Chapter 12
The Application of Social Networking as a Marketing Platform to Young Adults: An Emerging Market Perspective

Justin Henley Beneke
University of Cape Town, South Africa

ABSTRACT
Social networking is often touted as being a prominent application responsible for driving the adoption of residential broadband services. The growth of social networks is phenomenal – in many cases more than doubling in size on an annual basis. This study considers how social networking may be utilized for commercial purposes to spread word-of-mouth communication. The chapter therefore considers the characteristics of young adult social network users, how they behave and interact with other users on such platforms, as well as the manner in which marketers can make the most of this platform without experiencing a consumer backlash. The research suggests that if a symbiotic relationship does need exist between broadband proliferation and the adoption of social networking, both have a vested interest in each other’s continued success.

BACKGROUND
Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication has received extensive attention from academics and marketing practitioners for many years (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2004). In fact, one of the most commonly accepted concepts in consumer behaviour is that WOM communication plays a fundamental role in shaping consumers’ attitudes and behaviours (Brown & Reingen, 1987). With the increasing development of communication and information technologies, the consumers’ interactive environment has changed to reflect an amorphous network of communication possibilities, with electronic interaction (particularly the Internet) leading the social reform. As a result, peer-to-peer communication has become increasingly saturated with information, enhancing the effect of WOM through a process commonly described as social networking. Social networking refers to the building of communities that bring people together on the Internet, and has manifested itself in many ways.
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(Raskin, 2006). The most predominant social networking sites include MySpace, Facebook, Friendster, YouTube, Blog-it, Mig33 and Xanga. Mxit, a South African initiative, features amongst the most popular mobile-driven social networking platforms. These sites are, in different forms, social utilities that connect people through the ability to share information such as messages, photographs and personal characteristics and preferences. As of mid 2009, Facebook alone had over 300 million users worldwide, a four-fold increase within a single calendar year (Wikipedia, 2009). MySpace.com, now owned by News Corporation, launched as a website to help unknown musicians reach greater audiences. It soon progressed into a virtual community of over 84 million users who post profile pages detailing their life in words, pictures and music (Wolfe, 2006). It is presently rumoured to have around 110 million users and is the dominant player in the United States market (McCarthy, 2009). Both Facebook and MySpace allow members to interact socially, building a network of friends as well as friends of friends with whom they share their thoughts, perceptions and general life experiences (Raskin, 2006).

The graph below visually depicts traffic to the two social networking stalwarts between December 2007 and 2008, revealing that Facebook appears to be winning in the share of total unique visitors.

Marketers are increasingly faced with the challenge of breaking through commercial clutter in an attempt to capture the attention of over-stimulated consumers, who are becoming more and more adept at tuning out traditional forms of advertising (Wolfe, 2006). With the extensive adoption of online communication, many experts believe social networking websites to have vast potential as viral marketing platforms (i.e. tools for spreading product information through WOM communication). However, although evidence of previous viral marketing success exists, little is known about the attitudes, motivations and behaviours of those consumers who engage in social networking, as well as which online promotion and communication techniques best stimulate viral marketing amongst social network users (Phelps et al, 2004). The lack of knowledge in this area may lead to the implementation of ineffective marketing, and requires further investigation in order to fully harness the potential of this platform.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Both qualitative and quantitative research was employed for the empirical component of this study. In terms of the former, experience interviews were conducted with four individuals knowledge-