness and it influence on the students buying decisions. Conclusions were extracted from comparisons between the published reference-work and true facts from the interviews and survey conducted by the researcher and recommendations are drawn.

Once the arguments have been qualitatively verified, a survey is conducted on a Simple Random Sample (Frerichs, R.R. ,2008) of 60 graduate Lebanese business students of all ages, genders and social classes, no segmentation was needed in this case since all Lebanese above eighteen are considered consumers that can easily undertake this kind of survey. The author distributed 60 copies randomly on the graduate Lebanese business students at a private university.

The survey is presented in the form of a self-administered questionnaire consisting of 23 questions distributed under three categories. The imbedded questions have to be answered following the Likert scal [25]based on five answering options ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. Furthermore, there are questions where the answers come in the form of ranking. More to this, the respondent was given the opportunity to express his/her opinion with his/her own words at the end of the questionnaire. Afterwards, all the results were analyzed to verify or falsify the hypotheses of the study.

VI. DISCUSSION

The paper finds that 100% of the participants own a computer device and/or smart cellphone. 100% of the participants have an account with at least one of the social media websites. 98% of the participants have an account on Facebook. 90% of the participants are always connected to the Internet. 50% of the participants trust information submitted to social media. 75% of the respondents purchasing decisions may be based on social media information. 85% may change their mind about a product/service after reading about it on social media, while 15% will not be affected. 60% of the targeted sample will be affected by other customer reviews submitted socially. Students are 90% influenced by their family and friends over a salesperson. 45% agreed that they will be interested in becoming a "fan" of or following brands through social media sites. Answering the question: "Why do you use social media?" (choose as many that apply): 70% chose Networking, 80% chose to learn about information on products/services, 70% chose Entertainment, 90% chose Keep in touch with friends/ Family, and 85% chose Deals and Promotions. Answering the question: "Before purchasing a clothing item, have you ever checked a social media site for any of the following reasons?" (choose as many that apply): 70% chose User reviews, 85% chose Promotions, 75% chose to ask a friend about clothes from either store, and 10% chose Neither. Answering the question: "Who are you more likely to listen to when deciding whether or not to shop at a particular store?" (choose as many that apply): Friends 70%, Family 80%, User Reviews 65%, No one 75%.

After evaluating the data, we can conclude that social media impacted individual purchasing decision.

Moreover, Answering the question: "How do you generally receive retail promotions?" Regular Mail 40%, Online 75%, Email 80%, Social Media 87%, Neither 5%. Answering the question: "How likely are you influenced to buy a specific product based on the information you receive through a social media?" Very likely 15%, Likely 55%, Neither 10%, Not likely 15%, Very unlikely 5%. Answering the question: "How do you view an ad message on a social media site such as Facebook or Twitter versus traditional media such as, TV, radio or newspaper?" They are the same 40%, Prefer social media ad because it's more interactive 40%, Prefer traditional ads because its less interactive 10%, Neither 10%.

70% answered yes to the question: "Do you think that social media is an effective way to reach you as a customer when it comes to the fashion retail industry?" while 30% said No.

From the above results we can infer that the respondents are very active on social media.

The figures below are drawn from the participants' answers that present their most common activities on the social media:

• 90% like or follow on social media at least one preferred brand.

• 70% like photos and other posts of products/services.

• 14% comment on the quality, and their experiences with products.

• 19% share different posts related to products (photos, videos, texts, etc.).

• 16% "check-in" the place they are at.

• 10% use hashtag "#", mentioning the product, service or company

• 15% do not commit any activity on social media.

A further 45% declared that they sometimes read reviews, 25% consider that these reviews impact their opinion regarding a particular product, and 9% of respondents declared that at least once in their life they were convinced to buy or not to buy something as a result of reading the reviews.

Asking respondents about "what draws their attention on social media", 65% responded that it depends on how important the product is to them, while 45% declared that the visual elements of advertising, photos, and videos of products draws their attention.

When asked "what motivates them to buy products exposed in social media", 60% responded they are motivated by reviews of friends and acquaintances, 50% said by posted products' photos and videos, and 38% said they are motivated by positive comments of former [26][27][28].

It was previously mentioned that social media impacts purchasing, even if it is unplanned. This impact is empowered by the frequent exposure of consumers towards the products and advertisements in social media (Engel, Blackwell & Miniard, 1993). When respondents were asked about "the impact of a product going viral in social media, in their behavior", the results were as follows: 26% said their thoughts and attitudes regarding that product can change (for better or worse), 70% will consider it as potential alternative to buy, when they need something like that in the future, 9% said they would buy that product [29][30][31].

VII. CONCLUSION

The respondents included in the sample survey from a private Lebanese university use the Internet and the social media a lot, and spend a considerable amount of time (most of them spend at least 1 hour per day). The vast majority of respondents have Internet access via mobile phones or any other wireless device/tablet, and use social media. Looking at the results, it can be noticed that there is no significant difference in the users' gender, and most of the respondents using social media claimed to be students and/or unemployed. Considering the increasing trend of using social media, we begin to think that these young people will continue using social media in the future when they will get employed, making them potential online buyers. The most used social media are (Facebook, LinkedIn), while the least

are the Blogs and the Microblog. This high share of using social media by the respondent is also impacting their behavior as consumers, affecting each of the stages of the consumer decision making process. The respondents use the Internet and social media mainly as the search for information more than they use the traditional mass media (TV, radio, newspaper), where the main reason is the high quantity and easy access to information, and also because they consider the information to be more reliable since it is provided by other consumers, beyond the control of companies. Saving time by using social media is a great advantage to them. Another reason against using traditional media is the ability to receive the information without being interrupted. Furthermore, most of the respondents agree that using social media has increased and enhanced their knowledge related to different products and services.

VIII. RECOMMENDATION

Due to the low cost, social media provides operation space even for small and novice businesses. Therefore, we recommend the businesses in Lebanon to:

• Be active in social media and manage their accounts properly.

• Segment their consumers based on the type of social media they use.

• Use social media for more frequent exposure, in order to attract their consumers' attention and increase brand awareness.

• Be more interactive and generate ideas from the consumers (making them feel part of the brand).

• Try to be influential through the crowd, making their products go viral in social media.

• Identify and manage the opinion leaders of the digital groups, stimulating them to positively talk about their products.

• Enable consumers to express their experience (through reviews).

• Enable and facilitate online purchasing.

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