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EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE BEHAVIOUR OF ONLINE CONSUMERS

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Abstract

The aim of this analysis is to give an idea of what are the major changes that have occurred in the consumer-business relationship after the advent of Social Media (SM) in the past decade.

Also, throughout a presentation of the most significant concepts and cases, a detailed perspective of how Social Media can influence the purchase intentions of consumers will be portrayed. Indeed, the degree to which Social Media, including websites, can positively influence consumers will be discussed.

Moreover, in order to support the main ideas, some recent case studies and examples will be presented.

The rationale behind the choice of this topic relies on the need to investigate the fact that the phenomenon of Social Media has undoubtedly established a bidirectional relationship between the consumer and the companies through social networking sites, blogs and forums, compared to unidirectional relationship that once were involved by traditional media, such as TV advertisements and newspapers.

Key Words: Social Media, consumer behaviour, online consumer, Web 2.0, eWOM

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List of Acronyms

CCCWs Consumer created complaining websites

ELM Elaboration Likelihood Model

IM Instant Messaging

MMORPG massively multiplayer online role-playing game

PU Perceived Usefulness

SM Social Media

SNSs Social Network Sites

TAM Technology Acceptance Model

TRA Theory of Reasoned Action

TV Television

VGWs Virtual Game Worlds

VR Virtual Reality

VSWs Virtual Social Worlds

WOM Word of Mouth

Introduction

After the birth of Web 2.0, companies and businesses have experienced a whole new way to approach the consumer: the barriers that once traditional media were not able to break have been finally overcome by Social Media. Indeed, before the advent of SM, advertisement blitzes were the only means through which companies used to establish a frontal relationship with the consumer. Notwithstanding the fact that this topic of research is very recent and, so far, little work is available, this paper will analyse the constantly changing relation between business and consumer and the growing influence that Social Media plays on the latter. More importantly, the reasons according to which Social Media has become such an impacting factor in the purchase intentions of consumers will be discussed.

The starting point of this paper will focus on an overview of the main concepts, which will be defined in the first chapter. First of all, the topic of Social Media will be delineated according to the work of important authors, such as Kaplan & Haenlein (2010). The classification of Social Media that the authors have provided will be depicted, along with noteworthy examples of successful campaigns on Social Media brought about by some companies. Along with this classification, a number of recent trends that are acquiring importance for the development of online marketing will be illustrated. Afterwards, the new communication paradigms entailed in the use of Social Media for marketing purposes will be discussed and compared to the traditional communication paradigm, with the support of the work of Mangold and Faulds (2009). Consequently, the communication trends undertaken by companies as a response to the advent of Social Media will be discussed, in order to give a clear framework of how companies have adapted to the new online marketing strategies.

The second part will deal with the concept of online consumer. The classification made by Riegner (2007) of the various types of consumers that operate within the Internet, and that is still used nowadays, will be presented, followed by the analysis of the concept of Purchase Intentions; this topic will be supported by the Technology-Oriented and Trust-Oriented models, which will introduce significant theories such as the Technology Acceptance Model by Davis (1989). Finally, a study conducted by Hajli (2014) will be presented in order to support the theories previously illustrated.

The third part will deal first with the concept of electronic Word of Mouth and secondly with advantages deriving from consumer engagement in Social Media. The concept of electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) will be illustrated thanks to the work of Cheema and Kaikati (2010) on the social and psychological reasons behind the use of eWOM; moreover, a comparison between traditional Word of Mouth and electronic Word of Mouth will based on the work of Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004). Furthermore, the opportunities and challenges entailed in the use of eWOM will be discussed, along with an analysis conducted by Lee (2009) on online reviews based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

Subsequently, the focus will shift on the two cases of Amazon.com and Yelp.com, in order to give a clearer idea of the power of reviews on sales.

To conclude, a theoretical framework on online consumer engagement and the reasons for companies to engage online will be depicted with the support of a conceptual model portrayed by Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite (2012).

The final section will deal with the conclusions on the role of Social Media on consumer's buying behaviour following a summary and a short analysis of the main positions presented in the main chapters.

1. Social Media and companies

"Facilitated by countless blogs, forums, chat rooms and social networking sites, we now live in a 24-hour rolling, emotive, media world where we can satisfy our indelible need to feel a part of the events that unfold around us."

(Riegner, 2007)

1.0 Brief overview

As of June 2016, the online social network site Facebook has registered more than 1.13 billion daily active users[1]. To put that number in perspective, this is slightly less than the Chinese population (1.3 billion)[2] and over twice the population of the whole European Union (508 million)[3]. Similarly, a number of many other social network sites and applications such as Instagram, Youtube and Twitter register millions of daily users and uploaded content. Even though emails remain the dominant mean of online communication (Riegner, 2007, p. 438), Social Media represent one of the most accessible tools for interpersonal communication.

1.1 Definition of Social Media

Several definitions of Social Media have been proposed by a number of researchers and media experts. Parr, for instance, defines Social Media as the use of electronic and Internet tools for the purpose of sharing and discussing information and experiences with other human beings in more efficient ways[4]. Greenstein refers to Social Media as to "online technologies and practices that people use to share content, opinions, insights, experiences, perspectives and media themselves."[5]. However, in order to specifically understand what Social Media is, an efficient definition of the term first requires an account of two concepts that are usually related to it, namely Web 2.0 and User Generated Content. According Kaplan and Haenlein, Web 2.0 is a term used to describe a new way in which software developers and end-users started to utilize the World Wide Web: that is, "a platform whereby content and applications […] are continuously modified by all users in an participatory and collaborative fashion" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 60). Instead, the term User Generated Content (UGC) can be seen as the sum of all ways in which people make use of Social Media, and it is usually applied to describe the various form of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 61). Thanks to the definitions of these two topical concepts, Social Media can be portrayed as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of the Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User

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[1] Source: *Facebook Newsroom*. (2016). Available at http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/
[2] Source: Worldometers. (2016). *China Population* . Available at http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/china-population/
[3] Source: Eurostat. (2016). *Population in the European Union*. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&language=en&pcode=tps00001&tableSelection=1&footnotes=yes&labeling=labels&plugin=1
[4] Parr, B. (2008). *Ben Parr's Entrepreneurial Musings*. Available at http://benparr.com/2008/08/its-time-we-defined-social-media-no-more-arguing-heres-the-definition/
[5] Greenstein, H. (2011). *Heidi Cohen - Actionable Marketing Guide*. Available at Social Media Definitions: http://heidicohen.com/social-media-definition/

Generated Content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 61). Therefore, despite the wide variety of definitions proposed by the authors, it appears that communities, content and Web 2.0 are the crucial pillars to the concept of Social Media.

1.2 Classification of Social Media

The work of Kaplan and Haenlein deserves better attention as the two authors have provided an exhaustive classification of Social Media according to several elements, such as social presence, media richness, self-presentation and self-disclosure. The first two elements are to be related to the media component of SM, and the latters are connected to social processes, another key factor of Social Media. As for what concerns the former elements of social presence and media richness, the "Social presence theory" (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) is noteworthy. According to the theory, the degree of social presence that emerges in the communication between two actors is what differentiates the media. Usually, the higher the social presence, the larger is the influence on the actors' behaviour. Another theory that must be linked to the media component of SM is the "Media richness theory" (Daft & Lengel , 1986), according to which any communication must achieve "the resolution of ambiguity and the reduction of uncertainty" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 61). In the context of Social Media, Kaplan and Haenlein have portrayed a first classification based on both the richness of the medium and the social presence it provides.

A second classification is assumed to take into account the social dimension of SM. Indeed, it is necessary to define the two core concepts linked to the social aspect, namely self-presentation and self-disclosure. The first concept has been related to the assumption that in any social interaction people have the desire to control the impressions other people have of them (Goffman, 1959), and therefore the reason behind the creation of a personal webpage is to be found in the willingness of introducing one's self in the cyberspace. This usually happens through self-disclosure, defined as the conscious or unconscious revelation of personal information (e.g. thoughts, feelings, likes and dislikes) that is consistent with the image one would like to give (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 61). Self-disclosure is a crucial factor in the developmental process of relationships, nevertheless it can also happen between complete strangers. In the context of Social Media, Kaplan and Haenlein assume that a second classification can be made, simply by taking into account the degree to which SM self-disclosure is required and self-presentation is allowed. This concept is depicted in Table 1[6]

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[6] Retrieved from: Kaplan , A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2009). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons* (53), p. 61

Table 1 - Classification of Social Media

		Social Presence/ Media Richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation/ Self-disclosure	High	Blogs	Social Networking Sites (e.g. Facebook)	Virtual Social Worlds (e.g. Second Life)
	Low	Collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia)	Content Communities (e.g. YouTube)	Virtual Game Worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft)

"Taking into account both social presence and media richness, application such as blogs and collaborative projects usually score lowest, as they are often text-based and hence only allow for a relatively simple exchange. […] Conversely, if self-presentation and self-disclosure are to be considered, blogs usually score higher than collaborative projects, as the latter tend to be more focused on specific content domains" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 62). However, a more in depth description of the six types of Social Media identified by the two authors needs to be done.

1.2.1 Blogs

The term "blog" was first coined in 1999 as an abbreviation of "web-log" (Andrews, 2009). Blogs are the Social Media usually equivalent of personal web pages and can come in a multitude of different variations, such as personal diaries or summaries of all relevant information in one specific content area (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 63). They are often administered by one person and usually provide the opportunity for people to interact through a conversational and informal style.

Applied to the context of potential influencing factors to consumers purchase intentions, blogs can present some risks for businesses. First, customers that turn out to be dissatisfied with or disappointed by the company's offerings may decide to engage in virtual complaints in the form of protest websites or blogs (Ward & Ostrom, 2006, p. 222). For instance, a study conducted by the University of Minnesota has shown that almost 50% of Fortune 1000 companies have been targeted by CCCW's (Customer created complaining websites), in which consumers give more weight to negative information, that are esteemed to be more diagnostic, rather than to positive information about the targeted brand (Wilson , Giebelhausen, & Brady , 2008, p. 1019). Secondly, once firms encourage employees to be active on blogs, they may need to live with the consequence of staff members writing negatively about the firm (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 63). A clear example was given by Robert Scoble, Microsoft's former "technological evangelist", who had a tendency to criticize the products of his employer, before he decided to leave the famous software company in 2006 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 63). Certainly, together with the risks involved in the uncontrolled diffusion of negative UGC in blogs, there are also several potential benefits for companies, stemming from the promotion to the strengthening of their brand through the report of consumers' personal experiences.

Indeed, the influence of reviews on consumers' purchasing intentions is a topic that will be later discussed in the next chapters.

1.2.2 Collaborative projects

Collaborative projects "enable the joint and simultaneous creation of content by many end-users and are, in this sense, probably the most democratic manifestation of UGC. Within collaborative projects, one differentiates between wikis -that is, websites that allow users to add, remove and change text-based contents- and social bookmarking applications –which enable the group-based collection and rating of Internet links or media content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 62). A clear example of collaborative projects is the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, an online project started in 2011. The main idea underlying collaborative projects is that the joint effort of many actors can lead to a better outcome than any actor could achieve individually (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 62). Applied to a corporate perspective, it has been ascertained that collaborative projects are becoming one of the main sources of information for many consumers. Therefore, even though not everything written may be actually true, it is believed to be true by more and more Internet users: this can be particularly crucial for corporate crises (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 62). There are several examples of firms that have benefitted from using wikis: among them, the iconic producer of animated movies Pixar that uses a wiki to internally manage film production[7].

1.2.3 Social Networking Sites

Social network sites or social network services are applications that allow people to establish personal webpages and then connect with friends for the purpose of sharing information and communication[8]. The possibility to create personal webpages allows people to communicate through instant messages and statuses updates. Initially, social networking sites tried to connect people who were connected to each other from the early school days, and a clear example is "Classmates.com". Even though users were not able to create profiles, this platform became quite popular in the US (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012, p. 18). However, it was not until the 2000's that the second generation of SNSs reached the highest popularity especially among younger Internet users, thanks to Facebook, MySpace and Friendster.com. For instance Facebook, since its inception in 2004, has opened out new marketing strategies by providing an excellent platform to interact directly with customers and also to get more sales and traffic to their respective official business website (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012, p. 20). Indeed, social networking sites are of such popularity that several companies use them to support the promotion of their own brands throughout the creation of specific webpages. Through low-cost marketing strategies and targeted advertisement, and further providing support to the consumers, Facebook shows plenty of successful marketing cases. The company Oreo, for instance, to celebrate its 100th birthday, produced 100 Facebook posts in 100 days that turned trending news stories in "visual treats". As a result, Oreo increased their Facebook fans by over a million and their share rate by

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[7] Mader, S. (2008, September). *7 Effective Wiki Uses and the Companies That Benefit From Them*. Available at http://stewartmader.com/7-effective-wiki-uses-and-the-companies-that-benefit-from-them/
[8] Mayfield, A. (2008, August). *What is social media*. Tratto da http://www.icrossing.com/icrossing-what-is-social-media

280%[9]. Moreover, some firms even go a step further and use Facebook as a distribution channel: the American company 1-800-Flowers.com used to offer a widget on Facebook called "Gimme Love", whereby users could send "virtual bouquets" to friends or even real flowers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 64).

Another clear example of how SNSs can benefit companies is Yelp.com, a Social Networking Site that finds the roots of its popularity on the fact that every user can find, rate and discuss local businesses and restaurants. Yelp.com completely relies on user's reviews and ratings, therefore this website, which has recently become a mobile application, can be also classified as a collaborative project. Several businesses have benefitted from Yelp.com; in particular a study conducted in 2011 has demonstrated that adding a rating star on a review corresponded on an increase of 5% to 9% on revenues of restaurants, with the greatest effect on independent restaurants[10]. Indeed, the phenomenon of Yelp.com and the impact of reviews will be further investigated in the next chapters.

1.2.4 Content communities

The main objective of content communities is the sharing of media content between users. Content communities exist for a wide range of different media types, including texts (e.g. BookCrossing), photos (e.g. Flickr, Instagram), videos (e.g. YouTube) or even PowerPoint presentations (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 63). Users on content communities do not usually create personal webpages; if they do, profiles only contain basic information. However, if on one hand content communities can provide several benefits to companies, on the other hand they can also involve some risks. Content communities can be used as platforms to share copyright-protected materials: for instance, while major communities have rules in place to ban and remove illegal contents, it is also difficult to avoid popular videos to be uploaded hours after they have been aired on television (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 63). On the positive point of view, there are several cases in which businesses have benefitted from content communities. A classic example is the Blendtec blender from the company K-Tec, which had produced the blender for about ten years with limited success. Nevertheless, in October 2006, the company began producing a series of low budget videos asking the question: "Will it blend?". Instantly, the videos went viral on the Internet thanks to web sites such as YouTube, resulting in an increase in sales of 700% (Smith & Vardiabasis, 2010, p. 195).

1.2.5 Virtual Worlds: VGWs and VSWs

Kaplan and Haenlein define virtual worlds basically as "platforms that replicate a three-dimensional environment in which users can appear in the form of personalized avatars and interact with each other as they would in real life". To this extent, if the classification based on media richness and social presence is taken into account, virtual worlds can be seen as the ultimate expression of Social Media. Virtual worlds can take two forms, namely virtual game worlds (VGWs) and virtual social worlds (VSWs).

[9] Taylor, J. (2016, June). *5 Outstanding Facebook Marketing Case Studies*. Available at Oursocialtimes: http://oursocialtimes.com/5-outstanding-facebook-marketing-case-studies/

[10] Source: Blanding, M. (2001). *The Yelp Factor: Are Consumer Reviews Good for Business?* Tratto da Working Knowledge - Harvard Business School: http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/the-yelp-factor-are-consumer-reviews-good-for-business

The former requires users to behave according to strict rules in the context of a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). These applications have become more popular over time, as standard game consoles such as Microsoft's Xbox and Sony's Playstation have started allowing simultaneous play among a multitude of users around the globe (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 64). While virtual games have recently experienced a decline in their notoriety, still they are widely used: fore instance, nowadays "World of Warcraft" counts over 9.16 million of users[11]. Even though the rules of such games usually limit the degree of self-presentation and self-disclosure possible, some users spend so much time with these applications as their character starts resemble their real life personality (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 64). There are several companies that at the time of highest popularity of VGW have exploited the opportunities that these platforms provided. The Japanese car producer Toyota, for instance, used pictures and mechanics from the World of Warcraft application in its Tundra commercial to reach the 2.5 million players in the US alone (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 64).

The idea behind virtual social worlds is similar to the one of virtual game worlds, with the difference that the formers allow users to choose more freely and choose their behaviour, essentially by creating a virtual life similar to a real life. Users are usually provided with avatars, as in VGW, through which they can interact with other players. Therefore, the absence of nearly every behavioural barrier allows for an unlimited range of self-presentation strategies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 64). One of the most significant examples of virtual worlds is "Second life", which also permits users to create content and trade with each other thanks to "bitCoins", a virtual currency. From a company perspective, virtual worlds offered a multitude of possibilities as for what concerns marketing strategies, but there are also several examples of successful employment and training projects. For instance, in 2010 the leader company IBM hosted an employee meeting and held focus groups in Second Life, with a cost saving of approximately US$350,000 (Kuntze, Crudele T., Reynolds, & Matulich, 2013, p. 6). Furthermore, a multitude of real-life companies entered Second Life in order to promote brand awareness and image, and further to use the virtual environments as sales channels for real-life products (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2009, p. 95). Indeed, the possibility of experiencing products virtually prior to their purchase is likely to lead to more favourable attitudes and higher purchase intentions due to higher object interactivity (Schlosser, 2006, p. 380). Table 2[12] further portrays some of the most meaningful examples of companies that, once entered Second Life, have achieved significant results.

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[11] Source: Statista.com (2016, August). *The Statistic Portal*. Available at Statista:
http://www.statista.com/statistics/276601/number-of-world-of-warcraft-subscribers-by-quarter/
[12] Retrieved from: Salomon, M. (2007, May). Business in Second Life: an Introduction. *Smart Internet Technology Cooperative Research Centre*, p. 9.

Table 2 - Selected Business Activity in Second Life 2006-2007

Intel	Retail branding exercise: 'Live without Boundaries', to launch its Duo-Core Centrino processor. Message: that Laptops powered by Intel's new product sets new standard for power and battery life. A renowned virtual builder occupied a Madison Ave computer shop window for 72 hours. Using SL scripting tools, the scripter recreated the scene outside her real world window into Second Life. The event was uploaded on YouTube, resulting in thousands of hits.
IBM	Holds workshops for developers on a private island using Second Life scripting tools. IBM has replicated two of their Real World sites: their R & D Centre Hursley Labs in England, and the Almaden Research Centre in California. One of its pubic islands hosts the electronics store Circuit City where customers can browse and explore features of new equipment.
Toyota	Product launch of 'Scion XB', aimed at hip young market. Virtual version of the car dropped onto people in Second life. Cars initially given away in-world were then offered for purchase, 300Linden (1.25USD). Users can fully customise the model by building new features. Why? Driving in-world carries a certain cache as most residents fly or walk.
BBC	Purchased island and staged its annual 'One Big Weekend' rock concert in-world. Attendees were able to see avatars of their favourite artists, as well as watch and listen to live streams of the bands on stage in Scotland. Organisers agreed this added a new level of interactivity for those who were unable to attend physically.
Amazon	Is exploring new technologies for integrating in-world searching with real world purchases. 'Life2Life' combines search in Second Life with Amazon's Remote Shopping Cart system.
Warner Bros.	Has pioneered 'The Listening Party', an interactive promotion of artist's music. For Regina Spektor's new release Warners built a chic Manhattan loft. As Spektor's music played, the loft's lighting and décor changed to roughly illustrate the song lyrics: a new marketing experience that was part video game, part music video. Avatars were able to hang out, chat and listen. The in-world release pre-dated the actual release.
Adidas	Avatars visiting its shop could try on virtual versions of its real world range. The 'Microride' model offered "bounce and flexibility with minimum weight". Avatars found themselves jumping whenever they took a step.

Even though Second Life and VSW in general have experienced a dramatic decline in their popularity only few years after their creation, the above illustrated achievements are still noteworthy; although these companies were pioneers of online marketing, the campaigns did not have the hoped success. The reasons for the decline in the notoriety of Second Life, for instance, must be mainly found in the lack of innovation, low usability and lack of adaptability to mobile sites[13]. Nevertheless, the opportunities that Virtual Social Worlds have given to companies are still relevant for this analysis. If, indeed, companies do not rely anymore on Virtual Worlds as they did before, on the other hand they have shifted the focus of their marketing campaigns on other types of virtual platforms, i.e. virtual realities, which will be later discussed.

1.2.6 Virtual Reality

Due to the fast transformation of the dimension of Social Media, considering only the Social Media identified by Kaplan and Haenlein would be incorrect. Therefore, in order to give a precise idea of the major channels available to companies for online marketing campaigns, it is necessary to depict an additional concept: the Virtual Reality (VR). Over the past few years, the Web has been exploited by a number of

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[13] Di Lucchio, M. (2014). *Che fine ha fatto Second Life?* Available at: Yahoo Finance: https://it.finance.yahoo.com/notizie/che-fine-fatto-second-life-072524429.html

businesses and companies to exchange information mainly for its ease of use and almost totally absence of costs. Virtual reality indeed, can be seen as the evolution of Virtual Worlds, as both platforms seek to perfectly resemble the real world. The concept of VR is not new, and can be defined as a class of computer-controlled multisensory communication technologies that allow more intuitive interactions with data and involve human senses in new ways (McLellan, 1996, p. 461). Unlike traditional user interfaces, VR places the user inside an experience; instead of viewing a screen in front of them, users are immersed and able to interact with 3D worlds[14]. Recently, companies have started focusing on Virtual Reality-based advertising campaigns fore several reasons: firstly, the fact that VR provide the consumer with a far more immersive experience, allowing a better focus on the message of the advertisement. Secondly, VR experiences are more impactful, and by producing strong emotions they can result in a real attitude change. Finally, through the deep involvement of the individual's feelings and emotions, the message is more durable and long lasting in the user's memory. For these reasons, there are a number of examples of companies that have recently relied on Virtual Realities to bring about marketing campaigns. On Christmas 2015, Coca Cola created a virtual reality sleight ride that allowed people to impersonate Santa Claus for a day; in 2014 TopShop created the "Catwalk experience", offering members of the public a front-row view of their fashion runway during London Fashion Week using a 360 panoramic video stream[15].

So far, the most significant cases in which companies have successfully exploited the potentials of Social Media have been discussed along with the classification Kaplan and Haenlein have made of it. The paper will indeed focus on the new paradigm of communication shaped by the use of Social Media, and consequently on the ways in which companies have had to adapt their communication trends to the consumer's necessities, in order to optimally manage and influence their purchase intentions.

1.3 The new paradigm: New vs. Traditional Media

The birth of New Media, especially Social Media, has meant a revolution for advertisers and marketers in terms of product and service promotion. Indeed, the traditional communication paradigm was characterized by the coordinated work of organizations collaborating with their paid agents, as advertising agencies, marketing research firms, and public relations consultants (Mangold & Faulds, 2009, p. 360). Hence, the stream of information was only regulated by face-to-face communication that occurred through traditional Word of Mouth pathways, a concept that will be further investigated in the third part. Furthermore, the impact of the traditional communication paradigm was minimal on the dynamics of the consumers, due to its partial broadcasting. Conversely, in the era of Social Media, marketing managers' control over the content, timing and frequency of information is being severely eroded (Mangold & Faulds, 2009, p. 360). As it will be later discussed, a number of Social Media platforms amplify consumers' ability

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[14] Jackson, B. (2015). *What is Virtual Reality? Definition and examples*. Tratto da AR Blog: http://www.marxentlabs.com/what-is-virtual-reality-definition-and-examples/
[15] Source: Mbryonic.com. (2016). *10 Best Uses Of Virtual Reality In Marketing*. Tratto da Mbryonic.com: http://www.mbryonic.com/best-vr/

to interact and, accordingly, the information available to consumers is based on the individual consumers' experiences. Figure 1[16] portrays the new communication paradigm, according to which marketers should manage their ability to manage and accomplish the needs of the consumers, externalized through Social Media.

Figure 1 - The New Communication Paradigm
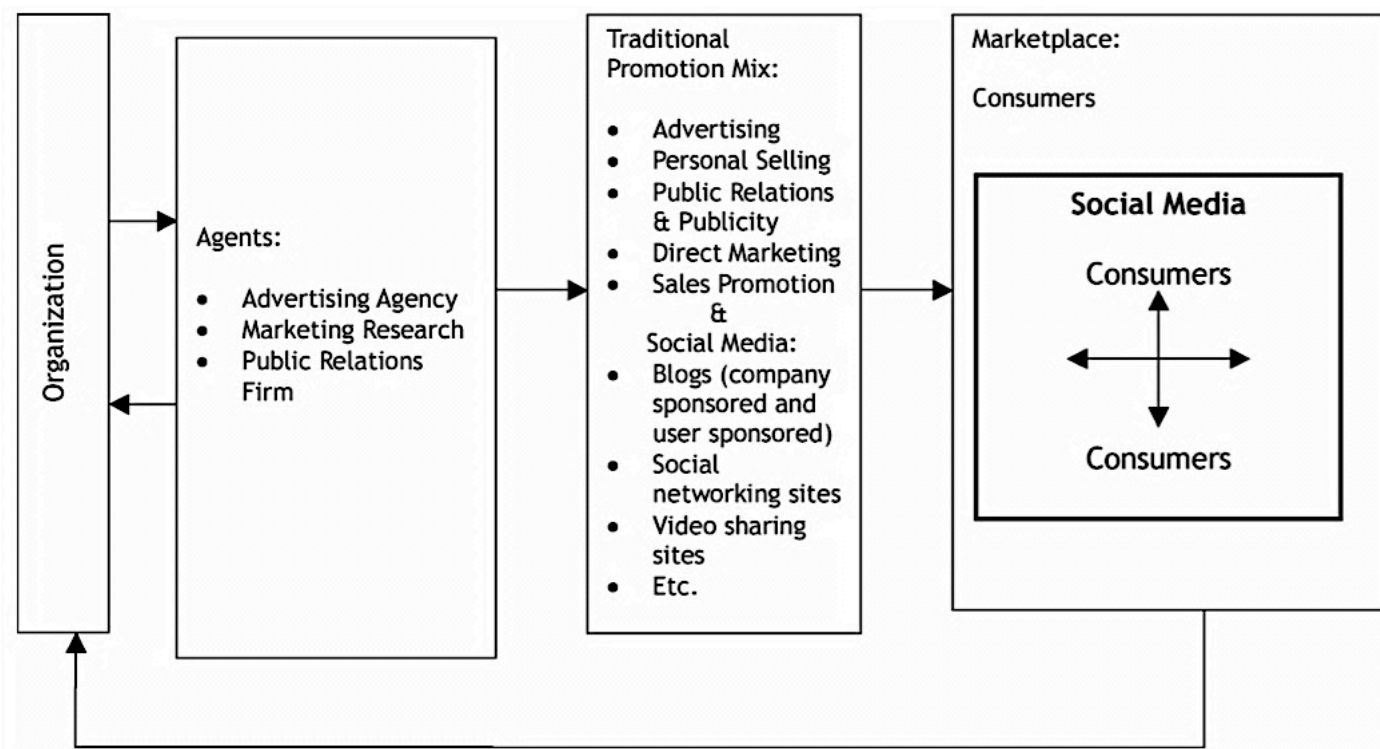
According to Mangold and Faulds (2009), the impact of the interactions among consumers in the SM can be further depicted in the following points:

- First of all, the Internet has become a mass media channel for consumer-sponsored communications;
- Secondly, consumers are gradually shifting their attention from traditional sources of advertising (newspapers, radio, television) to new media, requiring more control over their media utilization.
- Thirdly, online shoppers are more frequently relying on various sources of SM to seek the information they need and make their consumption decisions.
- Finally, consumers feel that Social Media is a more trustworthy channel for gathering information about products and services than communications diffused via traditional advertising.

"The above trends have severely diminished the usefulness and practicality of the traditional communications paradigm as a framework for developing marketing strategies. The new communications paradigm, on the other hand, requires several important changes in management's attitudes. […] Consumers are responding to this information in ways that directly influence all aspects of consumer behaviour, from

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[16] Retrieved from: Mangold, W. G., & Faulds, D. J. (2009). Social media: The new hybrid element of the promotion mix. *Business Horizons , 52* (4), p. 360.

information acquisition to post-purchase expression of satisfaction and dissatisfaction" (Mangold & Faulds, 2009, p. 361). Hence, the following section will be useful as it depicts the major changes that companies have undertaken in order to face the constantly developing dimension of Social Media.

1.4 The new communication trends: how companies have adapted

The paragraphs below will be useful and shall be kept in mind as they represent the starting point of the analysis of Social media influence on consumer's purchase intentions, that will be faced in the following chapters. Again, the works of Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) and of Hanna, Rohm *et al.* (2011) gives precise frameworks of the changes that have occurred –or should occur- in the ways companies communicate with consumers throughout Social Media. Hence, once traditional media's aim was to reach the largest number of consumers. However, while nowadays it is even more possible reaching people in large numbers, it often does not translate into a true marketing exchange: consumers can only be bystanders in the actions of the marketers (Hanna , Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011, p. 267). Nevertheless according to the authors, "digital technology has enabled the marketers to bring these potential consumers on-board, turning them in active hunters with Internet-based campaigns". Consumers are no longer mere recipients of advertisings, where traditional media is controlled by marketers in a firm-consumer unidirectional relationship; consumers now perceive themselves as participants in the media process. Consequentially, firms have had to adapt their communication and marketing strategies to the changes occurring: the steps that are usually encompassed in the new bidirectional company-consumer relationship will be illustrated below.

1.4.1 Visualizing the ecosystem

A critical step in the development of a social media communication strategy involves the concept and the classification of the social media ecosystem (Hanna , Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011, p. 271).
As a consequence, marketers will have a more precise idea as to which degree the social media interacts with the consumer, helping companies determine the ideal type of message that best suits the ecosystem. Nowadays, consumers actively participate and affect the messages and the image that brands want to give; consumer opinions help managing product and service assortment and companies can exploit the Web experiences to determine the success of future products and initiative. Figure 2[17] provides an overview of the Social Media ecosystem. The model has been created by Schultz (2007), in order to give an idea of how important is to know how to move through this constantly changing ecosystem. Generally, while platforms such as Social Network Sites (e.g. Facebook) provide instant transmission of messages and information, the spheres of influence have nowadays impersonated the ideal consumer that is usually engaged in conversations about products and services. Marketers must therefore learn how to navigate and integrate these multiple dimensions, while understanding the differences among consumers in the various social behaviour segments (Hanna , Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011, p. 269).

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[17] Retrieved from: Schultz, D. (2007). *A view of the ecosystem*. Available at Snackbyte:
http://www.deborahschultz.com/deblog/2007/11/snackbyte-a-vie.html

Figure 2 - Social Media Ecosystem
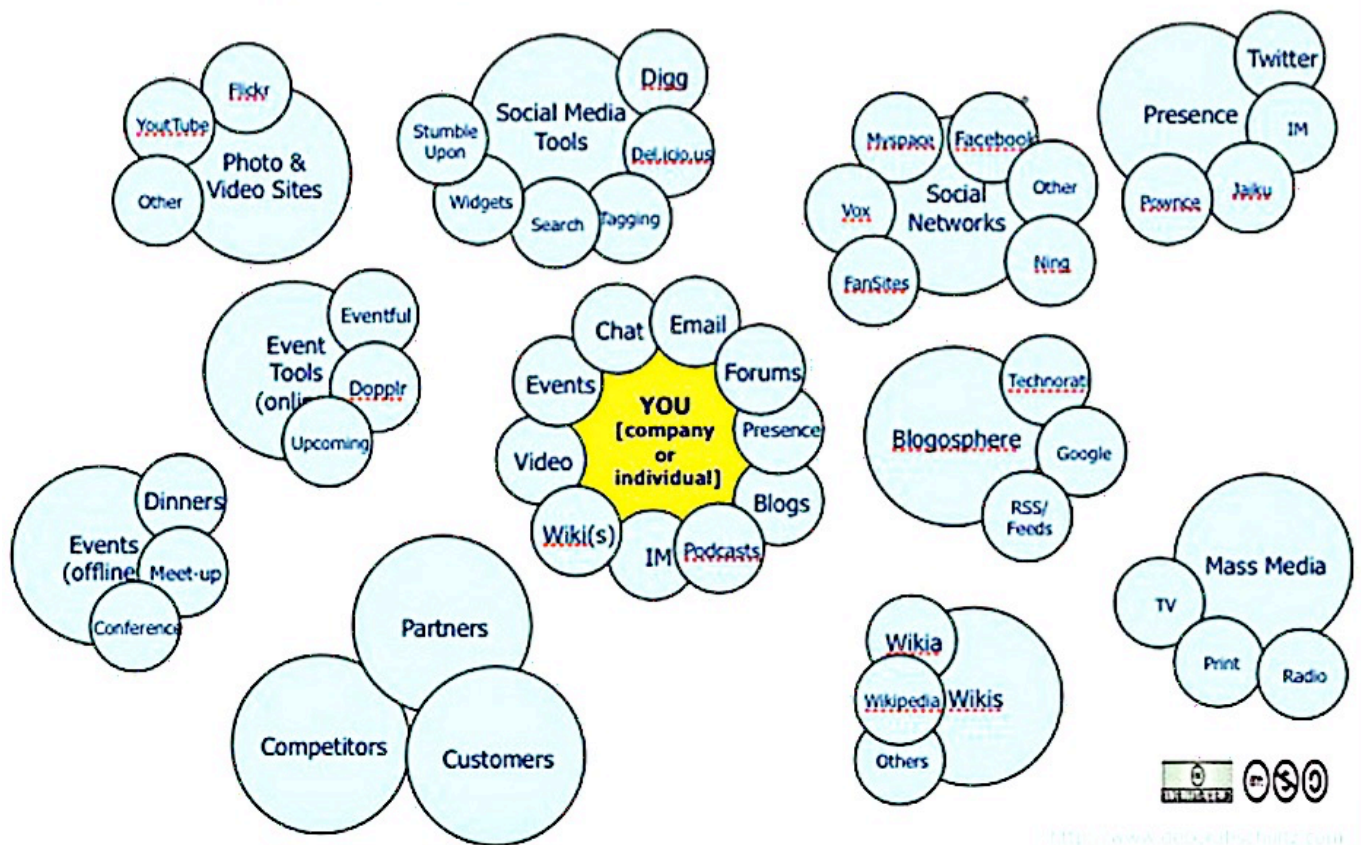
1.4.2 Beginning with the company's story

As with any communications strategy, a company needs to be clear about the story it wants to share with the marketplace; this story might be about a new product, a new service, a new relationship, or an overall theme (Hanna , Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011, p. 272). A noteworthy example is the campaign brought about by Samsung during the Olympic Games of Rio 2016. "The Anthem" opens with a young girl holding the Samsung phone and singing the national anthem of Botswana while enjoying a beautiful view of the sea. Instead of continuing with the same anthem, the spot jumps to another country, another person and another song[18]. A further example is the commercial by Dove, where the company tells an inspiring story about mother-daughter relationships. The commercial helped Dove getting close to half of a million views and thousands of likes and shares[19].

1.4.3 Being Active

According to Kaplan and Haenlein, Social Media are all about sharing and interaction, so companies should ensure that the content of their webpages is always updated (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 66). Also actively engaging in discussions with customers is another key factor that once traditional media could not make possible; indeed, as it has been already stated, TM involved unidirectional company-to-consumer

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[18] Richards, K. (2016, July). *Samsung Combines the World's Anthems into One beautiful song for Rio 2016.* Available at Adweek - advertising and branding: www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/ad-day-172621

[19] Vahl, A. (2014). *10 Successful Facebook Marketing Examples*. Available at Social Media Examiner: http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/10-successful-facebook-marketing-examples/

relationship only. Conversely, nowadays Social Media entails what can be considered a one-to-one share of information, which is usually in informal and unprofessional tones. Social Media is less about explaining why your baking mix, detergent or shampoo is better than anyone else's than it is about engaging others in open and active conversation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 66).

1.4.4 Being Interesting

As it is a fact that nobody is interested in speaking to a boring person, companies now are always looking for a valid reason to entail the customer in conversations and stimulate them actively. In order to do so, this reason must go beyond asserting that yours is the best sushi or airline in town. Therefore, the first step that companies usually undertake is listening to the consumer. Companies develop and post contents that meet the consumer's expectations: coffee powerhouse Starbucks, for example, created the "My Starbucks idea" platform, through which consumers could submit new ideas for the company (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p. 66).

2. The consumer: communication, content creation and purchase intention

"Consumer markets are heterogeneous and complex, and the Internet is but one possible distribution, transaction, and communication channel in a world dominated by conventional retailing channels."

(Peterson, Balasubramanian, & Bronnenberg, 1997)

2.0 Brief overview

A survey fielded in 2012[20] has showed that average Internet users spend 19% of their time online in communication activities and 5% of them is interested in online shopping activities. Figure 3[21] shows also how the total time spent on communication is commensurate with the amount of time users spend online for social networking:

Figure 3 - Allocation of Total Time Spent Online
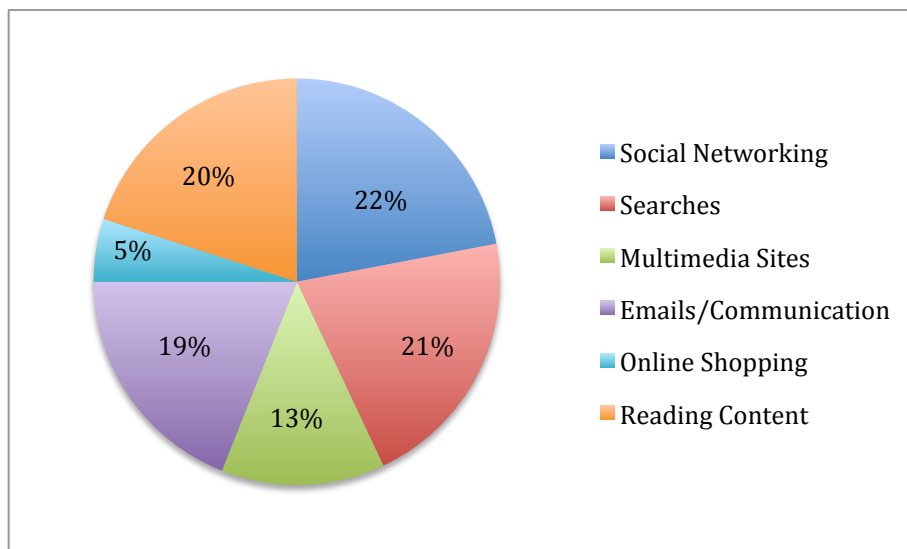
Notwithstanding the fact that the most essential types of Internet-based communication -such as emails and instant messaging (IM)- are media that exist separately from any web-related content or information, still innovative forms of Internet-based communication, such as social networking sites, forums and blogs, are providing a channel for people to easily connect with each other. Along with it, Web 2.0 sites like YouTube, MySpace, Wikipedia and Flickr contribute to a whole new bazaar of interests: a base of freely available user-created content, collaborative tools and networked communities create this dynamic and participatory internet culture (Riegner, 2007, p. 440). The outcome is a significant change in the ability of people to communicate their ideas and thoughts to others.

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[20] GoGulf. (2012). *How People Spend Their Time Online*. Available at da GoGulf: http://www.go-gulf.com/blog/online-time/
[21] Retrieved from: GoGulf. (2012). *How People Spend Their Time Online*. Available at GoGulf: http://www.go-gulf.com/blog/online-time/

2.1 Definition and classification of Online Consumer

In simple words, online consumers can be defined as actors on the market phase or individuals who purchase or consume products and services either online or offline[22].

A clear and useful classification of online consumers has been provided by Riegner. According to the author, two segments are the most immersed in common activities on the web: Online Insiders and Social Clickers. Online Insiders participate actively on the Internet and are very influential online shoppers; on the other hand, Social Clickers are often involved in communication activities and tend to be younger (Riegner, 2007, p. 439). These two groups will be taken into account in order to shape a classification, which will give an idea of what are the segments of the Internet users that can be most easily influenced by Social Media.

2.1.1 Consumers who surf the Internet without purchasing Online (Social Clickers)

According to Riegner (2007), Social Clickers use the Internet to keep relationships with friends and familiars alive, and to look for new ones. While there is a generational gap in this group, all Social Clickers are active communicators online. Usually, older Social Clickers are relatable to emails, whilst the younger part is associated with the use of chats and instant messages. The younger Social Clickers actively involved in content creation activities, such as the creation of blogs, personal webpages, as well as frequently posting comments. "With a natural interest in connecting with others, Social Clickers are likely to emerge as key influencer group for the products they care about. They may not be the first to adopt, but they vocalize their preferences more readily that other users, influencing friends and family indirectly through their personal pages, posts and chats" (Riegner, 2007, p. 440).

2.1.2 Consumers who actually purchase Online (Online Insiders)

Online Insiders are very active users and they tend to be young, male, and addicted to online environments; furthermore, they are usually more inclined than other groups to assume an online "voice" or persona and express themselves online (Riegner, 2007, p. 440). Moreover, Online Insiders are highly influential online shoppers in using different Social Media to buy and sell (Pookulangara & Koesler, 2011, p. 350). Additionally, this group is also more inclined on adding opinions via product ratings and reviews.

2.1.3 Other categories: Content Kings, Everyday Pros and Fast Trackers

According to Riegner, Content Kings tend to be young, male and addicted to online entertainment. Further, they are not involved much in the online communication, except from activities supporting their interests. Usually, when Content Kings communicate, is to achieve the best entertainment available on the Web.

Everyday Pros are actively involved in activities related to online shopping. The ideal Everyday Pro is usually related to the creation of reviews and comments about a certain product, rather than to the creation of a personal webpage. Indeed, their focus on the Web is often more specific and targeted. Moreover, they

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[22] Al-Dhuhli, I., Ismael, S., & Mukhaini, E. (2015, April). *The Impact of Social Media on Consumer Buying Behaviour.* Available at ResearchGate:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275347329_The_Impact_of_Social_Media_on_Consumer_Buying_Behaviour, p. 4.

participate in activities such as online banking, and spend an average of £97 per month online (Riegner, 2007, p. 441).

Fast Trackers are more interested into the use of Internet in order to meet their immediate and basic needs, such as checking for information, news, weather and so on.

Table 3[23] shows to which extent every category is related to different kinds of content creation, as an indicator of their participation in online activities.

Table 3 - Content Creation by Category*

	Online insiders	Social clickers	Content Kings	Everyday Pros	Fast Trackers
Review products	40%	31%	24%	35%	25%
Chat in Chat Rooms	18%	15%	15%	8%	9%
Post to forums	35%	24%	26%	18%	18%
Express Opinions	13%	7%	6%	5%	7%
Use a wiki	7%	3%	3%	2%	3%
Post to Journal	18%	17%	14%	10%	10%
Publish a blog	21%	19%	17%	10%	8%
Create/share audio files	6%	3%	2%	3%	3%
Create/share video files	5%	4%	4%	3%	4%

*Do it in a typical month; N=4190; base: all respondents

2.2 The Purchase Intentions of the Consumer

After having specified what are the different categories of Internet users and, consequentially, the potential online consumers, it could be useful to describe the theoretical background behind the concept of "purchase intentions", as it gives a perfect idea of the psychological mechanisms entrenched in the purchasing decisions of consumers. Purchase intentions are defined as the consumer's attitudes, assessments and external factors that construct his/her willingness to purchase a product (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977). Purchase intentions can assess the extent to which a consumer wants to buy a certain product, and usually the higher they are, the higher the willingness to buy the product. Purchase intentions indicate that consumers will follow their experience, preferences and external environment to collect information, evaluate alternatives, and make purchase decisions (Dodds, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991, p. 310). Purchase intentions can be affected by a number of factors, such as, for example, the attitude of the consumer towards the brand or the price of the product. Furthermore, consumers' purchase intentions derive from their perception of benefit and value acquisition, and it is a significant factor to predict their purchase behaviour.

To some extent, online consumer behaviour can be easily studied by applying the concepts used in the analysis of offline or traditional consumer behaviour. The frameworks that study the decision-making process of the potential consumers distinguish a number of stages, typically including at least the following: need recognition, pre-purchase search, and post-purchase evaluation; these stages are relatively abstract and

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[23] Retrieved from: Riegner, C. (2007, December). Word of Mouth on the Web: The Impact of Web 2.0 on Consumer Purchase Decisions. *Journal of Advertising Research* , p. 440.

do not consider the medium through which the consumer buys. Hence, the stages can be applied to online consumer behaviour (O'Keefe & McEachern, 1998, p. 73).

Indeed, looking more closely at the difference between online and off-line consumer behaviour, the work of Van Der Heijden *et al.* (2003) is very useful, as it defines the issues that are employed in the differentiation between online and offline consumer behaviour. First, online consumers have to interact with technology to purchase the goods and services they need. The physical shop environment is replaced by an electronic shopping environment or, in other words, by an information system (IS) (Van der Heijden, Verhagen, & Creemers, 2003, p. 42). Second, a greater degree of trust is needed in an online shopping than in a physical shop. The concept of trust will be further extended in the following paragraphs along with supporting case studies, however in this section trust will be useful in shaping the so-called trust-oriented models in the analysis of online consumer behaviour. In the words of Tan and Thoen, "trust mitigates the feelings of uncertainty that arise when the shop is unknown, the shop owners are unknown, the quality of the product is unknown and the settlement performance is unknown" (Tan & Thoen, 2001, p. 63).

2.2.1 Technology-Oriented Models

In this context, technology refers to the website that an online store employs to spread and share its products. Authors and researchers have long been studying how consumers seek for information about products and how useful technology can be to acquire this information (Van der Heijden, Verhagen, & Creemers, 2003, p. 42). The so-called information-seeking behaviour is usually characterized by a pondered comparison between the cost of search and evaluation of more alternative products and the advantages of a better decision when more choices are available. Indeed, technology can potentially decrease the cost of searching and comparing available alternatives while increasing the quality of the decision. Moreover, there is some evidence that online consumers not only care for the instrumental value of the technology, but also the more immersive and hedonic value (Childers, Carr, & al., 2001, p. 515). Upon these and other studies, many models have been developed: within them, the well known "technology acceptance model" (TAM).

The TAM was first created by Davis to explain user acceptance of technology in the workplace (Davis D. F., 1989, p. 321). The model basically consists in the analysis of the consumer behaviour when accepting a new technology, thanks to the help of two variables: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. The former is the degree up to which an individual believes that using a particular technology would increase his/her job performances. Perceived ease of use is instead the amount of effort that the individual believes to put in the use of the technology itself. The model further explains that every other external variable, such as system-specific features, are entirely mediated by the two key beliefs. In simple words, the models attempts in adopting a casual chain of beliefs, attitudes and intentions that the sociologists Fishbein and Ajzen have further developed in the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). According to the latter, an individual creates an attitude about a certain object, on the basis of which he/she forms an intention to behave with respect to the object itself (Van der Heijden, Verhagen, & Creemers, 2003, p. 42). As the model has recently been updated, it has been found that not only usefulness (i.e. external motivation), but also enjoyment (i.e. internal

motivation) is a direct determinant of user acceptance of technology (Davis & Bagozzi, 1992, p. 1120) (Venkatesh, 1999, p. 241). Moreover, researchers have applied the original TAM to a number of settings: in particular, recent studies on technology acceptance in Internet and website usage have confirmed the importance of the ease-of-use and usefulness in an online context, and authenticate the intrinsic enjoyment that many consumers feel when surfing the Internet. To sum up, the Technology Acceptance Model has a key role in validating the importance of usefulness and ease-of-use of websites, further demonstrating how these two elements can influence consumers purchase intentions.

2.2.2 Trust-Oriented Models

The Trust-Oriented view has gained notoriety in he early 1990s, with the advent of large-scale electronic commerce. In this context, Mayer et al. (1995) define trust as "the willingness of a consumer to be vulnerable to the actions of an online store based on the expectation that the online store will perform a particular action important to the consumer, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the online store" (Mayer, Davis, & al, 1995, p. 710). Indeed, researchers have investigated on to what extent trust affects the willingness to buy from a specific website, and it has been showed that trust in a company negatively influences the perceived risk associated with the purchase of a certain object on the Internet. Perceived risk can be regarded as a consumer's subjective function of the magnitude of adverse consequences and the probabilities that these consequences may occur if the product is acquired (Featherman, 2001). Usually, the more trust a person has in a company, the less risk the person will perceive in buying a certain product online; as a consequence, perceived risk negatively affects the attitude towards Internet shopping.

Generally, people develop trust in online shops through several factors, such as the perceived size of a company and its reputation: the larger the perceived size and the perceived reputation, the greater the trust in the company. Reputation is closely related to familiarity with the store, which researchers have also identified as an antecedent of trust (Van der Heijden, Verhagen, & Creemers, 2003, p. 43). Additionally, it should be stressed that trust in a company does not necessarily determine the success of the purchase online. Indeed, we may not trust the Internet company, but we may trust the system or the website that monitors its performances (Tan & Thoen, 2001, p. 72). To conclude, the trust-oriented model suggests that trust plays a key role in the consumer's purchase intention, thanks to the aid of a number of trust drivers, namely perceived risk, size and reputation.

The model that Van Der Heijden *et al.* have attempted to explain is portrayed in Figure 4[24]. The pillar of this model is the relation between attitude towards online purchasing and intention to purchase online.

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[24] Retrieved from: Van der Heijden, H., Verhagen, T., & Creemers, M. (2003). Understanding online purchase intentions: contributions from technology and trust perspectives. *European Journal of Information Systems , 12* (1), 44.

Figure 4 - Conceptual Model of Attitudes Towards Online Purchasing
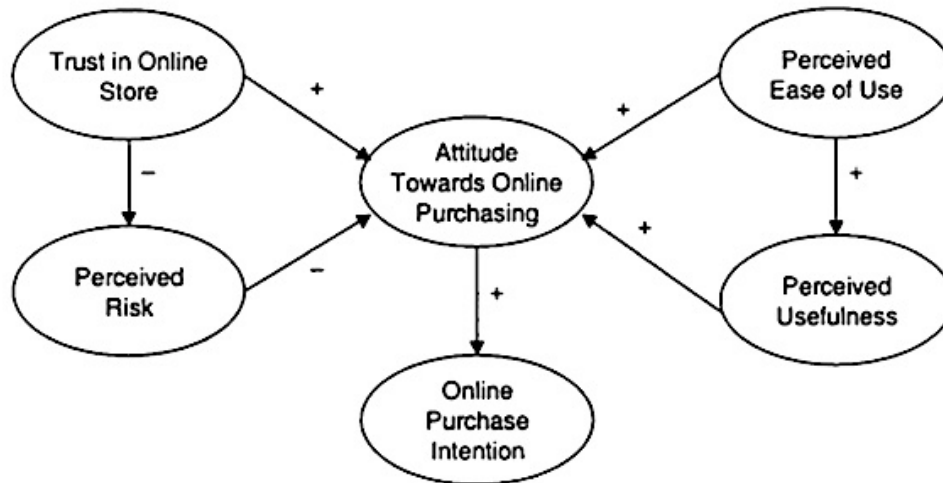
To summarize, the attitude model has four antecedents in total: two from the technology perspective and two from the trust perspective. The technological antecedents are the perceived usefulness and perceived ease-of-use, both deriving from the Technology Acceptance Model, while the trust antecedents are trust in the online store and perceived risk (Van der Heijden, Verhagen, & Creemers, 2003, p. 43).

So far, the most important theories and concept concerning online consumers' psychological mechanisms have been illustrated. The following paragraph illustrates a case study that portrays how perceived usefulness and trust operate on consumer's buying behaviour.

2.3 The role of Trust and Perceived Usefulness on Intention to Buy

The study conducted by Hajli (2014) focuses on "examining the role of social factors on trust, which can influence an individual's intentions to buy" (Hajli, 2014, p. 388). The objectives of the study are (a) determining the extent to which Social Media influence trust in e-commerce; (b) understanding the relationship between trust and intention to buy; (c) understanding the relationship between trust and perceived usefulness; (d) examining the direct and indirect influence of Social Media and intention to buy. The research model proposed in showed in Figure 5[25]:

Figure 5 - Research Model on the Relationship Between Social Media, Trust, PU and Intention to Buy

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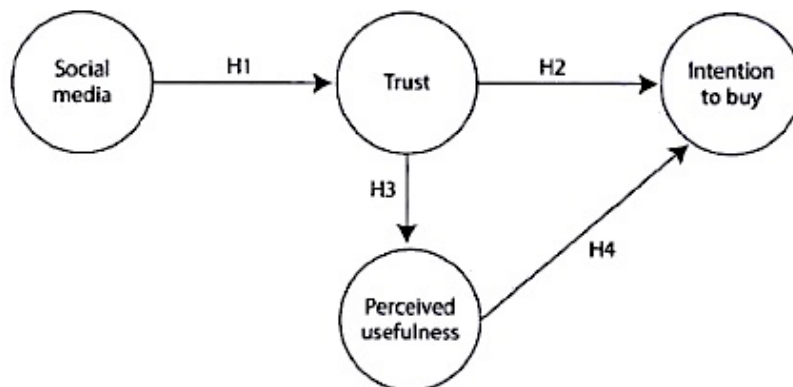
[25] Retrieved from: Hajli, M. N. (2014). A study of the impact of social media on consumers. *International Journal of Market Research , 56* (3), p 390.

The author hypothesizes that the "interconnectivity of consumers through Social Media such as communities, reviews or recommendations is likely to establish trust in e-commerce, therefore in Social Networking Sites the social interaction of consumers helps their peers to develop or reject trust in a provider" (Hajli, 2014, p. 393). In other words, the relationships established through Social Media is likely to affect the perceived trust on consumers, as these interactions generate social support; consequentially, the social support generated influences trust. An example can be derived from online reviews, which are perceived to be useful and affect attitude and intention to buy in consumers through the impression created about a product or a service (Purnawirawan, De Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2012, p. 247). From these assumptions, Hajli draws the first hypothesis:

H1: Social Media have a positive effect on the user's trust.

The second and the third hypotheses are made on the assumption that trust plays a significant role on online shopping as members of online communities and Social Networking Sites can assure each other on the reliability of a website through the exchange of information and experiences, thus increasing their willingness to buy. In other words, according to Hajli Social Media and the emergence of Web 2.0 can help customers to reduce their risk and increase their social trust through customer ratings and reviews (Hajli, 2014, p. 394). Moreover, a positive relationship between trust and perceived usefulness is assumed.

H2: Trust of individuals in SNSs has a positive effect of intention to buy.
H3: Trust positively affects PU.

The fourth hypothesis concerns the role of perceived usefulness on the intention to buy. Indeed, it is stated that in SNSs, the users' perceived value of online connection has a significant positive effect on their willingness to pay for other members of SNSs (Han & Windsor, 2011, p. 37). Therefore:

H4: The sites' perceived usefulness has a positive effect on the user's intention to buy on SNSs

The data were collected through the use of a questionnaire that was distributed in London. Moreover, an online questionnaire was developed and individuals were invited to participate through emails. The targeted individuals were active members of SNSs such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.

The data revealed important results. First of all, it was showed that trust, enhanced by Social Media, plays a key role in positively affecting intention to buy. Indeed, "when potential consumers are encouraged to trust in vendors by their peers, […] they are ore likely to buy through SNSs. This confirms the related hypothesis" (Hajli, 2014, p. 400). Also, it has been confirmed that perceived usefulness affects intention to buy; additionally, it has a more significant impact than trust on the willingness to buy. Hence, Hajili assumes that

"improving the quality of websites enhances perceived usefulness in their consumers". Furthermore, data revealed that trust "has a positive and significant effect on perceived usefulness. Once participants accepted trust, not only they had more intention to buy, but they also found increased perceived usefulness in the site. […] Therefore, trust has a significant role in e-commerce by directly influencing intention to buy and indirectly influencing perceived usefulness" (Hajli, 2014, p. 400).

To conclude, this study has been useful to introduce the concepts with which the next chapter will deal and which will be necessary to further investigate on the role of Social Media on consumer's behaviour. Indeed, the theoretical framework previously depicted will be fundamental to understand the concept of electronic Word of Mouth and to better understand the mechanisms that affect consumer's buying behaviour.

3. Social Media as drivers of consumer's intentions: Word of Mouth and Consumer Engagement

"Social Media presents potentially seductive opportunities for new forms of communication and commerce between marketers and consumers. As advertisers typically want to find some way to follow their target audiences, many new media opportunities are presented to advertisers themselves. However, we are still Social Media pioneers."

<div align="right">(Miller & Lammas, 2010)</div>

3.0 Brief Overview

As it has been already stated, in recent years Social media and Social Networking Sites have dramatically increased their popularity. The revolutions that have been brought not only concern marketing and advertising practices, but also patterns of Internet usage and consumer behaviour from information acquisition to post-purchase behaviour (Mangold & Faulds, 2009, p. 360).

Nevertheless, the overall theoretical framework through which Social media influences consumers' intentions has been discussed so far, along with the main channels available to companies that have started operating online. However, the focus of this analysis will move to the practical ways in which the advent of Social Media has changed the perception of marketing and, consequentially, how consumers and companies themselves have had to adapt to this constantly developing dimension. Moreover, the key points of this discussion will be supported by a number of studies, which will further witness a direct influence on the consumer's buying behaviour.

3.1 The Power of the electronic Word of Mouth

With the advent of Web 2.0, it was finally possible for online consumers to engage in real time conversation, both between Internet users themselves and also between companies. The open structure that characterizes Social Media has allowed a bidirectional flow of information between marketers and users. Indeed, Web 2.0 presents new opportunities for the electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which is defined as "an evaluative informal communication between two or several persons about the characteristics of a brand, a product or a service and which is spread on the Internet" (Carl, 2006, p. 603). By engaging in eWOM, consumers' options for gathering unbiased product information from other consumers have been extended, and it has also been provided the opportunity for consumers to offer their own consumption-related advice (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). This topic has recently received a lot of attention mainly because of the exponential growth of the Internet and the popularity of the e-commerce; indeed, the electronic WOM is considered as extension of interpersonal communication at the new age (Akrimi & Khemakhem, 2012, p. 3). Nevertheless, in order to better understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to provide a theoretical framework that can explain the rationale behind the fact that consumers rely much on online recommendations.

3.1.1 Reasons for engaging in eWOM communication

A number of authors have investigated in the reasons for which consumers interact with each others to influence their own behaviour. Among them, Cheema and Kaikati (2010) for example, have postulated that consumers tend to recommend products for social and psychological motives. According to them, people who purchase online can feel the obligation to help their peers, and probably by the sense of pleasure deriving from reaching a particular social status.

More specifically, among the psychological factors there are to be found:

- Self-esteem: according to Darley (1999), self-esteem is "a previous attitude which consists in saying to itself that we have some value". The author goes further by arguing that individuals with higher self-esteem usually tend to seek more information about products from several sources. Moreover, these individuals use their knowledge to convince others of their own superiority.

- Intrinsic Motivation: according to Fagan and al. (2008), "intrinsic motivation is an interest, a curiosity, a tendency to investigate several sources of stimulation felt about an activity. The consequences of intrinsic motivation can be a satisfaction or a positive attitude towards the activity. The activity is considered as intrinsically pleasant without taking into account the effort to achieve it or the profits which ensue from it". In other words, the intent of the consumers in sharing information with others is to express their feeling of enjoyment associated to a positive experience.

- Product Involvement: Higie and Feick (1989) assert that involved consumers tend to inquire regularly in order to actively seek and share information about products; moreover, one of the reasons to explain information sharing is the so-called product implication, in which the involved consumers are interested in the product, even though in the majority of cases the product purchase does not occur.

Among the social factors, the most impacting are the following:

- Interpersonal Connectivity: according to Dholakia and al. (2004), interpersonal connectivity can be defined as "the social benefits derived from establishing and maintaining contact with other people such as social support, friendship and intimacy". In this sense, the consumer can be enthusiastic in participating in virtual communities with the purpose of staying in touch with their peers by posting comments and reviews.

- Social Influence: the concept of social influence has been first tackled by Ajzen (1991) in the form of "subjective norms" in his theory of reasoned action. Indeed, subjective norms are defined as "an individual's perception of whether people important to the individual think the behaviour should performed". In the context of recommending products though Social Media, an individual may believe that most people who are significant for him think he/she should or should not recommend a certain product.

In order to put this theoretical framework in a pragmatic perspective, the work of Akrimi and Khemakhem (2012) is noteworthy. Indeed, the authors have demonstrated that "the attitude to the recommendation is

strongly influenced by intrinsic motivation and self-esteem. […] The experience on the social networks is considered as and hedonist experience associating positive feelings which can influence positively the attitude to the recommendation". Moreover, it was also found that "the intention of recommendation on SNSs is further influenced by interpersonal connectivity, product involvement, social influence and attitude towards recommendation" (Akrimi & Khemakhem, 2012, p. 8).

Another huge contribute concerning eWOM has been given by the work of Hennig-Thurau and al. (2004). According to the authors, given the conceptual closeness of eWOM and traditional WOM communication, the consumer motives identified in the literature for engaging in traditional WOM that can also be relevant for eWOM.

Table 4[26] depicts the eleven motives for engaging in Word of Mouth communication; three different studies have been taken into account. According to Hennig-Thurau and al. (2004), "the most prominent study of WOM communication motives is by Dichter (1966), who identified four main motivational categories of positive WOM communication: product-involvement, self-involvement, other-involvement and message-involvement. However, despite its intuitive plausibility and prominence, a main weakness of Dichter's work is that no detailed information about the development of his typology is provided". The work of Dichter was further edited by Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1993) who modified the typologies, renaming the motives and further adding another category: dissonance reduction.

According to the authors, dissonance reduction is the only reason for undertaking negative WOM communication. Nevertheless, the most comprehensive study on this topic remains the one by Sundaram and al. (1998): by analyzing 390 critical-incident interviews, the authors identified eight different motives for consumers to engage in WOM communication, some of which corresponded to categories already found by Dichter and Engel and al. Four categories, namely altruism, product involvement, self-enhancement and helping the company, explain positive WOM communication; instead, the other four motives, namely altruism, anxiety reduction, vengeance and advice seeking, explain engagement in negative WOM.

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[26] Retrieved from: Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D. D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet? *Journal of interactive marketing*, *18* (1), p. 40;
Adapted from: Dichter, E. (1966, November-December). How Word-of-Mouth Advertising Works. *Harvard Business Review , 44*, p. 147-166;
Engel, J. F., Blackwell, R. D., & Miniard, P. W. (1993). *Consumer Behavior* (8th ed.). Fort Worth: Dryden Press;
Sundaram, D. S., Mitra, K., & Webster, C. (1998). Word-of-Mouth communication: a motivational analysis. *Advances in Consumer Research , 25*, 527-531.

Table 4 - Motives for Traditional Word-of-Mouth Communication Behaviour

Author(s)	Motive	Description
Dichter (1966)	Product-involvement	a customer feels so strongly about the product that a pressure builds up in wanting to do something about it; recommending the product to others reduces the tension caused by the consumption experience
	Self-involvement	the product serves as a means through which the speaker can gratify certain emotional needs
	Other-involvement	word-of-mouth activity addresses the need to give something to the receiver
	Message-involvement	refers to discussion which is stimulated by advertisements, commercials, or public relations
Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard (1993)	Involvement	level of interest or involvement in the topic under consideration serves to stimulate discussion
	Self-enhancement	recommendations allow person to gain attention, show connoisseurship, suggest status, give the impression of possessing inside information, and assert superiority
	Concern for others	a genuine desire to help a friend or relative make a better purchase decision
	Message intrigue	entertainment resulting from talking about certain ads or selling appeals
	Dissonance reduction	reduces cognitive dissonance (doubts) following a major purchase decision
Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster (1998)	Altruism (positive WOM)	the act of doing something for others without anticipating any reward in return
	Product involvement	personal interest in the product, excitement resulting from product ownership and product use
	Self-enhancement	enhancing images among other consumers by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers
	Helping the company	desire to help the company
	Altruism (negative WOM)	to prevent others from experiencing the problems they had encountered
	Anxiety reduction	easing anger, anxiety, and frustration
	Vengeance	to retaliate against the company associated with a negative consumption experience
	Advice seeking	obtaining advice on how to resolve problems

Furthermore, traditional WOM motives were integrated with motives derived from the specific features of eWOM on consumer-opinion platform (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 41).

Indeed, this was possible thanks to the work of Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2011), who provided a useful framework for considering the integration of economic and social activity within the context of a virtual community, resulting in the distinction of three types of social interaction utility: focus-related utility, consumpion utility and approval utility (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 42). Afterwards, two additional consumer utilities, namely moderator-related utility and homeostase utility, have been added in order to complete this theoretical framework in order to focus on the particular aspects of Social Media platforms.

- Focus-related utility refers to the type of utility that the consumer receives when adding a value to the community through his/her contributions (Balasubramanian & Mhajan, 2001, p. 125). This contributions can be, for instance, reviews and commentary on products or services.

- Consumption utility refers to consumers receiving utility through "direct consumpion of the contributions of other community constituents" (Balasubramanian & Mhajan, 2001, p. 125). Consumption happens when potential consumers read the product reviews and comments provided by other individuals, which in turn can also motivate consumers to leave reviews.

- Approval utility refers to the satisfaction of a consumer deriving from "when other constituents consume and approve of the constituent's own contribution" (Balasubramanian & Mhajan, 2001, p. 126). Usually, this feedbacks can be both formal and informal.

- Moderator-related utility is "derived when a third party makes the complaint act easier for the community member. In a Web-based opinion platform context, this might entail the platform saff interacting with a company on behalf of the customer" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 50).

- Homeostase utility: this last utility is based on the idea that individuals have the desire ofkeeping their lives balances. For, after their originally balanced status has become unbalanced, they will strive to restore their balance through comments or reviews concerning a strongly positive or negative consumption experience.

The work of Hennig-Thurau and al. (2004) is further significant, as it provides an important study carried out through the application of the traditional WOM theoretical framework and the utility-based approach to eWOM, which were useful to create a questionnaire. Indeed, the study, which was conducted on a sample of 2063 Internet users, "provides ans insight into a variety of different motives for eWOM communication" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 50). It was finally found that social benefits, economic incentives, concern for others and self-enhancement where the most significant motives for consumers to leave comments and reviews. A multiple regression analysis was conducted in order to determine the ability of the different motives to predict eWOM behavior. The dependent variable used was actual eWOM behaviour (operationalized in "frequency of consumer's visit to opinion platform" and "number of comments written"), while the eight eWOM motive factors derived from the theoretical framework previously discusse were used as independent variables. The results are depicted in Table 5[27].

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[27] Retrieved from: Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D. D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet? *Journal of interactive marketing*, *18* (1), p. 48.

Table 5 - Factor-score Regression Results - Motives for Engaging in eWOM Communication

	Platform Visit Frequency Regression Coefficient (Standardized)	Comment Writing Regression Coefficient (Standardized)
Factor 1: Platform assistance	−.18**	−.04
Factor 2: Venting negative feelings	−.10**	.01
Factor 3: Concern for other consumers	.13**	.16**
Factor 4: Extraversion/positive self-enhancement	.15**	.12**
Factor 5: Social benefits	.37**	.34**
Factor 6: Economic incentives	.10**	.18**
Factor 7: Helping the company	−.01	−.03
Factor 8: Advice seeking	.10**	.06*
R^2	.242	.197

** Significant at $p < .001$.
* Significant at $p < .01$.

The relevancy of these results relies on the fact that "identifying such motives can enable platforms operators to design their service in a more customer-oriented way by addressing the specific reasonf platform users post messages. […] Platform operators can develop programs that appeal to the basic motives that drive eWOM behavior. For example, because of the especially large impact that social benefits have on eWOM behaviour, a platform provider might decide to offer special services, such as the development of a discussion forum, to increase community coherence and activity" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 51). Having provided an exhaustive theoretical framework that explains the reasons for consumers in engaging in eWOM communication, it is necessary to analyse the whole concept from another perspective: the companies' point of view. Indeed, in the next paragraph the opportunities of eWOM for companies will be discussed.

3.1.2 Opportunities of the electronic Word of Mouth

Online relationship marketing requires the facilitation of the process of interaction, communication, dialogue and value (Harridge March & Quinton, 2009, p. 174). Moreover, social marketing technologies also permit marketers to customize their messages and have a dialogue with customers (Miller & Lammas, 2010, p. 4).

Indeed, in order to establish a relationship with consumers, marketers have started including in Social Media a wide range of interests a concepts that have a direct link with the brand, resulting in the creation of the so-called "brand communities". A clear example is the one by Procter & Gamble: the company in order to promote its Tampax brand to teenage girls created an online community for teens that integrated peer networking with games, quizzes, music, videos and a Q & A area (Miller & Lammas, 2010, p. 6).

Moreover some conceptual models were developed with the purpose of guiding the process of "co-creation" with online consumers. One example is the DART model, according to which the main aim of a company in

order to best fulfil consumers' needs is to create a direct dialogue. Indeed, a direct dialogue with the consumer led Unilever to conduct the well known "Dove Campaign for Real Beauty", in which the company was able to take into account advices coming directly from the flow of information, messages and requests among consumers. Furthermore, another noteworthy area of opportunity for social marketing is the so called "brand building", defined by Ferguson (2008) as "the ability to connect enthusiastic online brand advocates with the company's product development cycle". In this context, marketing is completely based on research, a product developers rely much on web-based reactions, such as discussions in forums regarding the change in prices or features of a certain product. A clear "example is IdeaStorm, a Dell's community discussion and brainstorming website" (Miller & Lammas, 2010, p. 6). After the launch of the website, the company registered a significant increase in sales, just by providing a forum for constructive and meaningful critiques and advices.

3.1.3 Challenges of the electronic Word of Mouth

Along with the several opportunities involved in the use of eWOM in social media marketing campaign, there are also several risks deriving, for example, from the inability to control user-generated contents. In one instance, the pharmaceutical manufactures Johnson & Johnson released an online marketing campaign via an online video about pain relief for women who carry their babies in a sling; within hours, Twitter and other SNSs exploded with negative commentary about the video's perceived denigration of motherhood (Miller & Lammas, 2010, p. 5). Thus, over a single weekend, the volume and sentiment of the consumer-generated media brought down a well-planned advertising campaign (Baker, 2009, p. 2).

An additional risk for marketers related to the source credibility of user-generated content (UGC) is that "consumers will consider information if it is both useful and believable, but will react badly to sales-push messages that violate social networking's intrinsic qualities of socialization and trust" (Angel & Sexsmith, 2009, p. 4). Nevertheless, making SNSs overly commercial can be dangerous, as consumers can feel the sense of being exploited by advertisers. Moreover, the size of online communities is a concrete risk for generating eWOM: many marketers were born in an era of mass marketing and are driven by the prospect of large and often hard to reach audiences viewing their campaigns (Miller & Lammas, 2010, p. 5). Indeed, the concept of reaching the biggest amount of consumers through mass media needs to be reconsidered, as nowadays-marketing campaigns on Social Media tend to be more focused and consumer-shaped.

3.2 Strengthening the relationship between consumers through eWOM: online reviews.

It has been already showed how eWOM has become one of the main influential channels. In the previous paragraphs, the extent to which marketing campaigns in SNSs have affected consumers' purchase intentions has been taken into account. However, in order to better portray the utmost ways through which Social Media influence consumers' behaviour, it is necessary to depict another type of electronic Word of Mouth: online reviews. Online consumer reviews provide a trusted source of product information for consumers, and therefore a potentially valuable sales asset; positive consumer reviews on product or

companies is one of the best predictors of business growth (Keller, 2007, p. 450). In order to give a useful framework of how online reviews can be used also as predictors of consumers' purchase intentions two main studies will be illustrated. First, the study conducted by Lee (2009) focuses on the impact on online reviews by taking into account the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and gives an overall framework of the mechanisms of review on purchasing intentions. Secondly, the focus will shift on the specific cases of Amazon.com and Yelp.com.

3.2.1 Effect of online reviews on consumers purchase intentions: the ELM model

"One theoretical perspective that can enrich the understanding of the influence of online reviews is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)" (Lee, 2009, p. 576). The ELM was developed by Petty and Cacioppo in 1986, and provides a useful interpretation of the effectiveness of persuasive communication. According to the model, an individual's attitude may change in two different ways: the central an the peripheral route. The two routes differ in the manner of elaborating and processing information: "individuals taking the central route critically think about issue-related arguments and scrutinize the merits and the relevance of those arguments before forming attitude towards the advertisement or product. On the other hand, individuals taking the peripheral route make less cognitive effort and rely on shortcuts such as number of arguments and physical attractiveness of endorsers when forming the attitude" (Lee, 2009, p. 577). Furthermore, the ELM postulates that changes occurring through the central route are more enduring and better behaviour predictors than attitudes former according to the peripheral route, since the former route is based on deliberate and thoughtful consideration of relevant arguments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The model further asserts that the concept of "elaboration likelihood" is of utmost importance, as it is determined by the motivation of the individual and his or her ability to elaborate and process information, which in turn determine the response of the individual to the persuasive message. Therefore, the study conducted by Lee (2009) takes into account the individual's motivation along with his or her involvement, which is defined as the perceived personal relevance of a product based on the consumer's needs, interests and values (Park, Lee, & Han, 2007, p. 126). Indeed, the Elaboration Likelihood Model asserts that whether a consumer takes the central or the peripheral route in attitude formulation depends on the level of involvement (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984, p. 73). Basically, people who are motivated to elaborate a message or an advertisement tend to process arguments which are persuasive and consequently to judge them by taking into account the evaluation of persuasive arguments. Morevoer, the ELM further suggests that low-involvement consumers expend less cognitive efforts when processing persuasive information, and they tend to base their judgments on peripheral cues, such as the attractiveness of sources and number of arguments (Lee, 2009, p. 478).

By basing his study on the ELM, Lee takes into account the quantity and the quality of online reviews, and finds some important results on the extent to which the characteristics of review can influence consumers' purchase intentions. Hence, the author finds that the quality of online reviews has a positive effect on the purchasing intentions of online shoppers, indeed reviews which are perceived to be better

structured are also perceived more objective (Lee, 2009, p. 579). Secondly, also the quantity of online reviews positively influences the online purchase intentions, and there is a positive relationship between the attitude of the consumer and the quantity of online reviews. The final result, which is consistent with the ELM theory, shows that "low involvement consumers tend to adopt the peripheral route in forming attitudes in an online context, that is, they are more persuaded by online review quantity since more reviews are perceived as higher product popularity" (Lee, 2009, p. 580). To conclude, the findings show that online reviews generate a very deep impact on consumers' purchase intentions through a variety of mechanisms that, in this case, are supported by the Elaboration Likelihood Model. Indeed, marketers can foster online shoppers' willingness to leave reviews, thus increasing the chances of selling products and services in an online context. In order to better support this concepts, the next paragraph will focus on the specific case of Amazon.com.

3.2.2 Online Reviews and their effect on sales: the cases of Amazon.com and Yelp.com

The study conducted by Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) focuses on the impact of online reviews on sales of two major online shopping websites: Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com; indeed, this two leading online booksellers allow consumers to post online reviews. The publicly available data were used in order to construct measures of each firm's sales of individual books (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006, p. 345). The reviewing practices of Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com were analysed by the authors, and it was found that "customer reviews tend to be positive at both sites and are more detailed at Amazon.com"; more importantly, results showed that the "the relative sales of a book across the two sites are related to differences across the sites in the number of reviews for books and in difference across the sites in the average star ranking of the reviews" (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006, p. 345). The results further suggest that electronic Word of Mouth, in this case analysed in the form of online reviews, heavily affects consumer's purchase intention; hence, one can assume that data found in similar analyses can be used as predictors and explanatory tools for companies' growth. This is also stated by Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006): "the notion that customer content affects sales is a prerequisite for differences in customer content quality to have any impact on difference in revenues and profitability across retailers. [...] Because Amazon.com has many ore reviews than rivals and because, on average, its reviews are lengthy and positive, it seems plausible to speculate that the total number of books sold at Amazon.com is higher than it would be without the provision of customer review features".

Among the several studies conducted for investigating the impact of online reviews, also the analysis of Luca (2011) is explanatory. Luca questioned whether online reviews affect restaurants' demands and consequentially revenues by taking into account reviews on Yelp.com. Furthermore, it was also possible to establish a causal relationship of the average Yelp ratings on the restaurant demand. Yelp.com is a website founded in 2004, where consumers can leave reviews for restaurants and other businesses (Luca, 2011, p. 7).

As of 2016, Yelp.com counts over 145 million monthly visitors, and 102 million reviews[28]. One the review is written, anyone with or without an account can access the website and freely read the review (Luca, 2011, p. 7). Given the fact that Yelp is among the most used websites for restaurants' rating, the visibility of Yelp reviews is huge; therefore, Luca investigated both on the impact on independent restaurants and on chains, and found several important results. First of all, it was found that the empirical influence of reviews on independent restaurants is far more important than on chains: a one-star increase in Yelp rating leads to a 5-9 percent increase in revenues (Luca, 2011, p. 1). Secondly, it has been proved that ratings do not affect restaurant franchising, i.e. McDonald's, and that the effect on revenues is more impacting on independent restaurants. Furthermore, because chains already have little uncertainty about quality, their demand does not respond to consumer reviews; hence, given the differential impact of Yelp on chains and independent restaurants, one might expect chains to become less popular after the introduction of Yelp (Luca, 2011, p. 19). Consistent with this hypothesis, Luca found that after the introduction of Yelp, chains experienced a decline in their revenues in comparison with independent restaurant, further assuming that online consumers reviews have managed to substitute conventional forms of reputation. Finally, two additional findings were presented: first, that consumers are more responsive to quality changes that are more noticeable and, more significantly, that consumers respond to online rating is affected by the amount of information and whether the review is certified as "elite" by Yelp (Luca, 2011, p. 1).

3.3 Strengthening the relationship between business and consumer: consumer engagement

Online consumer engagement is gaining popularity among companies that attempt to build and affirm their brands online, a factor that is necessary to form a competitive advantage. Indeed, as what has already been showed, Social Media is a dimension that nowadays provides a number of opportunities to reach the consumer through involvement, frontal communication and attractive contents. "Successful online consumer engagement can lead to active consumer communication in Social Media channels, can encourage to improve the attributes of brands, attract more consumers that are loyal or would like to advocate for a particular brand" (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012, p. 194). Therefore, it is important for a company to understand which type of actions can enhance consumer's involvement in Social Media, thus increasing the company's brand awareness and the loyalty of the consumer towards the brand.

Indeed, online consumer engagement is valued as a key element for the company's progress and expansion, as in the virtual space "it is becoming particularly relevant since it is valued as reliable and capable of influencing consumer decision to buy one good or another […] because consumers are affected by the information spreading in the Social Media, which in turn can determine marketability of goods, i.e. attracting and retaining consumers" (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012, p. 194).

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[28] Source: Smith, C. (2016, July). *By the numbers: 52 amazing Yelp statistics.* Available at DMR Statitics: http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/yelp-statistics/

According to Hollebeek (2011), the interaction between the subjects being engaged, the consumers, and the engaging object, the brand, is what determines the engagement process. Hence, the ultimate manner to analyse the online engagement is to determine both the consumers and the company's position. For, it is significant for companies to observe, ponder and measure communication in Social Media and consequently to gather information useful to undertake the best actions for engaging consumers. Consequently, online users will tend to be engaged if creatively motivated by companies, for example by creating online brand communities. Brand equity building is based on individual experience of interacting with a particular brand (Brodie, Hollebeek, Ilic, & Juric, 2011, p. 261). Therefore, the concept of "engagement" is a broader concept than "involvement" (a term which has been defined in the previous paragraphs) as it entrenches consumer's practices and interactive relationships between brand and consumer. For, consumers can be motivated to be part of a brand community not only for their wish to learn more about a certain product or service, but also as an opportunity to be part of a group, convey emotions and present themselves (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012, p. 195).

3.3.1 Companies' engagement in Social Media

As it has been stated, the rationale behind the engagement of companies in Social Media relies mainly on the wish to establish a direct contact with the consumers, therefore enhancing brand equity. Indeed, Social Media engagement can provide several benefits, stemming from making the name of the company more popular, enforcing the brand and gathering online support. Moreover, communities can initiate brand-related discussions and share experiences that can enforce positive Word of Mouth. Companies should constantly observe and analyse these activities, as consumer engagement in Social Media can potentially enhance brand equity dimension: brand awareness, bran associations and loyalty to the brand (Aaker, 2012). Brand awareness is a prerequisite for an active Word of Mouth, as Social Media consumers can be attracted by creative and updated contents and motivated to share them. Additionally, favourable brand associations can motivate to share, comment contents and spread information: "if companies notice consumers successfully participating in brand communications […] they will actively seek to engage them in communication in SM and turn them in "advocates" of the brand itself" (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012, p. 196).

Interestingly, Owyang and al. (2010) distinguish different stages of consumer's engagement in Social Media, further suggesting what positions and actions companies should undertake (Table 6)[29].

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[29] Retrieved from: Zailskaite-Jakste, L., & Kuvykaite, R. (2012). Consumer Engagement in Social Media by Building the Brand. *Electronic International Interdisciplinary Conference , 1* (1), p. 196.

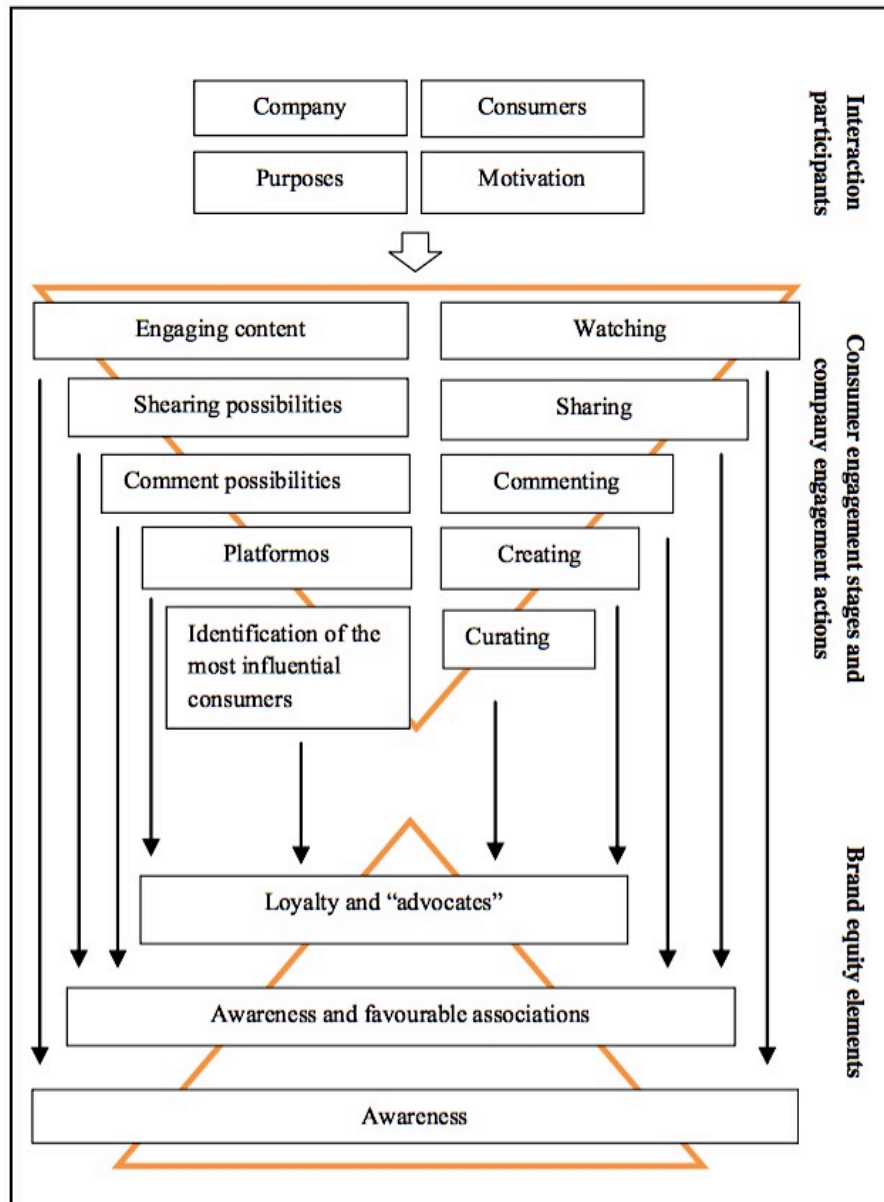*Table 6 - Links of Consumer Engagement in Social Media and Brand Equity Elements*

Stages	Consumer engagement actions from enterprise perspective	Consumer engagement stages	Brand equity elements	Brand evaluation indicators
1	To comprehend what content interests consumers the most, i.e. is the most popular; produce content meeting consumer needs	Watching	Brand awareness	Data on how many, where, who, about what, when communicated are collected: number of comments; number of advocating ones; number of fans; number of forwards; search rating; number of messages on brands; number of positive and negative comments; number of followers
2	To use forward buttons, measures facilitating sharing	Sharing	High brand awareness and favourable and strong associations	What information and what actions are the most interesting ones: number of likes "on" the messages forwarded by friends; number of consumer generated content (photos, responses); degree of interaction
3	Possibility to comment on every post	Commenting		
4	To offer platforms for consumers that would become the voice of consumers; public acknowledgement of the most active consumers; development of supported discussions, communication and cooperation	Producing	Loyalty to the brand through "word of mouth" communication	How eagerly and often brand is recommended to other consumers
5	To identify the most influential producers, "advocates" and publicly acknowledge them, trust them as non-paid partners	Curating	Loyalty to a brand, advocating; "word-of-mouth" communication	How eagerly and often a brand is recommended to other consumers and how often other consumers are motivated to act

In the first stage, watching, consumers gain the first impression and rely on social contents to undertake the right decision. This stage is essential to increase brand awareness because only in the case in which brand communication occurs properly, the second and third stage can be accessed. Indeed, the second stage, sharing, involves an update of the consumer's profile with the shared content; the third stage, commenting, corresponds to an active response of consumers to others' contents, by sharing personal experiences and opinions (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012, p. 196). The fourth stage, producing, is important as well as the consumer has the opportunity to produce his own content and seek self-expression, thus eventually becoming loyal to the brand. Finally the fifth stage, curating, is the most influential, as "consumers are distinguished between the ones that can be trusted and the ones that can become representatives in the Social Media. Advocating helps to build a strong brand through interactive experience, thus companies should motivate consumers to become well-informed in order to attract more consumers. Informed advocates are provided with opportunities to disseminate the content generated by themselves in the platforms offered by the company. The activity and participation of consumers in company's actions can be promoted by, for example, invitations to events, gift cards, points accumulated and so on, hence strengthening consumer's relationship with a brand" (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012, p. 197). As what can be seen, promoting consumer engagement is useful not only for companies, but also for consumers themselves and for the reinforcement of the customer-business relationship. On this basis, the next paragraph will present an ideal model of consumer engagement in SM.

3.3.2 Model for Online Consumer Engagement

Zailskaite-Jakste and Kuvykaite (2012) have further depicted a model according to which the consumer can eactively be engaged in the company's activities in order to build brand equity. The model is portrayed in Figure 6[30].

Figure 6 - Conceptual Model of Consumer Engagement

In the words of the authors, "factors motivating consumers to get involved and participate are essential for consumer engagement in Social Media; communication with consumers and motivating actions used by a company for that purpose will depend on the objectives of a company. In turn, companies seeking to engage consumers in SM should take into account the fact that the process of consumer engagement in SM is gradual and happens through different stages according to which companies should undertake strategic actions". Therefore:

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[30] Retrieved from: Zailskaite-Jakste, L., & Kuvykaite, R. (2012). Consumer Engagement in Social Media by Building the Brand. *Electronic International Interdisciplinary Conference , 1* (1), p. 197.

- At the watching stage, consumers pay attention at the way companies communicate, which contents are provided and whether the content is engaging or not. Therefore, companies should understand how to participate efficiently in Social Media and make the consumer's purchase intentions clearer.

- At the sharing stage, consumers are usually motivated by their wish to demonstrate their knowledge or support the fold (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012, p. 197). Since active online shoppers can disseminate both negative and positive information, the readiness of the company to handle the spread of this information is crucial. Furthermore, online consumers can willingly create new associations both in the virtual and real dimension, thus spreading positive and negative personal experiences. Companies should be careful with these associations, and stimulate positive consumer-to-consumer communication.

- At the commenting stage, consumers can express their opinions and share their experiences, as it has already been stated. Companies seeking consumers' support should therefore take care of the presentation of their products and freely give consumers the opportunity to participate in discussions and comment.

- At the producing stage, companies identify consumers that are already confident with their brand and have created certain associations. On the basis of their experiences, these consumers are usually involved in the flow of information and are motivated mainly by a wish to be heard and to be art of a group. At this point, the loyalty of the consumer that is frequently involved in the creation of content supporting the company is clear; therefore, the company should actively sustain consumers that engage in this positive communication, further encouraging other consumers to act similarly.

- At the curating stage, since consumers actively produce content in order to seek brand acknowledgement, it is important for companies to provide them platforms where they can even acquire the role of advisors and evaluators of communication, such as product-related Facebook pages.

This is a very useful model that can be utilised by companies as a predictor of consumer behaviour and attitude towards the brand. Moreover, it has been showed how the actions undertaken by a certain company can actually determine and influence the structure of brand perception. Along with the theories highlighted when the presenting the concept of eWOM, consumer engagement is another essential approach that can make the consumer buying behaviour far more understandable.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this analysis was to investigate on the role of Social Media on consumers' buying behaviour, and to portray the main factors that affect consumers' purchase intentions. Hence, it was first necessary to depict the main concepts in the first chapter, and to assess how the traditional communication pathways have changed after the advent of Social Media.

First of all, a number of successful marketing campaigns along with the standard classification of Social Media have been described, in order to give an idea of the opportunities available to companies in comparison with traditional media. Hence, it is correct to assert that companies' involvement in Social Media has enabled them to establish a direct and intimate relationship with the consumer that once was not possible with traditional mass media. In this instance, the model proposed by Mangold and Faulds (2009) is very useful as it perfectly embraces the major changes that have occurred after the advent of Social Media. According to the model, companies have had to undertake a number of changes in order to adapt to consumers' new necessities, and therefore relying on a new approach with consumers such as being active, informal and interesting on Social Media.

The second chapter has dealt with the concept of online consumer and the theories related to online consumer's behaviour. The classification of online consumer provided by Riegner (2007) has been suitable to understand which type of consumers are the most targeted by companies in online marketing campaigns. Furthermore, the concept of Purchase Intentions ha been illustrated in order to give an account of the psychological mechanisms entailed in the consumer decision process. Hence, in this framework the factors affecting consumer's decisions have been described, namely trust and perceived ease of use of a website. Finally, a study conducted by Hajli (2014) has confirmed the previously illustrated theories, by asserting that improving the quality of websites enhances the perceived usefulness of the consumers, and that also trust plays a positive role on perceived usefulness. As a consequence, both factors have a positively affect consumer's intention to buy.

Finally, the concepts of electronic Word of Mouth and of consumer engagement have been depicted, in order to assess the practical ways through which Social Media influence consumer's behaviour. First of all, the various reasons of consumers for engaging in eWOM have been discussed, and it was demonstrated that among the psychological factors the most impacting are the self-esteem and the intrinsic motivation. Moreover, it has also been confirmed that the intention to recommend products or services is further enhanced by social benefits, concerns for others and economic incentives. In this context, the concept of online reviews has been further investigated, and it has been found that online reviews generate a significant impact on consumers' purchase intentions through a variety of mechanisms that are studied and supported by the Elaboration Likelihood Model by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). The extent to which online reviews

influence consumers' buying behaviour has been further depicted with the support of studies on Amazon.com and Yelp.com; indeed, it was confirmed that reviews can potentially affect businesses' revenues, and that consumers respond to reviews with a higher amount of information and whether there is enough evidence that the review is authentic.

To conclude, the importance of consumer online engagement and brand awareness has been highlighted. After having portrayed the stages through which consumer engagement occurs, the model by Zailskaite & Kuvykaite (2012) has been illustrated. The model asesses that at each stage the consumer gradually ponders and compares the different choices available and can be very advantageous for companies as it provides a clear account of online consumer behaviour.

The topic of this analysis is very recent, and so far there is little work available. However, given the impact that Social Media have on our daily life, and the weight that online shopping is acquiring, this matter deserves better attention.

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Il ruolo dei Social Media nel processo decisionale del consumatore online

Nell'ultimo decennio, la crescente diffusione dei Social Media ha comportato un cambiamento a livello comunicativo, relazionale e commerciale. Tale analisi si propone quindi di classificare e determinare i cambiamenti sopraggiunti con la nascita dei Social Media su due livelli: quello delle aziende e quello del consumatore, stabilendo un'eventuale correlazione tra l'uso dei Social Media e il comportamento di quest'ultimo nel commercio elettronico. Come sono cambiate le strategie pubblicitarie dai tradizionali mass media a oggi? Le campagne marketing sono soltanto più efficaci grazie all'efficienza di marketers e agenzie pubblicitarie o tale influenza è data dall'uso sempre più crescente dei Social Media nel rapportarsi con il consumatore? Sono queste le domande cui il lettore riuscirà a rispondere alla fine della dissertazione, che si snoda principalmente in tre livelli: i Social Media e le aziende, il consumatore online e i Social Media come elemento determinante nel comportamento del consumatore.

Dopo la nascita del Web 2.0, le aziende hanno dovuto adottare un modo completamente diverso di approcciare il consumatore, e grazie ai Social Media è stato possibile stabilire un tipo di comunicazione bidirezionale e colloquiale; infatti, prima della nascita dei Social Media, le aziende usavano instaurare un rapporto frontale e formale con il consumatore attraverso il bombardamento pubblicitario nei mass media, come televisioni e giornali. Oggi, i Social Media rappresentano uno degli strumenti più accessibili per la comunicazione interpersonale. La descrizione che ne da Parr (2008) si limita all'uso di "Internet e strumenti elettronici allo scopo di condividere informazioni ed esperienze con altri individui in modo più efficiente". Tuttavia, la definizione più efficace sembra essere quella di Kaplan e Haenlein (2009), che si basa sui concetti di Web 2.0 e Contenuto Generato dagli Utenti (o User-Generated Content). Secondo i due autori, i Social Media sono "un insieme di applicazioni online che si erigono sui fondamenti ideologici e tecnologici delle piattaforme Web 2.0 e che permettono la creazione e lo scambio di contenuti generati dagli utenti".

Oltre alla definizione, Kaplan e Haenlein hanno provveduto anche a una dettagliata classificazione dei Social Media in base ad una componente mediatica (presenza sociale e intensità mediatica) e ad un fattore sociale (auto-presentazione e auto-rivelazione). Riguardo la componente mediatica, la teoria della "Presenza Sociale" di Short et al. (1976) è fondamentale, dato che secondo quest'ultima il grado di presenza sociale che emerge dall'interazione tra due attori è ciò che caratterizza un mezzo di comunicazione. Un'altra teoria che va presa in considerazione è la teoria dell'"Intensità Mediatica" di Daft e Lengel (1986), secondo la quale qualsiasi tipo di comunicazione deve raggiungere "la risoluzione dell'ambiguità e la riduzione dell'incertezza". Nel contesto dei Social Media, una prima classificazione è stata fatta da Kaplan e Haenlein rispetto alla componente mediatica. La seconda suddivisione basata sul fattore sociale, è stata compiuta prendendo in considerazione sia l'auto-presentazione sia l'auto-rivelazione. La prima presuppone che durante un'interazione, ogni individuo abbia il desiderio di controllare l'impressione che gli altri hanno di

sé, e di conseguenza il desiderio di aprire un sito web personale è dettato dal fatto di volersi presentare adeguatamente nel cyber-spazio. Questo avviene di solito attraverso l'auto-rivelazione, definita come la rivelazione conscia o inconscia di informazioni personali.

Secondo questi criteri, sei categorie di Social Media sono state create: blogs, social networking sites, progetti collaborativi (collaborative projects), comunità di contenuti (content communities), mondi sociali virtuali e giochi virtuali. Molte sono le aziende che hanno utilizzato a proprio beneficio tali piattaforme, e numerose sono le campagne pubblicitarie che hanno riscontrato grandi successi, sia per i costi ridotti sia per la loro accessibilità. Su Facebook ad esempio, per celebrare il proprio centesimo anniversario, la compagnia Oreo nel 2016 ha prodotto cento post in cento giorni incrementando il numero di fan di circa un milione e la propria quota di mercato del 280%. Un'ulteriore dimostrazione di campagna pubblicitaria di successo riguarda l'azienda BlendTec: nel 2006, dopo che un video su YouTube che aveva come oggetto un miscelatore prodotto dalla ditta stessa diventò virale, la compagnia registrò un aumento delle vendite del 700%. Sfortunatamente la classificazione di Kaplan e Haenlein, anche se degna di nota, non prende in considerazione altri tipi di piattaforme sviluppatesi più recentemente, come ad esempio la realtà virtuale. Questo tipo di tecnologia è stato utilizzato ultimamente da numerose aziende, come ad esempio la Coca-Cola che nel Natale 2015 ha riprodotto un viaggio virtuale sulla slitta di Santa Claus.

Con l'introduzione dei Social Media nelle operazioni promozionali, il mondo del marketing ha sperimentato un cambiamento radicale nel modo di approcciarsi con il consumatore. Infatti, la nascita dei Social Media ha completamente soppiantato il paradigma di comunicazione tradizionale, caratterizzato prevalentemente dal lavoro coordinato di organizzazioni, agenti e agenzie pubblicitarie. Al contrario, nell'era dei Social Media, i marketers hanno il pieno controllo del contenuto, della frequenza e della distribuzione di promozioni, e inoltre i consumatori si affidano di più alla pubblicità nei new media dato il loro desiderio di maggior controllo sul flusso di informazioni. Infine, dato che ora i clienti hanno a disposizione diverse fonti da cui ricavare le informazioni necessarie al loro processo decisionale, i Social Media sono percepiti come un canale più affidabile rispetto ai media tradizionali.

L'e-consumer si è trasformato da mero ricevente del messaggio pubblicitario ad attivo partecipante delle campagne promozionali, addirittura in grado di modificare l'immagine dell'azienda stessa: quali sono quindi i cambiamenti che le aziende hanno apportato nel loro modo di approcciarsi con il consumatore? Innanzitutto, le imprese si sono dovute adattare al cambiamento repentino dell'ambiente comunicativo, in cui ora la diffusione dell'immagine dell'azienda avviene ponendosi in modo informale e colloquiale. Di conseguenza, anche le strategie comunicative sono cambiate: dato che l'interazione e la condivisione sono il tratto caratterizzante dei Social Media, essere interessanti, attivi ed innovativi sui Social Media è essenziale. Inoltre, intrattenere il potenziale consumatore con storie anche riguardanti l'azienda stessa si è rivelata

essere una buona strategia: nel 2014 la campagna pubblicitaria del marchio "Dove" riguardante la toccante storia di una relazione madre-figlia raggiunse più di mezzo milione di utenti e migliaia di condivisioni.

Avendo analizzato il contesto in cui le aziende si trovano e le piattaforme a disposizione per approcciarsi al consumatore online, è necessario esaminare la figura di quest'ultimo. Riegner (2007) individua cinque diverse categorie di e-consumer: i Social Clickers, gli Online Insiders, i Content Kings, gli Everyday Pros e i Fast Trackers. Di questi, gli Online Insiders e gli Everyday Pros sono i più coinvolti nello shopping online; i primi sono sia attivi venditori e compratori e tendono a utilizzare diversi tipi di Social Media allo scopo di influenzare altri consumatori, mentre la figura dell'Everyday Pros è legata alla creazione di recensioni poiché si limita ad acquistare da siti specifici e mirati. Tale classifica sarà di seguito utile per capire a quali categorie saranno applicati i diversi modelli teorici sul comportamento del consumatore.

A tal proposito, la "Teoria della Propensione all'Acquisto" (Theory of Purchase Intention) del consumatore dà una chiara idea dei meccanismi psicologici che spingono quest'ultimo alla decisione finale d'acquisto. Tale propensione è definita da Fishbein e Ajzen (1977) come la volontà di acquistare un prodotto fondata sulla valutazione di elementi esogeni e sull'atteggiamento del consumatore stesso. Infatti, la propensione all'acquisto può essere influenzata da svariati fattori, come per esempio l'idea che il consumatore ha del marchio o del prodotto. Tale teoria ha tuttora applicazione nel contesto più recente dei Social Media, e si ispira a due tipi di modelli: quelli basati sulla tecnologia (Technology-Oriented Models) e quelli basati sulla fiducia (Trust-Oriented Models). Per quanto riguarda i Technology-Oriented Models, per tecnologia ci si riferisce al sito web impiegato dall'azienda per la promozione e la diffusione di un prodotto. Uno dei modelli più celebri basati sulla tecnologia è il Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), che consiste in un'analisi sul comportamento del consumatore in base al tasso di gradimento di una tecnologia secondo due variabili: accessibilità della tecnologia percepita (la quantità di sforzo impiegata dall'utente nell'uso del sito web) e utilità percepita (quanto l'utente crede che l'uso di tale sito web lo possa favorire). Recenti sviluppi del modello hanno rivelato che entrambe le variabili determinano l'appagamento che l'utente prova nel momento in cui visita un sito web. Di conseguenza, il modello può essere facilmente impiegato nella previsione del comportamento del consumatore.

I Trust-Oriented Models si fondano sul concetto di fiducia, definita da Mayer et al. (1995) come "la volontà da parte di un soggetto di assumersi il rischio intrinseco alle relazioni di mercato sulla base della sua percezione di affidabilità in merito all'onestà, alla benevolenza e all'abilità della propria controparte relazionale". Generalmente, la fiducia di un cliente verso un'azienda è direttamente proporzionale alla reputazione e alla grandezza della stessa. Non sempre la fiducia determina la riuscita o meno di un acquisto su Internet: infatti, un cliente può fidarsi di un marchio, ma può dubitare del sito Internet che gestisce le vendite dell'azienda.

Tuttavia, svariati studi hanno dimostrato che la fiducia gioca un ruolo chiave nel processo decisionale del consumatore, poiché più fiducia un cliente ha nei confronti di un'azienda, meno sarà il rischio percepito.

Il ruolo della fiducia e dell'utilità percepita sulle intenzioni di acquisto del consumatore è stato ulteriormente analizzato nello studio di Hajli (2014), in cui è confermata l'ipotesi secondo la quale entrambi i fattori, una volta intensificati dai Social Media, hanno un ruolo decisivo nell'influenzare positivamente il comportamento del consumatore. Inoltre, lo studio chiarisce che l'utilità percepita ha un impatto più rilevante sulla propensione all'acquisto, e che la fiducia a sua volta influenza positivamente l'utilità percepita dal consumatore. Infatti, una volta che il partecipante si dimostra più fiducioso verso il negozio online, non solo la propensione all'acquisto cresce, ma riscontra anche una maggiore utilità percepita nei confronti del sito web. In conclusione, lo studio di Hajli dimostra come la fiducia sia un fattore essenziale nell'e-commerce, data l'influenza diretta sulla propensione all'acquisto e quella indiretta sull'utilità percepita.

Una volta stabilito il quadro di riferimento teorico, è necessario discutere i vari canali che partecipano al processo decisionale del consumatore. Il Web 2.0, infatti, presenta numerose opportunità per quanto riguarda l'"electronic Word of Mouth" (Passaparola Online), definita da Carl (2006) come un tipo di "comunicazione informale a scopo valutativo tra due o più individui riguardo alle caratteristiche di un marchio, di un prodotto o di un servizio, che viene successivamente diffusa nel Web". I consumatori coinvolti nell'eWOM aumentano considerevolmente la probabilità di ottenere informazioni imparziali grazie ai consigli e alle esperienze di altri consumatori. Per questi motivi, l'eWOM è considerata come l'odierna estensione della comunicazione interpersonale. I motivi per cui i consumatori partecipano al cosiddetto "Passaparola Online" sono molteplici; Cheema e Kaikati (2010) asseriscono che fattori psicologici, quali l'autostima, la motivazione intrinseca e il coinvolgimento del prodotto, insieme a fattori sociali, quali la connettività interpersonale e l'influenza sociale, sono le ragioni principali. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) identificano invece i benefici sociali, gli incentivi economici, l'interesse per i propri simili e l'auto-promozione come i fattori che spingono il consumatore a prendere parte all'eWOM.

Dal punto di vista delle aziende, numerose sono le opportunità che derivano dal coinvolgimento nell'electronic Word of Mouth. Al fine di stabilire e mantenere vivo il dialogo con il consumatore, i marketers hanno iniziato a includere nei Social Media un'ampia gamma di messaggi personalizzati e concetti avvincenti direttamente collegati al marchio promosso, creando le cosiddette "brand communities". Le brand communities sono infatti piattaforme rese di solito accessibili dalle aziende stesse, volte all'aggregazione di individui che interagiscono attorno ad un interesse condiviso. Per le imprese esse rappresentano uno strumento utile per conoscere e coinvolgere il consumatore attraverso una propria rete di comunicazione; nel 2010 ad esempio, per promuovere il proprio marchio Tampax, l'azienda leader nel settore Procter & Gamble creò una comunità online che disponeva addirittura di un proprio forum. Un ulteriore modo di relazionarsi con il consumatore online è stato identificato nell'uso del modello DART, secondo cui l'azienda deve mirare a soddisfare le richieste del cliente stabilendo un dialogo diretto. Infine,

un altro modo in cui le aziende possono sfruttare l'eWOM è attraverso il "brand building", definito da Ferguson (2008) come "la capacità di connettere tra loro appassionati difensori di un marchio con il processo di sviluppo di un prodotto"; in questo contesto, l'operazione marketing si basa esclusivamente sulla raccolta di informazioni e reazioni provenienti dal web, come ad esempio discussioni nei forum riguardanti le caratteristiche o il prezzo di un prodotto.

A compensare il grande numero di opportunità, vi sono anche numerosi rischi associati all'uso del Passaparola Online. Tali rischi derivano in primo luogo dall'impossibilità di controllare la diffusione repentina del contenuto generato dagli utenti e, in secondo luogo, dall'imprevedibilità delle reazioni che una campagna pubblicitaria può inaspettatamente suscitare. Nel 2010, la Johnson & Johnson diffuse un video online per promuovere un antidolorifico che aveva come oggetto delle donne che trasportavano il proprio bambino in una tracolla: in poche ore, i numerosi commenti negativi su Twitter e altri Social Networking Sites demolirono completamente una campagna pubblicitaria ben progettata. Un altro rischio legato all'uso dell'eWOM è dato dall'assenza di attendibilità della fonte per quanto riguarda i contenuti generati dagli utenti; Angel e Sexsmith (2009) sostengono infatti che il consumatore prenderà volentieri in considerazione informazioni che sembrano verosimili e utili, ma reagirà negativamente a messaggi promozionali che risultano essere ingannatori e fuorvianti.

Nonostante ciò, il fatto che il Passaparola Online sia uno dei canali che più incidono sul comportamento del consumatore è dimostrato anche dall'influenza che le recensioni online hanno sulla propensione all'acquisto dell'utente. Infatti, le recensioni sono una delle tante varianti in cui il Passaparola Online si manifesta, e forniscono una fonte attendibile di notizie sul prodotto ai consumatori. Keller (2007) sostiene addirittura che le recensioni positive su un prodotto siano un'efficace chiave di lettura per la crescita economica di un'azienda. Tre diversi studi saranno quindi illustrati a sostegno di questa argomentazione: il primo si basa sul modello di Probabilità di Elaborazione (Elaboration Likelihood Model - ELM) mentre gli ultimi due si concentrano sui casi più specifici di Amazon.com e Yelp.com.

Lee (2009) adatta il modello di Probabilità di Elaborazione alla teoria del consumatore per analizzare l'effetto delle recensioni online sulla propensione all'acquisto. Infatti, il modello ELM sviluppato da Petty e Cacioppo nel 1983 fornisce un'interpretazione sull'efficacia della comunicazione persuasiva, secondo cui l'atteggiamento di un individuo può cambiare seguendo una via centrale o una periferica. Le due vie differiscono nella maniera in cui le informazioni sono elaborate e processate: la via centrale presuppone che il ricevente sia coinvolto e motivato a elaborare il messaggio, mentre nella via periferica mancano queste due condizioni e gli effetti saranno meno duraturi. Basandosi sul modello ELM, Lee prende in considerazione le caratteristiche delle recensioni online, e rivela importanti risultati. Innanzitutto, lo studio palesa che la qualità e la quantità delle recensioni influenzano positivamente le decisioni del consumatore;

addirittura l'utente percepisce come più oggettive le recensioni quando esse sono meglio strutturate. Inoltre, lo studio conferma ciò che il modello postula, in altre parole che i consumatori meno coinvolti tendono ad adottare la via periferica, e sono più persuasi dalla quantità di recensioni online che viene percepita come una maggior popolarità del prodotto.

Per quanto riguarda i casi più specifici, Chevalier e Mayzlin (2006) studiano l'impatto delle recensioni online in Amazon.com, mentre Luca (2011) investiga sulle conseguenze delle recensioni nel sito Yelp.com. I risultati di entrambi gli studi non fanno altro che avvalorare la tesi secondo cui il Passaparola Online, analizzato nella forma di recensioni online, esercita un'influenza enorme sul processo decisionale del consumatore. Infatti, il primo studio conferma che, poiché in Amazon.com sono presenti in media recensioni più lunghe e qualitativamente migliori rispetto a quelle presenti in siti concorrenti, il successo delle vendite del sito Internet deriva anche dalle caratteristiche delle recensioni online.

Analizzando invece il metodo di valutazione online dei ristoranti su Yelp.com, lo studio di Luca (2011) rivela che l'aumento di una stella nella recensione di un ristorante porta addirittura ad un incremento dei ricavi del 5-9%. Inoltre, un'altra conclusione riguarda il fatto che le recensioni non sembrano avere alcun effetto sulla reputazione di catene di ristoranti, dove il consumatore è più incerto rispetto alla qualità del prodotto, al contrario di ristoranti indipendenti dove il consumatore è più attento alla qualità dei prodotti. Ciò sembra ulteriormente essere confermato dal fatto che, dopo la nascita di Yelp.com, la domanda dei ristoranti indipendenti è cresciuta rispetto alle catene di ristoranti, che hanno addirittura riscontrato un declino nei loro ricavi; in altre parole, le recensioni online hanno sostituito le convenzionali forme di reputazione.

Dopo aver appurato che il Passaparola Online (nella forma di recensioni, commenti e discussioni nei forum) esercita una grande influenza sulla propensione all'acquisto del consumatore, le aziende cercano di coinvolgere sempre di più il consumatore nei Social Media allo scopo di rafforzare la reputazione del proprio marchio online. La partecipazione attiva del consumatore è ciò che serve alle aziende per rafforzare il rapporto con quest'ultimo, aumentando la fiducia per il prodotto e attraendo altri consumatori. Per questi motivi, è importante misurare e pianificare la comunicazione nei Social Media e raccogliere informazioni utili per intraprendere le strategie più efficienti. Owyang et al. (2010) distinguono cinque diverse fasi di coinvolgimento del consumatore formulando una serie di decisioni che le aziende dovrebbero strategicamente adottare. Nella prima fase di osservazione (watching stage), il consumatore riceve il primo impatto dalla comunicazione dell'azienda, e di conseguenza quest'ultima deve comprendere gli interessi e le necessità del potenziale cliente per poi assecondarli. Nella seconda fase di condivisione (sharing stage), il consumatore è motivato a diffondere la propria esperienza con il prodotto, negativa o positiva che sia. Per questo, l'azienda deve essere pronta a gestire questo flusso di informazioni e a ricompensare eventualmente i consumatori che la supportano. Similmente, nella terza fase di commento (comment stage), le aziende devono prendersi cura della presentazione del prodotto e dare l'opportunità al consumatore di esprimersi

liberamente. La quarta fase di produzione (producing stage), in cui le aziende identificano i clienti fiduciosi nei loro confronti e li esortano a coinvolgere altri consumatori, è complementare alla quinta fase di mantenimento (curating stage). In questa fase, dato che il consumatore produce attivamente dei contenuti per espandere la propria conoscenza del prodotto, l'azienda deve mirare a offrire al consumatore piattaforme dove potersi esprimere al meglio (come ad esempio pagine Facebook dedicate a un prodotto specifico). In conclusione, questo approccio innovativo è interamente focalizzato sulla dimensione dei Social Media e rappresenta un metodo efficace per sfruttare le potenzialità degli stessi.

Lo scopo di questa dissertazione è stato quello di determinare il ruolo dei Social Media nel processo decisionale del consumatore, prendendo in considerazione dapprima le varie opportunità derivanti dall'uso dei Social Media nelle campagne pubblicitarie. Difatti, il coinvolgimento delle aziende nei Social Media ha reso possibile stabilire una relazione diretta ed esclusiva con il consumatore. In secondo luogo è stato possibile appurare che le forze che modellano maggiormente il processo decisionale del consumatore sono la fiducia e l'utilità percepita dei siti web; di conseguenza la capacità delle aziende di gestirle può facilmente influire sul comportamento del consumatore. Infine, dopo un'attenta analisi sull'electronic Word of Mouth, si può affermare che non solo i consumatori si sentono appagati nell'influenzarsi reciprocamente, ma che le aziende possono espandere la propria sfera d'influenza attraverso le brand communities e il coinvolgimento diretto del consumatore.