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## **A RESEARCH ON SOCIAL NETWORK WEBSITES AS A MARKETING COMMUNICATION CHANNEL**

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### **Abstract**

*Nowadays, as a result of rapid change in the informatics and the communication technologies consumers have begun to spend much more time on websites. In parallel with this change, firms adapted their marketing, sale, distribution and promotion facilities onto online platform. Thus the number of the consumers shopping on virtual platform is increasing day by day. Social network websites as a type of virtual communities present an important potential in attaining consumers shopping on virtual platform. The main purpose of this study is to determine the tendency of shopping websites operating in similar product and service categories to use the social networks as a type of virtual communities. For this purpose, the sharing updates of “Limango”, “Trendyol” ve “Markafoni shopping websites that operate on the electronic platform were investigated through content analysis method according to the determined evaluation criteria. In the content analysis, sharing status of Limango, Trendyol and Markafoni websites between 15 March and the 15 April 2011 has been considered. Using the electronic business to customer (e-b2c) strategy which is a type of target market strategy and operating in the similar product and service categories are the main factors to prefer concerned websites. According to the findings of this study, it was revealed that the concerned websites are effectively using social network platform as a marketing communication channel. It has also determined that the campaign and discount opportunities of the products are especially advertised on Facebook and Trendyol use the social networks more effective compared to the other online shopping websites.*

*Key words: Online social networks, social network websites, shopping websites, marketing communication channel.*

*JEL Classification: M31, M37, O31*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the developments in social and technological areas have brought for both consumers and marketing managers with the new possibilities and options. Consumers in the virtual world are able to find out answers on each single issue instantly and easily, about which they are curious. Consumers, especially via the mobile internet and tablet computers, are today able to access easily to the internet in any environment. The individuals spending a major part of their days on the virtual environment, through creating their own profile pages in various social platforms, are in contact with their business and friend environment. Now that, the concept of socialization is perceived as the individual's relationship with other individuals in the virtual environment, new friendships, discussions and a number of activities carried out (such as social responsibility projects).

In parallel with these developments, the marketing managers have found the possibility to obtain consumers' personal information and give direction to the consumers towards their purchasing behavior based on this data. These developments, in the mean time, have also resulted in the traditional mass marketing approaches turning into obsolescent (Van Raaij et al., 2001: 59). Social networks, in a sense, are a kind of data base containing the information they share in whole or in part through the personal profiles, their personal characteristics, relations with friend environment and their interests. The social networks, which are a type of virtual communities, are a channel that facilitates the marketers to reach virtual consumers in markets. Indeed, an individual that uses social networks functionally has the potential customer as wide as the number of friends on the social platform.

Given the spread speed of the message in social networks and its positive/negative feedback effect size, it is inevitable that the impressions that the products and the services leave on the customers will surely have reflections on shopping trends of other customers. In this study, it was aimed to determine the tendencies of the online shopping websites operating in the category of similar products and services on using the social networks, a type of the virtual communities, as a marketing communication channel. For this purpose, a review of the literature on the subject was actualized, and firstly the concept of marketing communication was described. Next, in order to emphasize the importance of social networks, social networks and social network sites were discussed. Marketing from business to consumer on electronic media, which is one of the marketing strategy types (e-b2c), generates the fundamental basis of this study. To accomplish this aim, it was tried to determine the tendencies of the online shopping websites operating in the category of similar products and services on using the social networks with the help of content analysis.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The basis of the marketing communication is formed through the inter-relationship between producers and consumers and the role of marketing mix components in this relationship. Marketing communication represents a process starting by the consumers' noticing the products and services, including the purchase and after sales services (Erciş, 2010: 166). The marketing communication is known as the main determinant of companies' integrated marketing missions and their success or failure. The primary forms of marketing communications include traditional mass media advertising (TV, magazines, etc.); online advertising (web sites, opt-in e-mail messages, text messaging, and so on); sales promotions (such as samples, coupons, rebates, and premium items); store signage and point-of-purchase communications; direct-mail literature; marketing-oriented public relations and publicity releases; sponsorships of events and causes; presentations by sales people; and various collateral forms of communication devices (Shimp, 2007: 4). In traditional publisher - or corporate - controlled media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, the communication is overwhelmingly one way. Professional journalists research and write stories that are edited and disseminated to the public (Weber, 2009: 5).

The integrated marketing communication on the virtual platform consist four main elements (Usta, 2007: 245): (a) Commercial, (b) Public Relations, (c) Sales Development and (d) Direct Marketing. Marketing communication and sales promotions are not only used to attract new customers but also to obtain and maintain loyal customers. In both cases, it is important to determine the effects of marketing communications under different conditions and on different consumer segments.

Enabling the consumers to gain more information and allow them to control this information, the internet has become an important channel of communication. Consumers not only decide on what information they want to see but also they make the decision of how and when they want to see this information. The Internet has opened a new channel to increase customer awareness, but it comes with a unique capacity—the user controls the information. The power is now in the consumer's hands, and as marketers, the task is to adapt, and adapt quickly, to new ways of communicating information to a user group that is sometimes one (or many) steps ahead (Pagon and Quigley, 2007: 182).

Rapidly increasing household internet penetration (Barefoot and Szabo, 2010: 3) underscores the potential for using corporate web sites to communicate with new and existing customers. The opportunities to use web sites as a new marketing communication medium increase as more and more consumers access the internet. At the heart of these

opportunities are advances in new technologies that have provided retailers competitive advantages. As new technologies were incorporated into web site designs retailers were quick to adapt their on-line marketing communication strategies to meet the needs of the new market (Bodkin ve Perry, 2004: 19).

In addition to this, the social networks are a resource that the companies may use to reach their potential customers. Indeed, each new member of the social networks will increase the impact of social networks one more time as a marketing communication channel. With this rise in consumer acceptance of online trading, has come increased use of the internet to support the purchasing activity. Each of the decisions a buyer faces can be influenced by interactions with communities that are focused on the same product or service type in question. In particular, patient buyers (those who purchase products after making some comparisons) and analytical buyers (those who do substantial research) are increasingly likely to seek out online forums to assist in their purchasing decision (Pitta and Fowler, 2005: 283).

Online shopping provides customers with more information in a way that they can reach more easily, lower costly and more quickly. The basic reason for that is shopping in the virtual media eliminates the geographical boundaries (Turan, 2008: 724). Parallel with this thought, marketing managers could design a marketing strategy to focus on this group. The marketing strategist must emphasize the benefits of online shopping, effectiveness and modern, company name familiarity, purchase convenience, information abundance and selection freedom etc., then design an excellent homepage to catch the attention of consumers and meet the consumer's information needs (Wu, 2003: 43).

As companies communicate with their consumers only via the web pages, it will account for ignoring their potential consumers that gradually began to spend more time on the social platforms. The number of members of social networks is increasing with each passing day. According to data of 2009, 84% of European internet users use social networks. The time spent on social networks, is not only increasing just among young people, but also in the individuals over 35 years of age (SMG Knowledge, 2011). That consumers take the recommendations in many social platforms into consideration rather than the firms' recommendations creates the basis for all marketing and advertising activities along with marking the key strength of the development of social network marketing (Newman, 2010).

Social networks are for networking. Not networking of the computer "cables linking to routers and switches" kind, but networking of the old-fashioned, twentieth-century

“meeting people to make new friends and get to know them better” variety. This means building relationships to attract new customers and increase purchases by existing customers (Fox, 2009: 100). Social networks in some ways represent personal areas. Personal areas refer to a micro-universe of the society (Akar, 2010: 116). In this respect, the role of the social networks is distinctive in that the users create and spread the content. There is an awareness that a community has power and can quickly generate support for a brand but also, more frighteningly, against one (Vogt and Knapman, 2008: 48).

Social networking sites offer people new and varied ways to communicate via the internet, whether through their PC or their mobile phone. Examples include MySpace, Facebook and Bebo. They allow people to easily and simply create their own online page or profile and to construct and display an online network of contacts, often called ‘friends’. Users of these sites can communicate via their profile both with their ‘friends’ and with people outside their list of contacts (Ofcom, 2008: 5).

Boyd and Ellison (2008: 211) define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

Social networking sites are significant for two main reasons. First, they are the epitome of Web 2.0, in which the network of users is the platform and the community drives the content. Second, social networking sites combine elements of communication channels—such as email, message boards, instant messaging, and chat—with media vehicles—such as audio, video, and print. In these communities, like-minded individuals can share information and interests and provide feedback and reviews (Schmugar, 2008: 28; Smith and Kidder, 2010: 492).

Individuals use the social media for purposes such as meeting people who have the similar interests, making purchases more efficiently, obtaining detailed information about products and services, determining the inferior products and poor services and communicating with far away relatives along with friends anywhere in the world (Weber, 2009: 6). Social networks are essentially specialized tools for helping you meet people and maintain your relationships more easily; they automate much of the legwork of traditional networking. While they can be very useful, social networks still require basic steps like being friendly and meeting people. They help facilitate that process by amplifying your ability to meet new people, find common interests, and keep in touch.

With millions of people sharing their personal characteristics and interests online through such profile pages, the social networks are essentially huge databases of self-updating resumes. As a marketer, this means that social networks offer you unprecedented efficiency in finding and tapping into previously established and self-selected online communities that are likely to be enthusiastic about your products (Fox, 2009: 101).

Social networks are emerging as a powerful and sophisticated new kind of marketing channel. Marketing is becoming precise, personal, and social: Social networking sites are giving marketers new abilities to hyper-target campaigns using profile information, engage community members by tapping into social capital within friend groups, and systematically cultivate word-of-mouth marketing across their existing customer base (Shih, 2009: 81-82).

According to Akar (2010: 115), social networking sites, in a sense, serves as a marketing communication channel and the basic components of this marketing communication channel are:

- User/consumer areas, and their profiles,
- Reference groups, effectors (these two groups provide suggestion, share ideas, start conversations and direct),
- connections,
- chats, transmission of information and collaborative content creation (this provides the online socialization).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. The Purpose of the Study**

With the growing popularity of the social networks in recent years, people began to spend much more time on the internet. Individuals are constantly communicating with the others by their personal profiles. The sense of belonging of the individuals has developed by joining some groups, attending actively a variety of social activities and whose social circle rapidly grows up. Consumers consider advices and suggestions of immediate surroundings more than firms' marketing efforts to convince consumers. This tendency gives an opportunity to marketing experts to settle a variety of campaigns by considering personal information and purchasing behaviors of the individuals who are using social networks. Based on business to customer on the virtual platform (e-b2c) strategy as a type of target marketing strategy, the main purpose of this study is to determine the tendency

of shopping websites operating in similar product and service categories to use the social networks as a type of virtual communities.

### **3.2. Data Analysis**

In this study, the status sharing on Facebook and Twitter of “Limango”, “Trendyol” and “Markafoni” operating on virtual platform were examined by the defined criteria with the method of content analysis. Neuendorf (2002: 1) describes the content analysis as systematic, objective, quantitative, analyses of message characteristics. It includes careful examination of human interactions, the analysis of character portrayals in TV commercials, films and novels, the computer-driven investigation of word usage in news releases and political speeches and so much more. As a research technique, content analysis provides new insights, and increases a researcher's understanding of particular phenomena, or informs practical actions (Krippendorff, 2004: 18).

The main factors in determination of the websites included in research are expediency to the aim of the study, capacity of representing, popularity of the sites and operating in similar product and service categories. In research, coding schemes and some tables were prepared to be able to examine the content analyses of the social network pages of the shopping sites operating in similar product and service categories. The tables involves some knowledge such as the number of total pages behalf of sites, number of total members, average daily updates, number of comments, and also some messages about marketing and public relations. The coding schemes have been prepared by considering the sharing of shopping sites on Facebook and Twitter between 15 March and 15 April. Thirty different words figured in coding schemes.

## **4. FINDINGS**

The analyze results of the Facebook and Twitter pages of three shopping sites have been handled under the results and evaluation topic of the study. The observations acquired by the analysis, are belonging to the date of 15 March. The average number of comments stated on *Table 1* has been calculated by assigning mean values of the data between 15 March and 15 April.



Tablo-1. The Results of Content Analysis for Facebook

	The Number of Total Group Opened on Behalf of the Site	The Number of Total Member of the Most Popular Page	The Rate of Daily Average Updating	The Rate of Daily Average Comment	Formal Page
Trendyol	25	275.244 (15 April)	8.8	141.2	Available
Limango	23	36.390 (15 April)	1.7	8.83	Available
Markafoni	40	257.823 (15 April)	1.23	18.2	Available

According to the results, the most efficient user of social networks is Trendyol. Trendyol is mostly followed by the social network users, also Trendyol is leading shopping site in daily posted notifications. Additionally, Trendyol's average daily updating rate is higher than others. On the other hand, Markafoni is the leading shopping sites in formal and informal page rates which are opened on behalf of the relevant sites.

Tablo 2. The Results of Content Analysis for Twitter

	The Number of Total Pages	The Follower Number of The Most Popular Page	The Number of Total Twit	Formal Page
Trendyol	21	7016	2459	Available
Limango	8	6038	2327	Available
Markafoni	5	5613	1776	Available

Another exciting finding of the study is that the shopping sites use same notifications on Facebook and Twitter. Content analysis of Twitter shows that Trendyol is the leading site in the categories of follower number, total twit and formal and informal pages. All of the shopping sites have formal pages both on Facebook and Twitter (*Table 2*).

Tablo-3. Coding Scheme of the Using Words

Words	Trendyol		Limango		Markafoni		Toplam	
	Twitter	Facebook	Twitter	Facebook	Twitter	Facebook	Twitter	Facebook
Boutique	41	41	-	-	-	-	41	41
Gratis	-	-	-	-	2	2	4	4
Price	-	-	3	3	-	-	6	6
Security	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Opportunity	2	2	-	-	4	4	12	12
Gift	8	8	1	1	1	1	20	20
Service	-	-	-	-	1	1	2	2
Refund	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Communication	-	-	1	1	-	-	2	2
Discount	68	68	2	2	4	4	148	148
Women	4	4	4	4	-	-	16	16
Campaign	-	-	4	4	9	9	26	26
Quality	-	-	3	3	-	-	6	6
Catalog	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Credit card	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Using	-	-	1	1	-	-	2	2
Store	-	-	2	2	-	-	4	4
Fashion	56	56	9	9	3	3	136	136
Payment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Rival	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Advertisement	2	2	1	1	3	3	12	12
Sale	-	-	1	1	5	5	12	12
Installment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Promotion	-	-	-	-	2	2	4	4
Designing	30	30	16	16	5	5	112	112
Product/Good	66	66	9	9	4	4	158	158
Help	-	-	-	-	1	1	2	2

A coding scheme which involves most used words by shopping sites on social network has been presented in Table 3. This coding scheme has been generated by monthly data that obtained from 15 March to 15 April. In this context, relevant data have been gathered and most used words have been filtered among all data. Then, according the number of the filtered words coding scheme has been generated.

According the results in Table 3, the most used words ranked as; “discount”, “product”, “fashion” and “designing”. On the other hand some words such as security, refund, catalog, credit card, payment, competitor and installment has never used. Examined shopping sites positioned their products on style and elegancy by using the words like product, fashion and designing at most. The word of discount considered as an effective promotion tool for sales. From the results of coding scheme, it can be considered as a deficiency of the less or least using of communication, security and refund words in notifications.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Recently, the main issue which e-trade sites make a consensus on and give investment priority is bringing together price odds based products and services with their consumers. The factors have made great contribution to the today’s online shopping situation where gittigidiyor.com, an online shopping site, announcing a daily notice of “opportunity of the day” on their main page and the sub-category of hepsiburada.com named as “hepsi1000GO” that collects the campaign products. The shopping sites which offer the most familiar brands’ products with campaigns for a few days to their consumers’ attention have been successful in achieving attention of consumers of all ages. Some of the shopping sites still operating in virtual platform are “Limango”, “Trendyol”, “Markafoni”, “Clubboon”, “Daybuyday”, “Vipdukkkan”, “Evim.net”, “Aksesu”, “Markalonga”, and “Alışveriş Kulipleri” collecting those sites.

The private shopping sites operate in social network platform effectively besides their homepages (e.g., Trendyol.com) and blogs. Social networks attract attention as a marketing communication channel that firms make use of to reach consumers. Each new member of social network sites may be considered as a potential consumer. The notices and profile information sharing by individuals with their private profile, giving marketing experts some important clues about which consumer groups that they face with. The firms using social platforms effectively as a marketing communication channel inform their consumers about the campaigns composing with discounts nearly 90%, boutique (elite) products and discounts for individuals (e.g., free cargo) instantly. Given the consumers who consider advices and suggestions of immediate surroundings more than firms’

marketing efforts, and spending a great majority of their time on social platform, it is clearly seen that consumption habits have differentiated. Thus, it has become a necessity to accommodate with this new consumption trend.

The results of Content Analysis of the study indicate that each of three shopping sites use social networks effectively as a marketing communication channel. The results also indicate that Trendyol use social networks more effectively compared to the others. On the other hand, all of three shopping sites share notices directed to sales and marketing more intensely. Primarily consumers can obtain required information about their orders from the admin of Facebook pages instantly. Also, relevant shopping sites advertise each new campaign on the Facebook and Twitter.

As mentioned in the literature of the study, social networks are self-automated updating sites and they are also a gigantic database overspreading rapidly. This database is giving clues about the consumer's shopping tendency. Marketing experts should consider social networks as an opportunity who aims to reach the large masses in a short way and economically.

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