Stimuli of global social networks and their influence on users' shopping behavior

Tomas Ric^{1,*}, and Daniela Salkova¹

¹ Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague, Faculty of Economics and Management, Kamýcká 959, 165 00 Prague, Czechia

Abstract

Research background: The paper addresses the business potential of social networks and the impact of incentives on the purchase behaviour of consumers. Social networks are the fastest growing marketing tool in the world with more than 4 billion users worldwide. These global platforms offer new tools, encourage interactivity, and allow consumers to participate in product marketing thanks to sharing their own content.

Purpose of the article: The aim of the paper is a series of recommendations for small and micro businesses with a global audience. These recommendations are focused on the right choice of the marketing mix on social networks in order to optimize communication and sales activities.

Methods: The paper is based on a qualitative methods of focus groups and semi-structured interviews in order to characterize the perception of marketing incentives by users of these networks. The respondents of the research are users aged 18-25, which is also the most numerous group of active participants in social commerce.

Findings & Value added: The most significant incentives influencing customers' shopping behavior on social networks include interactivity (communicating with friends, commenting, and liking), content quality, content personalization, technological simplification of purchasing and reducing the number of steps required to purchase. An important component entering the decision-making process is social and ethical marketing, which is more transparent than ever.

Keywords: *social commerce; advertising; globalization; marketing.*

JEL Classification: *M31; M37; L86*

* Corresponding author: riect@pef.czu.cz

1 Introduction

Shopping behavior in a variety of settings has been the subject of academic research since the mid-20th century. At that time, consumer behavior was characterized in brick-and-mortar stores, followed by research in traditional e-commerce such as static websites and e-shops (Floh and Madlberger, 2013). The current research environment is the so-called social commerce (Dabbous and Barakat, 2020).

E-commerce and social commerce are platforms based on interactivity but differ in their business goals, user control, system interaction, and web design (Busalim et al., 2019). While e-commerce maximizes business potential through shopping buttons, social commerce stimulates business with social activities that encourage collaboration. Social commerce contains user-generated content, ratings, reviews, comments, and recommendations. They are encouraged to share their personal experiences (Ellahi and Bokhari, 2013).

In 2020, social networks were used worldwide by 3.8 billion users with a year-on-year increase of 9.2% compared to 2019. The largest social networks in terms of users are Facebook, YouTube and Instagram (Kemp, 2020).

The influence of individual stimuli of social networks on consumer behavior was investigated by several authors. It should be noted that most of these researchers were based only on the questionnaire survey method, without the addition of other methods, such as focus-group for a deeper knowledge of the context, or an experiment.

The most frequently studied stimuli include content characteristics, network characteristics, interactions. Most of these studies date from 2014 and 2015 (Busalim et al., 2019; Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016). Since then, social networking tools have expanded and changed.

The most significant incentives influencing customers' shopping behavior on social networks include interactivity (communicating with friends, commenting, and liking), content quality, content personalization, a technological simplification of purchasing, and reducing the number of steps required to purchase. An important component entering the decision-making process is social and ethical marketing, which is more transparent than ever.

The aim of this work is to characterize the motives of social network users to use individual platforms, which are mentioned above. Define the interests of users, their basic social behavior, and how they respond to advertising on these platforms, or how they think they respond to advertising.

1.1 Social commerce platforms

There is a wide range of social media, but the leading type is social networking. Whether one needs to connect with friends, to follow the news, or to expand one's business network, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn keep attracting users. Platforms like Instagram and YouTube focus on photo and video exchange. Blogging networks, as well as visually focused networks such as Pinterest, are where users share interests, and messengers like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp are used primarily for texting (Statista, 2021b).

Social media are online applications, platforms and media which aim to facilitate interactions, collaborations, and the sharing of content (Richter and Koch, 2008). Social commerce is defined in several different ways (Animesh et al., 2011; Dabbous and Barakat, 2020; Eroglu et al., 2003; Kim and Ko, 2012), but all studies agree on the importance of interaction that this social environment defines.

Users of social media platforms such as Facebook reported to be driven by several motivators such as a wish for entertainment, wish to stay informed and the desire to know the social activities of friends (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Quan-Haase and Young, 2010). Recent studies have also pointed out that social network sites are often used for self-

promotion and exhibitionism purposes (Islam et al., 2020). As such, social network sites differ from instant messaging, which is more personal, less self-promoting, more direct and driven by a wish to maintain and develop relationships (Quan-Haase and Young, 2010).

Social networks are the largest business platform in the world. It is the easiest way how to target customers with advertising activities. Responses can be analyzed immediately and thus verification process of the marketing activities.

In the following text, three main social networks are introduced from both the general and business perspective. They are Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

Facebook is the first global social network founded in 2004 but reached its greatest global expansion in 2010. Since then, it has grown steadily, even the growth has slowed in the last few years. Facebook is based on the personal profiles of people who share content from their personal lives. Naturally, the platform expanded and included business sites, products, and event promotion. It became an information and business platform with the possibility of direct business targeting its users (Wiese et al., 2020).

So far, the biggest business expansion is the so-called marketplace, which allows entrepreneurs to add products from their e-shops, tag them in photos and promote them in online catalogs in order to simplify and speed up shopping for users .

In 2020, Facebook was regularly used by 1.9 billion users. In 2018, the platform had more than 65 million entrepreneurs using their services. Since then, the number has been growing steadily (Statista, 2021a).

In 2021, Facebook bought a platform called **Instagram**, which, unlike the previous social network, focuses mainly on photo and video content. In comments, users can use so-called hashtags, which make content easier to find for other users. There were 1.07 billion users on Instagram at the beginning of 2021, of which 71% are under 35 years of age. The average time users spend on Instagram is 30 minutes every day. There are about 25 million commercial profiles on this platform. For example, in America, over 60% of entrepreneurs use Instagram for their business purposes (Newberry, 2021b).

The most used Instagram business tools include targeted advertisements. Their success lies in accelerated access to the product through labeling in posts or through links to the e-shop. Entrepreneurs sometimes collaborate with so-called influencers. Those have a lot of followers that they can target with their posts, which should look more natural than traditional paid advertising.

The third most popular social network is YouTube, which is based on sharing videos of various categories that users can watch at any time. The platform is popular mainly due to the growing importance of video across all platforms. Not only enthusiasts but also professional studios and artists upload their content to YouTube. As with other platforms, it is possible to target users specifically to their interests, similarities, etc. Advertising on this platform is usually in the form of a video before or after the video that the user searched for.

YouTube is used by over 2 billion logged-in users per month. 77% of users are aged 15-35. Unlike other platforms, 56% of men watch YouTube. Users over the age of 18 spend an average of 42 minutes a day watching videos. One of the most widely used categories is the so-called beauty tutorials, which soon began to be noticed by the respective brands (Newberry, 2021a).

TikTok is a platform for sharing micro videos. It is the fastest-growing platform. In 2019, it grew to 500 million users in just 18 months. In 2020, the platform has 700 million users. 60% of users are under 18 years old (Zhu et al., 2020).

2 Methodology

The core method used in this work is the focus group, which was preceded by a thorough stage of the literature. The paper is also part of a larger research unit that deals with the issue of social networks, specifically incentives that enter into consumer decision-making when purchasing products.

The paper serves as preliminary research which, thanks to extensive data collection, gradually helps to define a research model that will be based on the S-O-R paradigm (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Such a model will be analyzed using Structural equation modeling.

The relevant literature was studied for the correct procedure and subsequent analysis of the focus group. For example (O.Nyumba et al., 2018; Parker and Tritter, 2006; Whitehead and Lopez, 2016) .

Based on the study of the literature, we confirm the certainty of the degree of ambiguity and inaccuracy of the focus group method. This is confirmed also by (Parker and Tritter, 2006).

2.1 Collecting data

It should be noted that data collection using the focus group took place in April 2021 and was harmed by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Due to government and university regulations, it was not possible to meet the respondents physically, so all meetings took place online. The Microsoft Teams software was used for the sect, which the students were used to from the ongoing teaching. The respondents were volunteers from the University of Life Sciences in Prague and for their participation they were offered a reward of CZK 100 per session.

A total of 13 respondents participated in the research in three focus group sessions. There were 6 respondents at the first meeting, and 4 respondents at the second mini-focus group. The last meeting was resigned by three respondents, and so in the end there was a dyadic interview that allowed researchers to go into more depth of the problem (Morgan et al. 2013). All respondents were aged 22-25, so they belong to the largest group of social network users. All respondents are active users of social networks. Focus groups were attended by 7 men and 5 women.

The researchers talked to all the participants before the focus group session confirmed the date and time of the meeting and informed them about the rules of the focus group so that everyone would feel safe. The rules were as follows: talk and share your experiences and thoughts, there are no wrong answers, everything said stays here, the session will be recorded for further analysis. Furthermore, the participants were informed of the expected focus group time, ie 60-90 minutes.

A scenario was prepared in advance. In the first part, the respondents should introduce themselves to each other. After that, a non-research question was asked in order to get used to talking in front of others.

The first set of questions on the topic focused on the motives for using social networks, the behavior on social networks, and the feelings they have. The second set of questions focused more commercially on the perception of advertising on social networks, advertising, shopping, influencers.

The scenario was followed in all three focus group sessions. In most cases, respondents followed each other and developed each other's ideas. Sometimes it was necessary for the moderator of the discussion to ask someone to react. Respondents most often shared their own experiences and feelings, or the experiences of their friends.

2.2 Data analysis

All focus group sessions were recorded. Subsequently, a session transcript was performed. The individual statements were written to a spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel and coded. The first code is the respondent's code, for example, 1.1 for respondent #1 in focus group #1. The second code was assigned to the topic to which the statement belonged. Topics and sub-topics arose naturally and correlated between individual focus group sessions. Thanks to the statements coding it was possible to compare them with data across focus groups using a constant comparative method of analysis. As the comparison, interpretation, and analysis progressed, substantive codes were grouped into emerging themes and subthemes.

After coding, the answers of the respondents were classified into individual categories as follows:

- Used social networks
- Following profiles
- Motivation to use
- Negative experiences and opinions on social media
- Advertisement
- Shopping experiences on social media
- Targeted advertising experiences

3 Results

The following chapter summarizes the most important findings from the thematic subcategories.

3.1 Used social networks

Facebook and Instagram, the two strongest social platforms, are used by all respondents. They usually start using them in primary school. It was mainly fun at those times, like 2.1: "I started because of the games I played there. Gradually, I started using it to talk with friends." It is this respondent who characterizes the inclination of almost all respondents to communicate with friends and family instead of the previous entertainment.

WhatsApp, Facebook messenger, Snapchat, and the newly growing TikTok platform are gradually being added to these social networks. Respondents agreed that they "feel too old" for using TikTok. They consider ICQ to be the first social network used. One of the respondents also uses the Tinder application, which he has for dating.

3.2 Followed profiles

The dominant type of profiles that respondents follow are their friends and close family. The second type are profiles that are associated with their interests and hobbies, such as floorball, coffee, fitness, etc. Less than half of respondents follow news profiles like BBC or CNN because they seem to them as a fast and trustworthy source of information.

Respondents claim that they hardly follow commercial profiles or brands. Only one of them admits that he watches brands like Adidas and Nike. If following celebrities, then only those who can create a sense of authenticity and wit.

Respondent 1.1 interestingly states: "I follow people who are a sample of the whole Czech Republic. I deliberately chose them, even the poor, or with other opinions. I wonder what I come across, what they share, what they drink, what they read. It's more interesting to me than research than fun." Researchers consider this as an interesting exception.

3.3 Motivation to use

According to the answers of the respondents, the original intention of the creators of social networks to connect people is being fulfilled. The most common motive for using these platforms is communication. Communication with friends, family, but also with brands and celebrities. For example, respondent 2.1 states: "Social networks are very close to us. The transmission of information is more humane than in traditional media. And the same goes for political information."

Another important motive is interaction in general, immediate feedback. Respondent 3.2 states: "Feedback is important to me. I communicate there to get feedback from around the world. I am glad about that. Otherwise, I don't know why I would do that. The more, the better. I've been there long enough every day, three at night. "

Some of the respondents see the advantage of social networks in the ability to present themselves as they like. They can create their own world with people they would not even be able to meet in normal life. But everyone agrees that it's primarily about fun, about being in touch with people and having up-to-date information.

3.4 Negative experiences and opinions on social media

Social networks are not only perceived positively. Most respondents agree that they spend too much time on social networks. In some extreme cases, even 8 hours a day. Some respondents feel pressured, such as respondent 1.3: "I am bothered by the enormous amount of time I spend there, the application forces me to communicate with notifications." Corresponding to this is respondent 1.3. Three respondents even met with a negative reaction from friends when they did not respond immediately to the received message. Some respondents also realize that they are being followed by more people than they actually know, but they are too lazy or do not have time to delete them.

Three respondents do not agree with this view, such as 1.2: "I have no problem not to reply to people, I do not feel pressured." Respondent 2.4 even uses software that prevents him from overusing social networks.

Two respondents have a negative experience, where one of them has had his identity stolen. The second respondent's data were stolen and used against him with threats and police intervention. It was not appropriate to ask for more details in the study.

3.5 Advertisement

By respondents, everything that is not requested can be considered as advertising. For example, 1.1. claims: "For me, advertising is everything: promotion of a company, a nice personal photo from a holiday, coffee in a cafe. I would hardly look for something that is not advertising" or 2.1: "Everyone who forces me into something, what i don't want, do advertisement." Several other respondents support the same idea. They consider advertisement on social networks both paid ones and organic also. For example, in stories on Instagram or in the feed, as well as organic content shared by their friends.

The most positive advertising is considered to be the one with social overlaps, such as in case of respondent 2.1: "I enjoy socially responsible ads. I don't care that wine is good, anyone can say that. I prefer the story. " Some respondents even look for services that promise some more help, such as planting trees, etc.

Respondent 3.2 has a very positive experience with direct interaction with an unnamed brand. Thanks to one comment, the respondent subsequently made pro-shopping behavior in the form of another search for the brand's products.

Respondents perceive the use of influencers as slightly negative advertising. According to the respondents, the products that are donated to these people are promoted unrealistically

without an interest. They consider it the worst when influencer uses products other than those declared in their profile.

More than half of the respondents perceive intrusive advertising, which is not personalized, as negative advertising. Yes, the personalization of advertising is perceived positively by the respondents because it corresponds to their needs. This is a very important factor in successful advertising. According to the respondents, advertising must be concise, visual, and funny.

Researchers perceive the statement of three respondents, who are convinced that they are not clicking on ads, that they are not interesting for them, but at the same time claim that they have already bought something thanks to them. Mostly it was if the ad offered them the product or service they needed.

3.6 Shopping experiences on social media

Respondents perceive advertising on social networks very intensely. Less than a third of respondents perceive advertising very negatively. Respondent 1.3 even claims: "When I see too much in advertisements, I lose the desire to buy the thing."

However, most respondents have a positive even proactive experience with advertising, specifically with shopping on social networks. According to the respondents, the advertisement that can satisfy their current needs is successful. One of the most successful communication tools is sharing products and services by other people, whether they are celebrities or, even better, their friends. In this case, users simply identify themselves with the person. This leads to several different types of behavior, such as: searching for more information about a product, finding a product in a brick-and-mortar store, or even buying directly from the e-shop.

In the case of some respondents, the experience with shopping on social networks is very mixed. Advertising is bothering two respondents in principle; they consider it intrusive. Despite this, they realize that it affects them. An example is the answer of respondent 1.3: "I don't mind advertising about AboutYou, because it's everywhere and it's too much, but now I needed pants, so I finally ordered them on their website because it occurred to me first." This is the opposite of the first statement of the respondent which is mentioned above.

3.7 Targeted advertising experiences

Targeted advertising negatively surprises all respondents. The fact that targeted advertising is displayed based on search engines in Internet search engines is already perceived as normal. Advertising that is displayed based on the actual spoken word around mobile devices is perceived negatively. Respondents think that this is beyond personal safety and feel threatened. At the moment of speaking about the topic, they realize how dangerous the data that companies have about them can be.

Despite the fact that they perceive the use of personal data, in half of the cases, it happens that they display the ad. It screened at the right time.

4 Conclusion and discussion

Based on the focus-group findings, advertising on social networks is a very powerful marketing tool. Users react to the visuals, look for products that the advertisement offers, get to know new brands thanks to it, and also buy products and services. The perception of advertising varies among respondents, but some findings can be marginalized.

Recommendations to companies, brands, and especially marketers, or social network managers follow in the next paragraphs. They advise how to behave on social networks so that advertising is received even more positively by users:

- **Interactions:** Companies should interact with their followers on social networks. This is a relatively inexpensive marketing tool, where customers may feel more part of the community. This can lead to bigger brand loyalty. Zhou (2019) came to the same but widespread conclusion.
- **Connection with real people:** Products that are presented by people meaningfully on a long-term basis inspire users' trust and desire to try them. Electronic word-of-mouth is extremely important, even more, when the word comes from someone you know.
- **Focus on micro-influencers:** Profiles with hundreds of thousands of followers have an artificial effect on users and do not trust them. People with a small number of followers with a curated community are much more trustworthy.
- **Authenticity:** Social networks are mainly a platform for a personal presentation. Therefore, those profiles and posts that are authentic have greater business success. Stories and real people are important. In their research, Zafar et al. (2021) focused on the authenticity of traditional celebrities, whose influence on shopping behavior turned out to be indifferent. Although this statement seems to contradict the finding in this work, it rather extends it. Authenticity is especially important in communities.
- **Avoid a lot of unnecessary information:** On social networks, users respond mainly to audio-visual content. The information must be concise, clear, and without much text. Also easy, understandable, and clean aesthetic is important.
- **Socially responsible overlaps:** If it is within the possibilities of the company, it is appropriate to do public benefit activities with a charitable subtext. Users respond very well to such communication.
- **Targeted advertising:** Specify your target audience as accurately as possible. Although users react negatively to targeted advertising in their feelings, advertising leads to shopping behavior. Proper timing is important.

Researchers find it interesting to see the discrepancy in what consumers present that they do and what they describe that they actually do. Several respondents strongly opposed advertising in general. They are convinced that it does not work for them, they do not like her and they skip her. At the same time, they claim that entertainment advertising, well-targeted advertising, and advertising that meets their interests leads to pro-shopping behavior.

This research has several limitations that are important to mention. Thanks to the ongoing lockdown associated with Covid-19, all focus-group sessions could only take place online. Because of this, research lacks an aspect of non-verbal speech. At the same time, this meant that respondents had a limited opportunity to react to each other. The researchers could not completely influence the environment in which the respondents were at the time, and thus could not influence their level of comfort.

The number of respondents is also considered insufficient; however, this research is before the research of the follow-up project. The aim of the preliminary research was to identify the main variables that users of social networks perceive as important for positive shopping behavior.

Based on the findings of this research and further literature search, a research model will be established, which will be further analyzed. Another goal is the accurate identification of variables entering the consumer's purchasing decisions when shopping on social networks.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Internal Grant Agency of the Faculty of Economics and Management at the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague under Grant 2021A0011 - Stimuli of social networks and their influence on user's hopping behavior.

References

1. Animesh, A., Pinsonneault, A., Yang, S. B., & Oh, W. (2011). An odyssey into virtual worlds: Exploring the impacts of technological and spatial environments on intention to purchase virtual products. *MIS Quarterly: Management Information Systems*, 35(3), 789–810.
2. Busalim, A. H., Che Hussin, A. R., & Iahad, N. A. (2019). Factors Influencing Customer Engagement in Social Commerce Websites: A Systematic Literature Review. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 14(2), 0–0.
3. Dabbous, A., & Barakat, K. A. (2020). Bridging the online offline gap: Assessing the impact of brands' social network content quality on brand awareness and purchase intention. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 53(November 2018), 101966.
4. Ellahi, A., & Bokhari, R. H. (2013). Key quality factors affecting users' perception of social networking websites. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 20(1), 120–129.
5. Eroglu, S. A., Machleit, K. A., & Davis, L. M. (2003). Empirical Testing of a Model of Online Store Atmospherics and Shopper Responses. *Psychology and Marketing*, 20(2), 139–150.
6. Floh, A., & Madlberger, M. (2013). The role of atmospheric cues in online impulse-buying behavior. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, 12(6), 425–439.
7. Islam, A. K. M. N., Laato, S., Talukder, S., & Sutinen, E. (2020). Misinformation sharing and social media fatigue during COVID-19: An affordance and cognitive load perspective. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 159(May), 120201.
8. Kemp, S. (2020). *Digital 2020: 3.8 Billion People Use Social Media*. We Are Social.
9. Kietzmann, J. H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I. P., & Silvestre, B. S. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 241–251.
10. Kim, A. J., & Ko, E. (2012). Do social media marketing activities enhance customer equity? An empirical study of luxury fashion brand. *Journal of Business Research*, 65(10), 1480–1486.
11. Mehrabian, A., & Russell, J. A. (1974). An approach to environmental psychology. In *An approach to environmental psychology*. The MIT Press.
12. Newberry, C. (2021a). *25 YouTube Statistics that May Surprise You: 2021 Edition*. Hootsuite.
13. Newberry, C. (2021b). *44 Instagram Stats That Matter to Marketers in 2021*. Hootsuite. Available at: <https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-statistics/>
14. O.Nyumba, T., Wilson, K., Derrick, C. J., & Mukherjee, N. (2018). The use of focus group discussion methodology: Insights from two decades of application in conservation. *Methods in Ecology and Evolution*, (9)1, 20–32.
15. Parker, A., & Tritter, J. (2006). Focus group method and methodology: Current practice and recent debate. *International Journal of Research and Method in Education*, 29(1), 23–37.

16. Quan-Haase, A., & Young, A. L. (2010). Uses and Gratifications of Social Media: A Comparison of Facebook and Instant Messaging. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30(5), 350–361.
17. Richter, A., & Koch, M. (2008). *Functions of Social Networking Services. From CSCW to Web 2.0: European Developments in Collaborative Design Selected Papers from COOP08*.
18. Statista. (2021a). *Number of daily active Facebook users worldwide as of 2nd quarter 2021*. Statista.Com. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/346167/facebook-global-dau/>
19. Statista. (2021b). *Social Media & User-Generated Content*. Statista.Com. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/markets/424/topic/540/social-media-user-generated-content/#statistic2>
20. Whitehead, D., & Lopez, V. (2016). Sampling data and data collection in qualitative research methods. *Nursing and Midwifery Research*, March 2019, 111–126.
21. Wiese, M., Martínez-Climent, C., & Botella-Carrubi, D. (2020). A framework for Facebook advertising effectiveness: A behavioral perspective. *Journal of Business Research*, 109(November 2019), 76–87.
22. Zafar, A. U., Qiu, J., Li, Y., Wang, J., & Shahzad, M. (2021). The impact of social media celebrities' posts and contextual interactions on impulse buying in social commerce. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 115(July), 106178.
23. Zhang, K. Z. K., & Benyoucef, M. (2016). Consumer behavior in social commerce: A literature review. *Decision Support Systems*, 86, 95–108.
24. Zhou, T. (2019). The effect of social interaction on users' social commerce intention. *International Journal of Mobile Communications*, 17(4), 391–408.
25. Zhu, C., Xu, X., Zhang, W., Chen, J., & Evans, R. (2020). How health communication via tik tok makes a difference: A content analysis of tik tok accounts run by Chinese provincial health committees. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(1), 1–13.