Electronic Word-of-Mouth Factors Influencing the Customer Behaviour and Buyer Decision Process in Bulgaria

Ralitsa Lyubomirova Zlateva, PhD
Faculty of Business, University of National and World Economy, Sofia
E-mail: ralitsa_z@mail.bg

Abstract: The aim of the study is to examine the behaviour of consumers in emerging markets such as the Bulgarian market, where the impact of social media and electronic Word-of-Mouth is constantly growing. The results of this study should give general guidelines for developing and improving marketing strategies, which will allow Bulgarian companies to gain additional profit through usage of social media popularity and influence.

Key words: electronic Word-of-Mouth, Social Media, Social Media Marketing, Customer Behaviour

I. Introduction

Traditional (offline) word-of-mouth has proven that it has a meaningful role for customers’ buying decisions. The advent of the different social media websites and applications have extended consumers’ options for unbiased sharing of product information with other consumers and their own consumption-related advice by engaging in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Considering the characteristics of Internet communication (e.g., directed to multiple individuals, available to other consumers for an indefinite period of time...
II. Literature review

Recently, enormous number of articles about electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWoM) is published because of the growing interest in social media and eWoM. The most of them are based on several prominent studies in the field of traditional Word-of-Mouth (tWoM) and eWoM such as WOM communication motives by Dichter, who identified four main motivational categories of positive WoM communication; the study of Engel, Blackwell and Miniard who modified Dichter’s typology, renaming the categories and introducing an additional motive; the study of Sundaram et al. who identified eight motives for consumer WoM communication, several of which correspond with categories originally suggested by Dichter (1966) and Engel (1993) et al.

The following article leans on the classification of Andrea Krier and Dr. Johannes Schmidt (2011) about determinants influencing on eWoM and Buyer decision process as the specifics of the Bulgarian market are taken into consideration. The above mentioned determinants are sorted according to their relevance for the achievement of enterprises’ marketing objectives and are arranged in an assessment scale. The very well organized determinants classification and practical approach are the reason their study to be chosen as a theoretical basis of this article.

Aim of the following article is to explain how the firms can effectively use social media tools in a context of good knowledge about Web-based opinion-platforms, consumer-to-consumer communication, determinants influencing these information streams and instruments to guide them in a direction desired by the company. Main task is considering the complicated economic conditions in Bulgaria and the financial difficulties, which many companies are experiencing, to formulate tools for efficient using of social media because this could be of great importance for their existence and successful development.

However, they could be also a very good...
base for efficient application of permission marketing. This is the privilege and ability of delivering personal and relevant messages to people who actually want them (Mokreva & Antonova, 2009). The majority of the Bulgarian companies do not have good understanding what is important or relevant for their clients and social media gives them another option to improve in this area.

III. Methodology

In order to be formulated successful tools for efficient using of social media by business organizations was developed a questionnaire asking consumers about their opinion and behaviour. The questionnaire contains eighteen closed questions and the average time for their completing was just under 15 min. After excluding eight cases containing missing or inconsistent information, the final sample consisted of 106 successful fulfilled questionnaires. The participation in the survey was completely voluntary so that the results could be defined as impartial.

Target group of the practical study whose results are used in the present article are young people between 20 and 35 years with university degree in their early professional career. Currently all live in the capital city, the majority holds administrative positions and 64,3% of the respondents are women. Taking into consideration the current situation on the Bulgarian labour market and the official national statistics they can be described as the most promising i. e. solvent current and future consumers.

The empirical results and assessments of consumer’s activity in social media are based on data given by 106 people, so they do not claim to be unarguable, but they certainly can be used as a basis for further studies of hypotheses and trends in the development of Bulgarian consumers’ behaviour.

The review of the foreign literature has led to the suggestion that there are certain social media tools i. e. platforms which are used frequently by the consumers for expressing their opinion (Safko & маркетинга на позволението. Това е привилегията и възможността за предоставяне на лични и релевантни съобщения на хора, които действительно ги искат (Мокрева & Антонова, 2009). По-голямата част от българските фирми все още нямат достатъчно добро разбиране какво е важно или значимо за техните клиенти и социалните медии им дават още една възможност да се усъвършенстват в тази насока.

III. Методология.

За да бъдат формулирани успешни мерки за ефективно използване на социалните медии от бизнес организацииите бе създадена анкета, интересуваща се от мнението и поведението на потребителите. Анкетата съдържа 18 затворени въпроса и средното време за попълването им е под 15 мин. След изключването на 8 анкети с липсваща или нерелевантна информация, окончателната извадка съдържа 106 успешно попълнени анкети. Участието в изследването е напълно доброволно и поради това резултатите могат да бъдат определени като безпристранични.

Целево група на практическото изследване, чиито резултати се използват в настоящата статия, са млади хора на възраст между 20 и 35 години с висше образование в началото на тяхната професионална кариера. Към момента всички живеят в столицата, множество за ема административни длъжности и 64,3% от участващите са жени. Има лакътни предвид настоящата ситуация на българския пазар на труда и официалните национални статистически данни, могат да бъдат описани като най-обещаващите, т. е. сред най-платежоспособните настъпващите и будещи потребители.

Емпиричните резултати и оценки относно активността на потребителите в социалните медии се основават на данни, дадени от 106 души, и поради това не се твърди, че са безспорни, но те със сигурност могат да се използват като основа за по-нататъшни изследвания на хипотези и тенденции в развитието на поведението на българските потребители.

Прегледът на чуждестранната литература води до предположението, че съществуват определени средства на социалните медии, т. е. платформи, които се използват често от потребителите за изразяване.
Brake 2009; West & Turner 2009; Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner, 2010). To determine the specific preferences of the Bulgarian consumers they were asked to check which are the most used and popular social media types according to their opinion and which of them they personally use. The results are shown on the table below.

### Table 1. Ranking of social media according to its popularity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media</th>
<th>Number of respondents who believe the media is popular</th>
<th>Ranking media according to its popularity</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents who believe the media is popular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blogs / Блогове</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9,30%</td>
<td>26,50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microblogs / Микроблогове</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10,63%</td>
<td>29,60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Networks</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>34,22%</td>
<td>97,40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Sharing Media</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>29,90%</td>
<td>85,20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Bookmarking</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2,66%</td>
<td>7,80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forums / Форуми</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13,29%</td>
<td>37,80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own calculations using information from a survey among 106 people

Around 85% of the respondents have answered that they know different websites from the group of data sharing social media as YouTube and SlideShare and think they are popular. Possible reason for these results is that this type of media provides useful information such as advices in various areas, video manuals for installation, troubleshooting guides etc.

In relation to this it is not surprising that the most popular answer among the respondents with about 97% is social networks as Facebook, Google+ etc. They are also frequently used by consumers for finding help or advice, but their main strength is their social function – people find friends from their past, stay in contact with people who are far away and join different societies and groups, which people feel they belong to.

To a certain extent the above mentioned assumptions are confirmed by the answers to the second question from the survey.

Oколо 85% от анкетираните са отговорили, че познават различни сайтове от групата на социалните медии за обмен на данни като YouTube и SlideShare и смятат, че те са популярни. Възможна причина за тези резултати е, че този тип медии предоставя полезна информация, като напр. съвети в различни области, видео ръководства за монтаж, упътвания за отстраняване на проблеми и т. н. В тази връзка не е изненадващо, че най-популярният ответ сред запитаните, с около 97%, е социални мрежи като Facebook, Google+ и т. н. Те също са често използвани от потребителите за на- миране на помощ или съвет, но тяхната основна сила е социалната им функция - хора намират приятели от миналото си, поддържат контакт с хора, които са далеч, и се присъединяват към различни общества и групи, към които чувстват, че принадлежат.

В известна степен по-горе изведенните предположения се потвърждават и от отговорите на втория въпрос от изслед-
where respondents give information about their personal use of social media. Almost 99% from them use social media for sharing data. However, only 84% consider themselves as active users of social network sites. The main reasons for that are usually lack of time and demand for more privacy.

Besides popularity of different social media types, another very important issue that concerns the firms is user’s consumption which can be measured trough frequency and duration of social media usage (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Following two figures illustrate very well Bulgarian consumers’ opinion and behavior.

Figure 1. Frequency of use of social media
Фигура 1. Честота на използване на социалните медии

Source: Own calculations using information from a survey among 106 people
Източник: Собствени изчисления по информация от проведена анкета сред 106 души

The survey results are unambiguous – 96.5% of the respondents use social media sites every day while around 48% of them spend more than 10 hours online. Indeed they are not always active, but are reachable and technically their behavior in the social media space (and not only there) can be traced almost constantly. It is also interesting that none of the respondents has stated that he or she uses social media less than 2-3 hours a week. This practically means that everybody from the above
mentioned target group can be reached by firms through social media as long as they have common approach to these people.

After collection, systematization and analysis of general information about the use of social media, it is definitely clear that it has a direct impact on a certain part of Bulgarian consumers and rather indirect - on companies’ marketing and sales. In this context, the next part of this study focuses on the main determinants presenting the impact of social media on consumers and in particular their decision to purchase a certain product.

As it already has been mentioned the following study leans on the classification of Krier and Schmidt who divides the determinants influencing communication in the online space into two groups - those which were transferred from traditional Word-of-Mouth to electronic Word-of-Mouth and those which are related to the commitment of the various parties involved in the pro-

Това на практика означава, че всеки от целевата група може да бъде достигнат от фирмите посредством социалните медии, стига те да имат правилен подход към тези хора. След събиране, систематизиране и анализ на цялата информация за използването на социалните медии, категорично става ясно, че то има пряко въздействие върху определена част от българските потребители и по-скоро непряко - върху маркетинга и продажбите на фирмите. В този контекст, следващата част от статията се фокусира върху основните детерминанти, представлящи влиянието на социалните медии върху потребителите и по-специално върху тяхното решение за покупка на определен продукт. Както вече бе споменато настоящата статия се основава на класификацията на Криер и Шмид, които разделят детерминантите, влияещи върху комуникацията в онлайн пространството, на две групи - прехвърлени от традиционното към електронното предаване от уста на уста, и други, които са свързани с различни-

Figure 2. Time spent on social media

Фигура 2. Време, прекарано в социалните медии

Source: Own calculations using information from a survey among 106 people
Източник: Собствени изчисления по информация от проведена анкета сред 106 души
cess of eWoM. The same logic is followed in the formulation of the survey questions as the respondents answered according to their impressions about their behavior without having a clue what it could mean and that it is an indicator related to the above mentioned determinants.

Homogeneity, source reliability and expert-level of message's recipient are distinguished as determinants with the biggest influence from the first group (Fitzpatrick, 2007; Rauschnabel, Ivens & Mau, 2012).

Homogeneity describes subjectively perceived similarity between parties (persons or companies) sending and receiving messages in the frames of the communication process. In connection with the definition of this concept, it is concluded that the main part of communication between people takes place between resembling personalities. The survey results confirm this statement - the subjective sense of resemblance to the image and the message of certain social media or website in general is determining whether they will be visited by the users. About 74% of the respondents support this assertion with their answers saying that they would prefer to visit social media websites which are similar to their interests and have attractive interface.

The source reliability is also often given as an important factor which is decisive for Bulgarian user whether she or he will trust the respective media. 65% of the answers illustrate this opinion. In this context it is important to define the meaning of this determinant. It is referred as a level of expertise of the sending eWoM messages party and describes its ability of presenting information on a certain topic in order to achieve its goals. This finding suggests that companies should pay attention not only to the themes and vision of their profiles in social media, but should take time to build trust and a closer relationship with their target groups. Obviously the world trend toward more personal B2C relations is also observed in Bulgaria.

Another very important factor for determination of Bulgarian consumers’ behavior is expert-level of message's recipient. About
78% of the respondents said they very rarely seek information in social media when they feel they have enough knowledge on a certain topic.

In this context a study from 1991 of Dr. Herr and his team arouses interest for this research and the analysis of its results. Their experimental study shows that the impact of Word-of-Mouth decreases as much as more information the user has received previously (Herr, Kardes & Kim, 1991). Therefore, it can be made a conclusion that the impact of Word-of-Mouth weakens, the higher the level of expert-level of message’s recipient is. This statement allows to be concluded that in this aspect the Bulgarian consumer does not differ significantly from the statistical average westerner.

There are also significant determinants from the second group influencing factors for creation and distribution of electronic Word-of-Mouth. They are summarized as the so called “commitment”. For the purpose of this article it will be used the definition of Zaychkovski. According to him the commitment represents the adopted by an individual relevance of a fact on the basis of its subjective needs, perspective and interests (Zaichkovsky, 1985). Bulgarian consumer’s opinion shows that in this group there are basically two major determinants with significant influence and more specifically - the social media’s commitment and consumer’s commitment.

Social media’s commitment describes how a user is activated by contact with certain media. Consequently Internet is dominated by those social media websites that managed to offer useful and easily accessible information in an attractive way for users. Important condition is the data to be purposefully managed and well structured. This will increase websites’ popularity, create better consumers’ experience and make such social media websites more preferred than others (Oetting, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). The data gained in the research show that about 61% of the respondents share this opinion. Possible reason for that percentage not being higher is that working people are also interested in specific topics. Therefore, at-nites sa заявили, че много рядко търсят информация в социалните медии, когато чувстват, че имат достатъчно познания по определена тема.

В този контекст едно проучване от 1991 г. на д-р Хер и екипа му представлява интерес за настоящата статия и за анализа на резултатите от изследването. Тяхното експериментално изследване показва, че влиянието на предаването от уста на уста намалява толкова, колкото повече информация потребителят е получил порано (Herr, Kardes & Kim, 1991). От това може да се направи заключение, че въздействието на предаването от уста на уста отслабва, колкото по-високо е експертното ниво на получателя на посланията. Това твърдение позволява да се заключи, че в този аспект българският потребител не се различава значително от средно статистическия западноевро- пеец.

Има и значими детерминанти от втората група влиещи фактори за създаването и разпространението на електронното предаване от уста на уста. Те са обобщени под понятието „ангажираност“. За целите на настоящата статия се използва определението на Зайчковски. Според него ангажираността представява възприетото от индивида значение на даден факт въз основа на неговите субективни нужди, възгледи и интереси (Zaichkovsky, 1985). Мнението на българския потребител показва, че в тази група като цяло има две основни детерминанти със значимо влияние и по-конкретно - ангажираност на социалните медии и ангажираност на потребителя. Ангажираността на социалните медии описва как даден потребител се активира при контакт с някои медии. Следователно интернет е доминиран от тези социални медии, които успяват да предоставят полезна и лесно достъпна информация по атрактивен за потребителите начин. Важно условие е датните да бъдат целенасочено управлявани и добре структурирани. Това увеличава популярността на интернет странниците, създава по-добро впечатление у потребителите и преви тези социални медии по-предпочитани спрямо останалите (Oetting, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Датните, придобити от изследването, показват, че около 61% от анкетираните споделят това мнение. Възможно причина този процент да не е по-висок е, че работещите хора се ин- тересуват от по-специфични теми. Ето
tractiveness of data presentation or website’s popularity is not so important for them. 39% of the respondents agree with that statement.

Consumer’s commitment describes the natural tendency of users to give their opinion about new or already known products. Users who are active in social media believe that in this way they demonstrate their awareness and/or emphasize their social status (Brown, Lee & Broderick, 2007). Since most of those people do not have any commercial interest when sharing and commenting, it is most likely that other users believe them (Sen & Lerman, 2007). So it is not surprising the survey’s results show that over than 55% of the respondents have marked this factor as a determinant forming their opinion on a certain topic or product.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the presented survey’s results can be summarized in conclusion that:

1) Understanding how consumers are using social media, especially for their buyer decisions, social and career related activities like networking, information sharing and professional development, is critical when creating a successful social media strategy and plan.

2) Good knowledge about the above explained determinants indicating the strength and direction of the impact of electronic Word-of-Mouth, is a prerequisite for the successful formulation of eWoM-messages and achievement of the desired results through them (West & Turner, 2009; Hristov, 2006; Brown & Hayes, 2008).

3) Influencing determinants can be arranged logically depending on the stage they occur. They can be predicted to a certain extent and therefore can be influenced by the firms.

Based on the discussed results of the conducted empirical study could be made the following basic recommendations to Bulgarian business organizations:

- Strong consumers’ interest in social

IV. Изводи и препоръки

Въз основа на резултатите от представеното проучване в заключение може да се обобщи, че:

1) Разбирането на това как потребителите използват социалните медии, особено при техните решения за покупка, дейности, свързани със социални контакти и кариера, споделяне на информация и професионално развитие, е от решаващо значение при създаването на успешна стратегия и план в социалните медии.

2) Добро познаване на по-горе разгледаните детерминанти, показващи силата и посоката на въздействието на електронното предаване от уста на уста, е предпоставка за успешното формулиране на послания и постигането на желаните резултати чрез тях (West & Turner, 2009; Hristov, 2006; Brown & Hayes, 2008).

3) Влияещите детерминанти могат да бъдат организирани логически в зависимост от етапа на тяхното възникване. Те могат да бъдат предвидени в известна степен и следователно могат да бъдат повлияни от фирмите.

Въз основа на дискутираните резултати от проведеното емпирично проучване могат да се изведат следните основополагащи препоръки към българските бизнес организации:

- Силният интерес на потребителите към социалните медии и по-конкретно
media and in particular in social networks and data sharing media requires the creation and maintenance of company profiles in these types of media, at least to maintain the corporate image;

• It should be paid special attention to blogs and forums since the tendency is to increase their attendance. They are also preferred by people with specific interests which is an opportunity for companies offering products suitable for them;

• Consumers’ daily active use of social media requires constant commitment of the company in the online space, which means provoking the interest of the people at least once a week through interesting video or pictures, new product, special activity etc.;

• Companies should be focused on creating an attractive vision for the pages that they maintain and publishing relevant for the audience materials. Only in this way they could sustainably attract the attention of their target group;

• It is necessary to take time to build trust and a closer relationship with consumers. The results of the conducted questionnaire prove beyond doubt that the world trend toward more personal B2C relations is also observed in Bulgaria. This can be achieved through timely respond to users' inquiries, by solving their problems etc.;

• The activity in social media must be carefully considered and consistent with the pursued objectives, for example - Facebook is appropriate to maintain the corporate image and to create close relationships with consumers, Twitter is suitable for making short, impactful messages to people, but not for permanent and personal contact with them etc.

This article gives a better understanding of how Bulgarians are using social media so that companies can create more successful business strategies in this area. The business in Bulgaria is still not so active in using social media (according to a survey of National Statistical Institute only 40% of the Bulgarian companies use social media), so this could be a great advantage against competitors.
Reference/Литература


