
Editorial: The relevance of a better understanding of the online consumer behaviour

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Understanding the behaviour of consumers, organisations and businesses is the challenge that all marketers have to face. This is a complex challenge as complex is the behaviour of human beings. To find paths to interpret this complexity, it is important to take into account the ‘physical’ place as well as the ‘virtual’ space in which people live, act, interact and communicate.

The wide-spread and ubiquitous role of internet has had and will continue to have huge impact on business processes and practices such as retailing, personal selling and sales management processes. At the same time, the use of the internet is changing and becoming ubiquitous and continuous in people’s life. This is causing an ongoing paradigm shift both in society and business culture and practices. To understand this shift, it is pivotal to understand that the development of the internet does not involve only the ‘traditional’ use with personal computer but is now spreading to a number of other devices, in particular smart phones. The diffusion of these new ‘personal’ tools connecting people through the internet is changing the consumers’ culture and is making the internet a constant presence in the life of people worldwide.

Through mobile internet, consumers continuously act and interact via social media networks, collectively generating online shared thoughts, beliefs, habits and cultures. In this context, firms have the chance to develop a cultural following. The task for marketing managers and researchers is to comprehend how consumers collectively generate online brand/product culture.

To this aim, it is of increasing importance the capability to gather and interpret the big data coming from consumers' online conversations. Online consumers may generate consumer culture in variant ways (e.g., the construction of self, emotional relationships, storytelling).

The current task of marketing is turning towards more of a community-oriented approach which is highly noticeable in social media (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Schembri and Latimer, 2016). In the virtual market space of social media, consumers co-create value through online conversations (Espejo and Dominici, 2016; Weijo et al., 2014). Social media users gather their ideas and conversations online around particular interests such as specific purchase and/or possessions of products, and tell stories about their consumer experience of that product or brand thus creating sense of identity through the belonging to particular product/brand community (Dominici et al., 2013; Healy and McDonagh, 2013). Within social networks, consumers make conversations that constantly redefine product/brand meaning as well as consumer identity, creating an extended digital self (La Rocca et al., 2014; Belk, 2013). In other words, showing the possessions of a product/brand carries its symbolic meaning to engage in conversations that confirm the desired consumer identity thus co-creating the symbolic meaning of identity/consumption (Dominici et al., 2013).

It is pivotal for producers, distributors and retailers to be able to follow, understand, interpret and proactively influence the generation of online product/brand culture that leads the mechanism of product/brand value co-creation on social media. I am convinced that the deeper exploration of online consumer behaviour will prove to be highly productive not only for the electronic marketing but, more ambitiously, for the whole marketing discipline seeking to gain social significance.

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