ABSTRACT

The rise of Web 2.0 tools and mobile devices means that the image of the traditional consumer has to be replaced with an active, permanently connected, consumer who uses the Internet to find information about brands and to share opinions and shopping experiences with other consumers – a consumer who can be classified as a prosumer (producer + consumer). In this context it is important for marketers to know how consumers use social networks within their purchasing decision process. The present work describes an online survey of more than 500 Facebook users in Spain and Portugal, aimed at identifying which aspects most influence their intention to use this social network in their purchasing decisions. A structural equation model was constructed based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), in which the intended use of Facebook in purchasing decisions depends on two variables: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, with attitude being a mediating variable. The background variables considered were aptitude, network externalities, perceived privacy protection, and social influence. The results show that the intended use of Facebook in purchasing decisions is influenced by its perceived usefulness, by social influence, and by the attitude to Facebook. In contrast, the perceived ease of use does not have such direct influence.

Keywords: Facebook, Networks Externalities, Perceived Usefulness, Purchasing Decision Process, Social Influence, Technology Acceptance Model

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of Facebook in 2006, social networks have quickly become a platform in which citizens feel comfortable interacting with each other. They have not only become a sociological phenomenon, but also a marketing opportunity that firms are unwilling to let go by. This is a new ecosystem in which individuals are as important as firms or the media – an environment in which people are what is important, and one which is having an increasing influence in the business world.

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Through online word of mouth consumers become the protagonists of brand communication, not only in their role as disseminators of information but also as generators of new ideas and promoters of either fidelity or maybe even rejection towards some of those brands (San José-Cabezudo, Camarero-Izquierdo, & Rodríguez-Pinto, 2012).

In this context, Facebook can have a real impact on the four stages of the purchasing decision processes that follow a recognition of need: the search for information, the evaluation of alternatives, the purchase, and subsequent evaluation (Engel, Kollat, & Blackwell, 1968). The usual channels of seeking information are now complemented with the information that firms place on their Facebook pages about their products, a medium open to any potential buyer 24 hours a day, every day of the year, through any device with Internet connection. The evaluation of alternatives is favoured through the comments that other users have made previously on the Facebook page of the brand, or through the exchange of views that the consumer can have on their own Facebook with their “friends”. With the appropriate applications, firms can also create a system on Facebook that allows business transaction to be finalized without referring to the firm’s own website or a physical store. In this sense, “f-commerce” (Facebook commerce) or “s-commerce” (social commerce) complements e-commerce. Finally, Facebook plays a fundamental role in post-purchase evaluations since it facilitates the sharing of shopping experiences, whether positive or negative. Through such exchange of opinions in online spaces, known as “e-WoM” (online word-of-mouth), consumers co-create together with the firm the brand’s image. As noted in The Cluetrain Manifesto (Levine, Locke, Searls, Weinberger, & McKee, 2009), today, more than ever, markets are conversations. So marketers will have to listen and learn, rather than preach (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012).

Firms have now begun to penetrate the online social networking scene, offering direct links from their corporate websites to Facebook and Twitter, and using these tools to promote their brands and support the creation of brand communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

There is still very much room for growth in s- or f-commerce, however, since only 4% of the Facebook pages of the firms analysed in the present study allow completion of the business transaction without leaving the site (Argyle Social, 2012). Nevertheless, the future of s-commerce seems assured, since, according to the results of a study conducted jointly by Shop.org, comScore, and Social Shopping Labs (Marketing directo.com, 2011) 53% of Facebook users have reached the website of a seller through their profile on Facebook, and 35% of online shoppers would like to shop through the social network.

According to a study by the consultancy Ipsos, 22% of users acknowledge having bought a brand after seeing a friend had “liked” it or “followed” it on Facebook (Ipsos OTX & Ipsos Global @dvisor, 2012).

The objective of the present work was to analyse the commercial potential of Facebook as one of the most important social phenomena of recent years, and in particular to study the intended use of Facebook by consumers in the early phases of their purchasing process (search for information and the evaluation of alternatives). To this end, we used the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis F. D., 1989) designed to explain and predict how individuals decide to adopt a particular technology. This model is a preferred choice when parsimony, research costs and outcomes are considered. We choose this model because TAM explains more variance in attitude toward a technology, and a comparable percentage of variance in usage and the TAM constructs are also more amenable to operationalization and empirical testing than other models.

We chose Facebook from among the various social networks because it has the greatest number of users worldwide (1 billion in October 2012). Moreover, according to another recent study (HWZ & BV4, 2012), Facebook is the
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