‘Like’ Us:
Social media and its influence on consumer decision making, with reference to high-involvement products in Ireland

Peter Halpin
Student Number: 1538209
Master of Arts (MA) Marketing

May 2013
Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own, unaided work, except as indicated in the acknowledgments, the text and the references.

It is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of „Master of Arts” at Dublin Business School, Dublin.

It has not been submitted before, in whole, or in part for any degree or examination at any other institution.

Signed_________________              Date_________________

Peter Halpin
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................................... 8

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................................. 9

1. Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 10

1.2 Background – Social Media Marketing, the new ‘Status quo’ ........................................................... 10

1.2.1 The Emergence of Social Media .......................................................................................... 10

1.2.2 Social media and Consumer Behaviour ............................................................................... 11

1.3 Research Question and Objectives ............................................................................................. 11

1.4 Scope of the Researcher and Limitations ................................................................................... 12

1.5 Dissertation Structure Overview ................................................................................................. 12

2. Literature Review .............................................................................................................................. 14

2.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................................ 14

2.2 The Consumer Decision Making Process .................................................................................... 14

2.2.1 Problem Recognition ............................................................................................................ 15

2.2.2 Motivation ............................................................................................................................ 15

2.2.3 Information Search .............................................................................................................. 16

2.2.4 Perception and Trust ............................................................................................................ 17

2.2.5 Alternative Evaluation .......................................................................................................... 18

2.2.6 Attitudes and Brand Loyalty ................................................................................................. 18

2.2.7 Purchase Decision ................................................................................................................ 18

2.2.8 Purchase Evaluation ............................................................................................................. 19

2.3 Social Media and Social Networks .............................................................................................. 19

2.3.1 Social Network Sites ............................................................................................................. 19

2.4 Social Media and Brands ............................................................................................................. 21

2.5 Integrated Marketing Communications and Social Media’s role .................................................. 23

2.6 Social Media’s Influence on Consumer Behaviour ......................................................................... 24

2.7 Trust Networks and Word Of Mouth ............................................................................................ 26

2.8 Industry Review ............................................................................................................................. 27

2.8.1 Social Media in Ireland ......................................................................................................... 27

2.9 Review and Conceptual Model .................................................................................................... 29

3. Research Methodology ..................................................................................................................... 31
4.7 Has liking/following a social media page ever changed your mind about the brand for better or worse?........................................................................................................................................................................... 46

4.8 Have you ever heard of a positive or negative customer experience through Facebook or Twitter?............................................................................................................................................................................. 47

4.9 Do you agree with this statement, ‘I would trust a brand more if I knew they were actively engaging with their customers in real-time on Facebook and Twitter’?.................................................. 48

4.11 When purchasing a product, have you ever referred to social media brand pages for any of the following reasons? ...................................................................................................................................................................................... 49

4.12 Has a company’s social media page ever prompted or influenced your purchase decision? .. 50

4.13 Additional Findings – Gender Usage ........................................................................................................... 51

4.13.1 Do you use Facebook and / or Twitter? .................................................................................. 52

4.13.2 Do you follow and company pages on Facebook or Twitter? ................................................ 53

4.13.3 Do you read posts in your timeline from brands? ................................................................. 54

4.13.4 Have you ever interacted with a company on Facebook or Twitter? ........................................ 55

4.13.5 Has liking / following a social media page ever changed you mind about a brand for the better or worse? ........................................................................................................................................................... 56

4.13.6 Do you agree with this statement, ‘I would trust a brand more if I knew they were actively engaging with their customers in real-time on Facebook and Twitter’? ..................... 57

4.13.7 Do you agree with this statement, ‘my interaction with a brand on Facebook / Twitter (good or bad) could affect my loyalty towards a brand overall’? ................................................................. 58

4.13.8 When purchasing a product, have you ever referred to social media brand pages for any of the following reasons? ...................................................................................................................................................................................... 59

4.13.8 Has a company’s social media page ever prompted or influenced your purchase decision? ........................................................................................................................................................................... 60

4.14 Qualitative Research Responses ........................................................................................................... 61

4.14.1 Organisations’ use of Social Media ............................................................................................ 61

4.14.2 Social Media’s impact on Purchase Decision ............................................................................. 61

4.14.3 Social Media’s Impact on Brand Perception ............................................................................ 61

4.14.3 Social Media and Overall Strategy ............................................................................................. 62

4.14.4 Building Engagement on pages .............................................................................................. 62

5. Discussions ........................................................................................................................................ 64

5.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 64

5.2 Relevance of survey respondents to findings .................................................................................. 64
5.3 Facebook and Twitter Use .......................................................................................................... 65
5.4 Interactions with Brands (do you read posts from companies) - Interaction ...................... 65
5.5 Interacting with brands on Facebook and Twitter - Interaction ............................................... 66
5.6 Social Media’s effect on Attitudes - Effect .............................................................................. 66
5.7 Social Media’s effect on Loyalty - Effect .................................................................................. 67
5.8 Social Media’s effect on Trust - Effect ....................................................................................... 67
5.9 Social media’s Effect on Purchase - Outcome .......................................................................... 68
5.10 Additional findings - Social Media and Gender ................................................................. 68
5.11 Limitations to the findings .................................................................................................... 70

6. Implications ....................................................................................................................................... 71

6.1 Implications for Managers ........................................................................................................ 71

6.1.1 Work to increase Fan Base ................................................................................................... 71
6.1.2 Be ‘Always On’ ..................................................................................................................... 71
6.1.3 Be wary of your Audience .................................................................................................. 72
6.1.4 Be Strategic .......................................................................................................................... 72
6.1.5 Understand what makes your fans ‘Tic’ .............................................................................. 72
6.1.6 Use social media to influence Attitudes, build Loyalty and develop Trust ...................... 73

6.2 Implications for Future Research ............................................................................................ 73

7. Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 75

8. Reflection on learning – Link to Theory ...................................................................................... 79

8.1 Learning Theory ......................................................................................................................... 79
8.2 Personal achievements – Added Value .................................................................................. 82

8.2.1 Challenges Faced .................................................................................................................. 82

8.3 Skills obtained ............................................................................................................................. 83

8.3.1 Marketing Skills ..................................................................................................................... 83
8.3.2 Time Management Skills ...................................................................................................... 83
8.3.3 Researching and Analytics .................................................................................................. 83
8.3.4 Nothing worth doing is Ever Easy ...................................................................................... 83
8.3.5 Team work skills ................................................................................................................... 84
8.3.6 Plans to apply / Sustain the Learning ............................................................................... 84

Bibliography .......................................................................................................................................... 85
Abstract

Social media and social media marketing have revolutionised the way Irish companies promote their brands and talk to their customers, and as a result it has become an extremely "hot topic" within modern marketing.

Through examining existing research, theories and making observations on the Irish market the researcher created a conceptual to be tested. The conceptual model is composed of three key stages: the way brands promote themselves and interact with fans on social media, how these interactions affect customer attitudes, brand loyalty and trust and how these influences ultimately effect purchase decision.

In order to test the model the researcher surveyed over 160 Facebook and Twitter users. The researcher also interviewed two senior managers of large organisations in order to further develop and strengthen the findings. The findings indicated that social media marketing is extremely effective at influencing customer attitudes, brand loyalty and building customer trust both in positive and negative ways. The findings also highlighted that the message communicated and the way organisations interact with fans and followers is vital, essentially social media must be interactive. Other findings highlighted that there are differences in the way genders interact with and are influenced by social media, women interact with brands on social media more than men and there is evidence to suggest that women understand the benefits of brand pages more than men too, however it was identified that men’s attitudes are more likely to be influenced by social media pages.

The paper also identifies certain areas for future research. Investigating what types of posts are most impactful, bearing in-mind target audiences and demographic would be extremely beneficial to marketers. Another area that would warrant further investigation would be social media marketing’s effect on across genders.
Acknowledgements

Firstly I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Chantal Ladias. Chantal’s advice and support has been invaluable throughout this dissertation process.

I owe a special thank you to all the staff and lecturers at DBS who have made my time in the college and extremely rich and enjoyable experience.

I gratefully thank my close friends and family who stood by and supported me throughout this process.

Finally I would like to thank my loving girlfriend Katie for her constant unyielding support and belief.

I dedicate this paper to mother, Cynthia Halpin, who „always knew” I could do it.
1. Introduction

1.2 Background – Social Media Marketing, the new ‘Status quo’

It is undeniable that social media marketing is now an important part of the way organisations do business today. Initial research in the area of social media found there to be in excess of 200 online community sites. Most of these sites are quite specific in their type and were generated for users to discuss, share and research particular types of information; however the biggest and most commonly used by marketers today are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and location-based services like Foursquare (Wasserman, 2011). With this in mind, „Like” us on Facebook or „Follow” us on Twitter are the new „call to action” and seem to be present on most of the marketing communications we”re exposed to daily. But why has social media become such an important facet within modern marketing? The simple answer is, because that is where current and potential customers are.

Consumers are spending more and more time using social media, accessing it on their laptops, desktops and mobile devices and organisations are rushing to understand how they can use social media to reach the millions of consumers who use it daily (Parsons, 2011). However, it is not just as simple as setting up a Facebook page and bombarding your „Fans” with the same advertising they”re exposed to on the street. It is an extremely strategic process and must be well thought through. Deciding on how to approach social media depends on a number of factors, including your target market, what message you wish to deliver, the level of control you wish to have over the message and how people interact/respond to it (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

The ultimate goal of an organisation”s social media presence is to market its brand and products, however when leveraging this tool, do marketers” need to consider the same facets they do when approaching traditional marketing, or do they need to start thinking differently? In such a new and dynamic space, what works? And when looking to build a social media strategy where should marketers begin?

1.2.1 The Emergence of Social Media

The social media space is massive and continues to grow at an impressive rate. One only has to browse the likes of SocialBakers.com to see this. In America currently there are over 158 million monthly Facebook users. This accounts for a total population penetration of over
50%! Knowing that half of your country’s population are using their laptops and phones to visit a website daily makes it an irresistible space for marketers (SocialBakers.com, 2013). According to SocialBakers.com (2012), Facebook integration in Ireland is at approximately 70% of our internet using population and continues to grow rapidly with 58,280 new signups in the first half of 2012 alone. With this in-mind, companies here are making substantial investments into the area of social media marketing. But for all the time and money invested into this channel, how influential is it when it comes down to actual purchase? If someone “Likes” a post about a new product, does that indicate purchase intent or just that they like what you’re saying? For such an integral facet with modern marketing, models around the approach to social media marketing theory and practice are scarce which limits the development of appropriate strategies in this area (Hill & Moran, 2011).

1.2.2 Social media and Consumer Behaviour

Heinonen (2011) highlight how the way consumers behave online is changing rapidly, no longer are they purely consuming content, they are now conversing with other consumers, sharing knowledge and experiences and adding to discussions. Consumers are now creating the content. However it is not only the consumer that is changing, companies must also adjust their behaviours in order to respond and effectively communicate (Heinonen, 2011).

Understanding the consumer decision making process and its relevance within social media is vital for companies, especially in such a dynamic space. Associating each stage of the process with an aspect of social media allows companies to be a lot more strategic, however it goes a lot deeper than that. Now that there is a dialogue with customers the approaches to each stage must be considered carefully.

Marketers must understand how best to interact with consumers on social media, how these interactions affect key influencing factors such as attitudes, brand loyalty and trust and how these influences ultimately effect purchase decision.

1.3 Research Question and Objectives

This study will examine the influence of corporate Facebook and Twitter pages on consumer buyer behaviour and decision making. The author will also look to test the research by creating a conceptual framework based on available theories in the area; in doing so the study
will make in-depth observations into the areas of consumer behaviour, social media and the crossover of both. The author will examine the attitudes of the fans of corporate Facebook and Twitter pages and examine what types of messages need to be communicated and how in order to successfully influence purchase. With this in-mind, the primary question that will form the foundation of this paper is;

„How can companies leverage social media to influence purchase?"

In order to successfully answer this question, the author has identified some key research objectives:

- Understand what is driving social media marketing to develop so rapidly
- Identify the key areas of the consumer decision making process that can be influenced by social media
- Test to gauge the level of influence social media has in these areas

1.4 Scope of the Researcher and Limitations

As this paper intends to explore the impact of social media on consumer behaviour, the author will examine existing research in both areas by referencing books, articles, websites and journals. The author will also conduct an industry review, paying particular attention to high-involvement products as they would require the most cognitive consideration.

The social media space is vast, however in order to develop appropriate benchmarks this study will focus primarily on the areas of Facebook and Twitter use in Ireland with very little emphasis on other social media platforms, this is this paper’s main limitation.

1.5 Dissertation Structure Overview

Chapter one will be the introduction to the research paper, identifying the main facets of the area of study; including the research questions, supporting objectives and so on.

The second chapter is the literature review, in this area the researcher looks to define the main concepts of the study, identify the core facets of the decision making process, look to identify exactly what social media is, why it is growing so rapidly, and identify where it sits within an integrated marketing communication. This area will also look at available
research around the influence of social media on consumer buyer behaviour, and finally look at the current Irish social media industry and work to build a conceptual framework that can be tested throughout the paper.

Chapter three will look at the research methodology, essentially the research approach that will be employed in order to achieve the research objectives. The areas covered in this chapter will include research philosophy, research approach, research choice, time horizons, data collection & analysis methods, ethical issues and any potential limitations of the research.

Chapter four will look at data analysis and findings where the researcher will present all of the findings of both the quantitative and qualitative research.

In chapter five the researcher will discuss the findings of the research. In chapter six the researcher will discuss potential implications of the findings.

Chapter seven will be a conclusion to the paper, looking to bring all the facets together and identify if the research objectives were achieved.

Chapter eight will be an area of self-reflection where the researcher will give an overview of learning methods with reference to his own, as well as analyse the dissertation writing experience and his performance and development overall.
2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The primary source of the initial research focuses around the emergence of social media marketing, its importance within organisations’ IMC processes, and consumer responses to it. However research has also been conducted on the fundamentals of consumer behaviour, as this plays a fundamental part in the understanding of how consumers will respond to social media marketing. As this is a relatively emerging area with very little defined theory, this literature review draws from many sources in order to get the best possible overview of the topic.

2.2 The Consumer Decision Making Process

Research into the area of consumer behaviour is vast and extends over decades. Consumer behaviour can be defined as “the process and activities people engage in when searching for, selecting, purchasing, using, evaluating and deposing of products and services so as to satisfy their needs and desires” Belch and Belch (2009, p111). In order to get the clearest possible understanding of this area, marketers are forever researching the „consumer decision making process”.

The consumer decision making process, as highlighted by many authors such as Belch and Belch (2009), is a process of consumer consideration that examines the purchasing process from problem recognition to post-purchase evaluation. This academically proven process is applied to marketing activities to ensure that organisations appeal to customers at every stage to allow for the most effective and persuasive marketing communication. As discussed by Mihart (2012), the consumer decision making consists of the stages that consumers pass through when contemplating the purchase of a good or service.

![Figure 1: Stages of the Consumer Decision Making Process Belch and Belch (2009, p111)]
This paper will touch on many facets of consumer behaviour and the consumer decision making process; however information search, customer attitudes and purchase decision are the areas that have the most influence on successfully answering the research question.

2.2.1 Problem Recognition

This stage of the model is centred around what drives consumers to start shopping for products (Workman and Studak, 2006). As explained by Belch and Belch (2009), here a person identifies a „need“ and feels compelled to satisfy it, to solve the problem. Belch and Belch (2009) also discuss how a need isn’t necessarily something that a person wants but can be something that a person must have in order to facilitate their way of life. They highlight the different facets what may influence problem recognition which include; out of stock, dissatisfaction, new needs/wants, related products / purchases, marketer induced problem recognition, new product (Belch 2009 p113-114).

Social media marketing could be present through all the various facets of problem recognition; however the most applicable areas to this research would be „dissatisfaction”, „marketer induced problem recognition” and „new products”.

2.2.2 Motivation

“Motivation refers to the drives, urges, wishes, or desires which initiate the sequence of events known as behaviour” (Bayton, 1958 p282)

The most commonly referred to study in the area of consumer motivation is Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943).
Figure 2: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943)

Maslow (1943) describes how a person’s needs become less greater as you travel up the pyramid with the most fundamental needs like food and shelter occupying a larger portion of the hierarchy then needs for self development or status. Marketers often employ Maslow’s research to identify where their product sits and how to position it accordingly.

In the industry review of this paper we will examine high involvement products that would fall into the top three tiers as these products require more cognitive consideration.

2.2.3 Information Search

As highlighted by Belch and Belch (2009), information search refers to when a consumer has actively identified a problem or a need that he/she wishes to satisfy. Mihart (2012) discuss how information search usually starts with an „internal search” and a customer will identify products that they are already aware of known as the „evoked set”. The „external search” aspect of information search relates to information obtained from external sources, which can include packaging and marketing communications. As identified in research by Richins & Bloch (1986), where the product is high-involvement, a customer will invest more time and effort into information search. Sources of information, as listed by Belch and Belch (2009
p118-119), can include personal sources, personal experience, public sources and marketer-controlled sources (such as the internet). Webber (2007) proposes that people are using the internet to seek out others with similar interests, shop more efficiently, to learn about products and services, and to vent about poor product experiences. With this in-mind, it is no surprise that organisations are scrambling to increase their page „Likes”; as if a customer „Likes” a page, an organisation feels they are one step closer to being included in their „evoked set”, an important part of the information search stage.

As highlighted by Kyriazis et al (2007) a key benefit of internet search through websites is their ability to carry large amounts of applicable information on one site, a lot more so than offline search through brochures and so on. Websites then have the ability to link to additional relevant information sources; this is also true for the likes of social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter.

2.2.4 Perception and Trust

Perception refers to the many different ways that an individual can sense external information, select particular sources of information and how they interoperate this information (Belch and Belch, 2009, p118). Marketers are forever looking at how people process information and why. An important part of the way people perceive information is if they trust the source. An example of this was put forward in an article by Light (2005); McDonalds were having trouble reaching their customers in an increasingly competitive and somewhat saturated market. They felt that customers were falling out of love with their brand and that it wasn”t being perceived the way they’d like. Light highlights how McDonalds worked tirelessly with their customers in order to change the perception of their brand by working to build trust with their customers, highlighting that trust was essential for customers to buy-into their brand again. For the purpose of this research we will look at how marketers use social media platforms to develop „trust” with their customers, an aspect that contributes greatly to purchase decision.
2.2.5 Alternative Evaluation

According to Belch and Belch (2009) this part of the decision making process refers to when a customer refers back to the „evoked set” to evaluate whether or not another product can help solve their „problem”.

2.2.6 Attitudes and Brand Loyalty

“Attitudes are learned predispositions to respond to an object, or class object, in a consistently favourable or unfavourable way” (Allport, 1935, p810). As this very commonly used definition highlights, attitudes are „learned” which would suggest that they can be influenced and re-learned. As highlighted in many texts, including Chakrabarty et al (1998), understanding the facets that influence customer attitudes and expectations is an indispensable marketing tool. Within the world of social media marketing, understanding how people form opinions, as well as their current opinion of an organisation can help marketers communicate and influence more effectively.

Another area that is born from the study of attitudes is brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is one of the key facets that must be considered within the area of purchase decision as it not only leads to purchase but also encourages repeat purchase. As highlighted by Yousaf et al (2012), brand loyalty is the commitment to re-buy a product from the same brand consistently in the future. In the same paper they highlight that if a customer is to be truly loyal towards a brand they must have a favourable attitude towards the brand. Yousaf et al (2012) also discuss how if one is to be truly loyal to a brand, in particular those offering a service, there are three factors that must be present; they must have a positive attitude towards the organisation, they will repeat purchase and cognitive process and they will use only this service provider ongoing.

2.2.7 Purchase Decision

Belch and Belch (2009) describe this point in the process as when a customer makes up his/her mind on what product his/her wishes to purchase, ultimately this is the „end goal”. This doesn’t necessary mean that the person will rush out to purchase the product immediately but that they have decided to buy it at some stage. Powers et al (2012) discuss
how a key area of concern for markets today is looking to identify when and why customers turn to social media in the purchase decision process. One of the points to note from Powers et al (2012) is that the purchase journey varies greatly from type of product. A high-involvement product will usually require more investigation and take more time where as low involvement products will usually be quicker decisions and require less persuasion.

2.2.8 Purchase Evaluation

Belch and belch (2009) describe purchase evaluation as the point in the process where the customer looks to evaluate if the purchase met expectations, exceeded expectations or left them disappointed. Powers et al (2012) found that joy is in fact the predominant emotion expressed in online post-purchase, as customers are looking to express their happiness with a product. However negative experiences are also shared very commonly, mainly if the user is disappointed with the product if it failed to deliver on expectations.

2.3 Social Media and Social Networks

Social media can be defined as “the media that is published, created and shared by individuals on the internet, such as blogs, images, video and more” (Strokes 2009: 350). In a relatively recent book (Webber, 2007) describes social networks as member-based online communities where individuals link to one another based on common interests. When defining social networks Mashable.com (2013) highlights that they usually consist of a representation of each user, often a profile picture or avatar, his/her social links or likes, and a variety of additional services such as games.

2.3.1 Social Network Sites

Of the 200+ social networking sites, most are quite specific in their type and were generated for particular users in order to discuss, share or research particular types of information.
Fred Cavazza (2013) a reputable business consultant, trainer and blogger with years of experience on digital media has drawn up an extremely comprehensive social media landscape which clearly defines four key areas, sharing, discussing, networking, publishing.

Cavazza defines the categories below:

- **Sharing** sites are those where users share pictures, videos, links, music and information about products
- **Publishing** sites are blogging platforms such as Blogger and WordPress
- **Discussing** sites are broken into two areas – „knowledge platforms”, such as Github and Reddit and „mobile chat” applications such as Skype and Whatsapp
- **Networking** sites are those used to network in a one-to-one capacity, such as dating sites, or those used in a business capacity such as LinkedIn.
As is highlighted in the Cavazza’s representation, the main social media sites are Facebook, Twitter and Google+. These sites are the most popular as they have touch points in every area of online social networking. However for the purposes of this paper the researcher will focus on Facebook and Twitter as they are the most prominent in the business space as Google+ for business, Google’s answer to Facebook’s brand pages is relatively new.

**Facebook** was launched on February 4\(^{th}\) 2004 and is the world’s biggest social networking site. Facebook’s mission “is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook, 2013). In recent years Facebook has come under some criticism for its privacy policies and a lot of people would consider the site to be somewhat intrusive, however this hasn’t stunted its growth and Facebook continues to go from strength to strength. As of June 2012 there were over 2,060,740 Irish profiles on Facebook which accounts for 67% of the internet using population and 69% of these are in the ABC1 demographic (SocialBakers, 2012).

**Twitter** is a social networking and micro blogging site that launched in March 2006 that allows its users to send messages (Tweets) with up to 140 characters. Created by Jack Dorsley, Twitter had grown rapidly, and in June 2012 it was reported that Twitter had reached over 500 million users, however they have come under some criticism as that number may be skewed largely being that approximately only one third of Twitter accounts are active (Lunden, 2012).

Population statistics around Twitter use in Ireland are not common but according to newworld.com (2011) there were approximately 385,000 people in Ireland over 15 who had Twitter accounts in 2012, factoring in potential growth, these numbers would still be considerably less than Facebook. Businesses use Twitter to quickly share information, gather market intelligence and insights, and build relationships with people who are interested in their organisation.

### 2.4 Social Media and Brands

“A brand is a promise of satisfaction. It is a sign, a metaphor operating as an unwritten contract between a manufacturer and a consumer, a seller and a buyer, a performer and an audience, an environment and those who inhabit it, an event and those who experience it” (Healey, 2008 p6). Kotler (1999) discusses how brands can increase the levels at which
people absorb information and that brands can both positively and negatively affect a consumer’s perception on the quality of a product.

Nair (2011) highlights that nowadays customers expect to find brands on social media and that it lies with a brand’s marketing department to carefully identify which social media channels to choose and how to „speak” to their audience. Especially for larger, more well known brands, having a presence on a social networking sites allows companies to draw the conversation to them, allowing them to respond to customers and perhaps interject or steer the conversation if needs be.

Scott (2007) discusses one of the most important benefits of social media marketing which is, rather than bombard people with advertising they’ll likely ignore, companies can focus on discreetly getting the right message to the right people at the right time. This argument is strengthened by McAfee et al (2011) who describe users of social media, not as passive consumers of information, but as collaborators who are constantly editing, sharing, discussing and creating content; and also by Tuten (2008) who discusses how modern consumers have embraced social media and industries are responding by encouraging users to create and co-create content.

Research carried out by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) found that organisations must, considering their target market, carefully decide what social media tools to deploy as well as the type of message they wish to deliver. This argument is strengthened by Akar and Topcu (2011) who found that customer attitudes can be positively and negatively affected by social media, but where the effects of social media marketing can be positive, it is necessary for the organisation to control the content as much as possible as, generally, direct advertising on social media is not perceived well by users.

Dickey et al (2008) also found that more and more consumers are using these sites to discuss products and brands. In response to this, as researched by Klassen (2007), social networking sites are making it easier for users to discuss, recommend or „Like” products in an open forum and that it is vital for marketers to seek out and process this information.

A study by Wasserman (2011) highlights how organisations have used social media to generate some fantastic marketing numbers; for example, there was a 33 percent increase in McDonald”s business after running a one-day check in campaign, and 10,000 site clicks were generated on an American Airlines „Tweet to win 30K miles campaign”. It must also be noted, from a critical stand point, that Wasserman’s (2011) article is info-graphic and gives little insight into how the research was carried out and the ultimate impact of any of these campaigns on sales.
In a recent study, Bruhn et al (2012) found that both traditional and social media communications greatly impact brand equity. They found that traditional media had a greater impact on brand awareness. However, social media had a more significant impact on hedonic brand image, both of which ultimately led to influence attitude. When looking deeper into social media activity, it was found that posts generated by the firm have had greater impact on brand awareness while those created by the users have had a bigger impact on brand image.

Figure 4: Social Media’s influence on Brand Perception, Bruhn et al (2012)

As is evident to most social media users and highlighted by Dickey and Lewis (2010), social networks are dynamic and ever-evolving communication channels; and as they constantly change so will consumer behaviours towards them and, in-turn, so must social media marketing tactics. This would suggest that strategies around social media may be tough to successfully implement, perhaps effecting the development of sustainable theoretical models.

2.5 Integrated Marketing Communications and Social Media’s role

As defined by the American Association of Advertising Agencies (1989) IMC is "an approach to achieving the objectives of a marketing campaign through a well-coordinated use of different promotional methods that are intended to reinforce each other". Schultz (1993) highlights that IMC differs from traditional marketing as it focuses on the customer
and then works backwards to define and develop the most effective and persuasive marketing tools. As discussed by Mihart (2012), even today, Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) remains quite a controversial topic in modern marketing, as the traditional marketing approach has been replaced by a much more strategic one that encompasses a lot more promotion touch points. Šerić & Saura (2012) discuss how the IMC concept is in “continuous progress” and has developed from a „one voice” approach to a more strategic customer-centric approach. Developing customer-centric approaches means more meaningful conversations with customers and this is at the essence of IMC. As highlighted by Kilgour et al (2011) in order to generate meaningful conversations marketers must first develop effective IMC communications and social media is paramount here as it gives both company and customer a platform to discourse.

For global organisations today, competing in an extremely competitive and highly dynamic market, searching for the best and most efficient ways to communicate and engage with customers is becoming more and more important (Clow, 2010).

2.6 Social Media’s Influence on Consumer Behaviour

As it would be considered quite a „hot topic”, research in the area of social media’s influence on consumer behaviour is growing fast. However there is still relatively little research available on what organisations are doing on social networking sites. Dickey et al (2008) found that one of the main reasons people visit social networking sites and the primary reason they’re growing so quickly is because they offer a sense of community and belonging.

Jansen et al (2009) found in their study focusing on Twitter, that consumer decision making can be influenced by web communications and social media. Their research conclusions also strengthened the argument that customers look to social networking sites such as Twitter for trusted sources of information about products and brands. They also highlighted that this „micro blogging” trend presented a great opportunity for organisations looking to market their brand in today’s environment. Contrary to this, Phan (2011), when investigating the impact of social media on fashion brands, found that it had no immediate influence on purchase. His research found that some of the brands that are most active in social media are in fact underperforming and that their activity did not increase „brand liking”. Phan (2011) found that investing in social media is not enough to enhance brand preference or purchase intention; however he was aware of the limitations of his research and highlighted that the impact of social media marking may be more visible in the long-term.
In Chung and Austria’s (2010) paper, they discuss Uses and Gratifications (U&G) research and its effect on media behaviour. U&G argues that consumers are needs orientated and that various needs (including social interactions and information search) are satisfied by social media. Their research also highlights that providing higher social interactions as well as information search qualities on social media sites leads to a higher level of gratification which, in turn, can effect attitudes, especially if the marketing messages present a more „hedonic needs” value. It is also important to note from their research that they found that „entertainment” wasn’t necessarily a cause of increased gratification as the way that people are using social media is evolving beyond being entertained. They also found that active participation on behalf of the organisation as well as more useful and applicable information made for a stronger marketing message. Their research also highlighted that most marketing managers aren’t operating in this space with a clear strategy and aren’t certain how this communication portal falls into their marketing mix. One critique of Chung and Austria’s research is perhaps the relatively small sample size and this must be considered if using it as a benchmark.

Chen et al’s (2012) research of 306 people between the ages of 18 and 22 on brands and consumer behaviour drew the following hypotheses:

- A consumer’s opinion of a brand can positively affect brand equity
- A consumer’s opinion of brand equity can positively affect their purchase intention
- A customers impression/opinion of brand image can positively affect purchase intention
- Due to different involvement strengths, brand image can greatly affect brand equity
- Due to different involvement strengths, brand equity can greatly affect purchase intent
- Due to different involvement strengths, brand image can greatly affect purchase intent

As highlighted by Chen et al (2012) in intensely competitive markets where there are high levels of product homogeneity, differentiation is key and „brand” is the most effective way to do this. Chen et al (2012) also found that there is significant evidence to support that brand image affected brand equity; research that reconfirmed findings from Aaker (1996), Faircloth et al. (2001), and Chen (2010).
2.7 Trust Networks and Word Of Mouth

Akar and Topcu (2011) and Hoyer and MacInnis (2010) found that consumers trust information found on social networking sites more than information provided directly by organisations and that ultimately attitudes towards marketing on social media sites is increasingly more and more positive. This is largely due to the fact that social media is not a traditional marketing source and the organisation’s end goal of highlighting a brand and selling a product is well hidden under a veil of customer care and customer dialogue.

As highlighted by Powers et al (2012), as a result of social networks and social media our „trust network“ is expanding rapidly. In their article they discuss how, in the past, when looking for advice on a potential purchase we would seek the guidance of our close friends and families, however with the advent of social media and social networks we go online seeking advice, not only from people we know but also from people on forums or on brands” social media pages. We’re curious about the experiences other non-brand-associated users have had with the product and/or service. Customers also use the likes of YouTube to watch online video blogs from everyday people who have researched products. According to Powers et al (2012) brands that facilitate these trust networks through social media pages are considered less like advisories and begin to develop a more meaningful customer relationship.

Word-of-mouth is also an important consideration when discussing „trust networks”. Two of the main benefits of word of mouth, as outlined by Libai et al (2013), is that they can lead to market expansion, in that, through word-of-mouth organisations can access a customer base that may not have otherwise bought the product. Another benefit discussed in the article is that word-of-mouth helps accelerate the purchasing process of customers who would have bought the product anyway. Beyond standard word-of-mouth, paid posts on social networks such as Facebook allows organisations to generate a pseudo word of mouth, as when someone „Likes“ a page an organisation can pay for the „Like“ to be posted as a story in other news feeds. Despite the reason the original person liked the page, the person will see this like as an endorsement.
2.8 Industry Review

Understanding the current „status quo” within a given industry/sector is an extremely important facet of this paper as the findings will help create the conceptual framework that will be examined. In this section I will look at some statistics around relevant organisations using social media, with a particular focus in Ireland. I will also then look at three leading technology brand pages in order to identify the three main types of „post” category currently in use; technology brands were chosen as their focus is high-involvement products.

2.8.1 Social Media in Ireland

Facebook
According to Socialbakers.com (2013) of the top-10 brands in Ireland, seven of them are celebrities or TV show brands with the number one being Rihanna at 378,797 (overall 70,215,131 fans). However, beyond Lidl Ireland and Pennys, the majority of the top-10 brands followed on Facebook in Ireland are made up of non-Irish brand pages.
The top-5 social organisational brands in Ireland, according to Socialbakers.com (2013), are Pennys, Lidl Ireland, Lyons Tea, Amazon UK, Coca-Cola. Pennys has most „fans” on their Facebook page of 301,721 Irish fans.

Twitter
In relation to Twitter use in Ireland Socialbakers.com (2013) discussed how, of the top-10 brands, none of them are organisations. The number one followed organisation is Spin 103.8 with 97,104 followers and the majority of the top-100 organisational brands are made up of entertainment and news brands.

Socialbakers.com (2013) highlight that there 13 agencies in Ireland whose primary focus is social media the top agency being „Red Ant”.

It becomes extremely evident when looking at these statistics that the numbers of followers on Twitter in comparison to the number of fans on Facebook on brand pages in Ireland is vastly different. Also, as brands occupy such a large proportion of the Facebook top-10 as opposed to Twitter, one could deduce that people use Facebook more to follow brands. Over 2.2 million Irish people use Facebook giving a 48% population penetration, in comparison,
according to His.ie (2013), there are considerably less Irish people on Twitter with only 385,000 Irish people over 15 using this service.

Facebook has always been a lot more focused on offering organisations the tools needed to increase their fan reach as well as an analysis statistics tool in contrast to Twitter which provides neither. The ways that people post on Facebook is also a lot more conducive to advertising, in that it allows the brands to post larger amounts of text and seamlessly attach photos and videos which tend to generate more engagement. So it is no surprise that the amount of time and money that brands invest in Facebook is substantially more in Ireland.

As a part of this industry review I have looked at some Facebook pages of brands who offer high-involvement technology products, they include: Samsung Ireland, Sony Ireland and HTC Ireland. In order to identify how these brands were conversing and engaging with their fans on Facebook I examined the last 10 posts of each brand spanning over a maximum of one month and built a post matrix (included as appendix). I then looked at each post and examined how best to categorise each one. Initially there was a concern that there would be an excessive amount of categories however something that became evident quite quickly was that no matter the post, it can be categorised in one of the following three categories; product highlight, customer engagement and customer dialogue.

Product highlight refers to when an organisation posts some information relating to their product, ultimately trying to highlight a feature or benefit. Organisations are getting a lot better at discreetly highlighting / advertising the benefits of their products in a much less obvious way. As discussed earlier in this paper, people are getting a lot more savvy to advertising on social media and this is one of the ways brands are trying counter this. Essentially, people are more susceptible to advertising when they don’t know they are engaging with it.

Customer engagement refers to when an organisation tries to engage their fans in conversation about their product or service, looking to build rapport while at the same time starting a conversation about something they’re trying to sell, this also has the added benefit of being promoted on that persons page, for example, „John Smith wrote on Tesco’s wall“. Customer engagement is often used in conjunction with product highlight and as is highlighted in the findings, all of the companies researched used this at one stage in the month. An example of this would be “Hey, check out this picture we just took with our latest camera. What great photos have you taken lately?” Posts like this not only highlight the benefit of the product but have the added benefit of increasing engagement.
Customer dialogue posts are those where the company talks about something totally non-related to their product or organisation, for example „Is everyone having a good day“ or „Did anyone see the match over the weekend“. Where posts like this remain quite common, the engagement levels generated are quite low. It is likely that the brand is looking to distance themselves from the corporate title and look to engage with their fans on a more emotional level, looking to build higher levels of „trust“, one of the more important facets in the consumer decision making process. However, as highlighted in my initial research, customers are aware of this and don’t want to engage with organisations on that type of level. Customer dialogue also refers to the conversations that organisations have with the fans on Facebook and Twitter, and how they approach responding to customer queries and so on.

2.9 Review and Conceptual Model

In the literature review, it was identified that among the main areas which brands are seeking to influence through social media activities are customer attitudes, brand loyalty and trust. The researcher has identified that, as attitudes are learned, they can also be re-learned through effective advertising and meaningful customer conversations. Another key facet in this area is customer loyalty, loyalty refers to the likelihood of ongoing purchase, and this is another area that interactions on social media look to build. Finally trust is inextricably linked to attitudes and loyalty and the researcher has identified that „trust“ is an area that brands are using social media to leverage the most. These „trust platforms“ not only allows brands to converse more convincingly with consumers but if a brand is seen to develop social media platforms and facilitate conversation forums they’re considered a lot less „them and us“ by the potential customer.

One area that the researcher has identified that in which there isn’t a considerable amount of quantifiable research is the area of social media’s influence on actual purchase intent as the available research is primarily focused on areas of attitudes and trust which are focused on earlier areas of the consumer decision making process.

The researcher also looked to identify the types of outwards communications (posts) that companies in Ireland are using to converse with customers and has identified that the three main posts are „customer engagement“, „product highlight“ and „customer dialogue“.

As highlighted in the introduction to this paper the researcher is looking to create a conceptual model that can be tested in order to identify the true impact of social media on consumer behaviour. Based on the above findings and drawing on recommendations from
Chung and Austria’s (2010) research around U&G, and Bruhn et al (2012) the following conceptual model was devised. This conceptual model is what will be tested throughout the research to identify if, in fact, the right message, communicated in the correct manner can influence consumers in a way that will ultimately effect purchase decision.

Figure 5: Conceptual Model – Leveraging Social Media to Influence Purchase
3. Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This area of the paper highlights the main elements of research methodology that were utilised in the research project entitled „Brand social media pages and their influence on consumer Buyer Behaviour: Building and examining a Conceptual Framework”

Authors including Saunders et al (2008) have outlined certain physical issues that must be considered when undertaking a research project and that these issues may greatly influence the types of research mythology one wishes to employ. Research mythology works to help the researcher answer the research question by highlighting important information as well as a suitable research design. Conducting research can be undergone in many ways but ensuring the highest possible standard of results will depend on the methods employed. In order to identify the correct approach, Saunders et al (2008), suggest researchers should utilise the „Research Onion” framework which includes the following facets: Research Philosophy, Research Approach, Research Strategy, Time Horizons and Data Collection.

3.2 Research Philosophy

The Research Onion, as highlighted by Saunders et al (2008), provides a framework for identifying the most suitable way to conduct the research. Each layer in the Onion helps the researcher further identify the best approach to answering the research question in the most effective way.

Figure 6: Research Onion (Sanders et al, 2008)
Philosophy is the first layer of the research and according to Saunders et al (2008) the main research philosophies that would be utilised in the business world are **positivism**, **interpretivism** and **realism**, these our outlined below.

### 3.2.1 Positivism

Positivism, as highlighted by Saunders et al (2008), is usually associated with quantitative research and deals mainly with results obtained from statistical data. An objective approach that is deductive in nature, positivism would be more appropriate within the sciences as it deals mainly with measurable, statistical data. With this in-mind, it would not be an appropriate approach when looking at human behaviour however it would be necessary when examining statistical data obtained in the survey that will be conducted.

### 3.3.2 Interpretivism

Interpretivism, generally associated with qualitative research, is more appropriate in the business world as it helps the researcher understand what influences behaviours. Interpretivism considers that opinions can be subjective and helps the researcher get a clearer understanding of these opinions. With this in-mind, in order for this type of approach to be successful the researcher must be appropriately empathetic (Saunders et al, 2008).

### 3.3.3 Realism

Realism, not unlike positivism, approaches research in a very factual, almost scientific way; in that, what is true and real is with what we can smell, touch, see and hear (Saunders et al 2008). Saunders et al (2008), discuss how the realist believes that objects exist independently of us knowing they exist. Thus, the realist’s attitude is constantly changing as the understanding of the object develops.

The research philosophies employed for this paper will be both **interpretivism** and **positivism**. Positivism, as its more quantitative approach will be appropriate in areas that will
employ deductive reasoning such as the survey, and interpretivism and its more qualitative approach will be employed in interviews.

3.2 Research Approach

Building on what was discussed in the first „layer”, the second area of the research onion is „research approach”. The two types of research approach that can be employed, according to Saunders et al (2008), are inductive and deductive approaches, these are discussed below.

3.2.1 Deductive

The deductive approach (informally known as the top-down approach) is used when looking to test a theory (hypothesis). As highlighted by Yin (2003) a deductive approach is employed when the research is looking to test an existing theory, however this also includes testing a conceptual model or theory that one has created in order to organise and direct the paper.

3.2.2 Inductive

The inductive approach (informally known as the bottom-up approach) is used when the researcher is looking to develop theory around and observation or empirical evidence (Saunders et al, 2008). This approach usually starts off looking at a particular area and then develops the understanding around it, essentially one looks at existing data, with no real structure in place yet, and then seeks to develop themes around these findings (Saunders et al, 2008).

The below graph highlights the differences between the two approaches;
As I’m looking to test the theory set out in the conceptual model, this paper will be employing a **deductive approach**, in that it will make assumptions based on that theory, test them and make conclusions based on the results. However, it would be inaccurate to state that this paper will apply a solely deductive reasoning approach. As highlighted in the below graph there are stages within the research that an **inductive approach** will be used, specifically interviews.

Figure 7: Adopted from Trochim (2001)

Figure 8: Research Approach Model - Based on research approaches examined by Saunders et al (2008)
3.3 Research Strategy

The next layer of the Onion is the „research strategy”, this is essentially the different methods employed in order to answer the research questions and can include, surveys, case studies, ethnography, action research, guided approach and experiments (Saunders et al, 2008).

For this research, surveys and interviews will be employed.

A survey will be used in order to research people who currently use Facebook and Twitter, including information on what they think of Social Media marketing, and if they’ve ever bought anything off the back of interaction with a brand Facebook / Twitter page. There will be additional interviews with decision makers within social media departments / organisation in order to develop and cross reference findings.

3.4 Research Choice

This area refers to the three choices of research methods highlighted by Saunders et al (2008), which include:

**Mono Method** – Using a single quantitative or qualitative data gathering approach and corresponding analysis procedure (Saunders et al, 2008).

**Multi Method** – Using more than one quantitative or qualitative data gathering approach and corresponding analysis procedures, but not both (Saunders et al, 2008).

**Mixed Method** – This is a form of multi-method where both quantitative and qualitative data gathering and corresponding analysis procedures are used (Saunders et al, 2008).

As this proposed research will use both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews) (as highlighted in Figure 8) a **mixed-method** approach will be chosen. It is felt that this approach will allow the research to develop a better understanding of quite a complex, multi-faceted area.

3.5 Time Horizons

As highlighted by Saunders et al (2008), there are two types of time horizons which include **cross-sectional** and **longitudinal** studies.
In order to identify which one is ideal we must look at the research and ask, “Is there a time constraint in place that would mean that the research has to be undergone within a short period of time or even a precise moment in time?”. If so, then this would be cross-sectional. This would be more suited in order to compare a phenomenon at a particular moment in time, such as benchmarking a service encounter (Saunders et al, 2008). If there is less of a need to restrict the research time frame then a longitudinal study would be more appropriate as it means the research can evolve.

As this study is looking to test existing variables, social media and its impact on consumer behaviour, it will be applying a **cross-sectional** approach in that it will look to examine the effect of one variable on another at a given time.

**3.6 Variables**

It is also important to understand the variables that will be considered throughout the research. In the case of the conceptual model that will be tested, these variables include:

**3.6.1 Organisation”s current approach on Facebook**
- Customer engagement Methods
- Product Highlights
- Consumer Dialogue Techniques

**3.6.2 Effect of brand”s approach**
- Attitudes - The way consumers perceive the brand
- Loyalty – Customers loyalty towards the brand
- Trust – Consumers trust in relation to the brand

**3.6.3 Required outcome**
- Customer decisions – Customer decisions around the brand (including purchase)
- Purchase – Purchasing a product from the organisation

**3.7 Data collection and data analysis**

Firstly, in this area it is important to identify if the way we are collecting the data is worthwhile, in that, for surveys and interviews the researcher won”t be told what people want them to hear rather than what is actually happening. For example, if we interview senior
management are we just going to get a positive response no matter what? (Saunders et al, 2008)

The approach to this research will be exploratory and explanatory. Exploratory as it seeks to develop understanding around an area that is just emerging (Saunders et al, 2008). One of the main facets in exploratory research is examining existing literature and findings. With this in mind, one using an exploratory approach must be aware that the research may evolve or change depending on additional findings. Explanatory as the research seeks to test the conceptual model and ultimately identify the relationship between two variables - Social Media Marketing / Consumer behaviour (Saunders et al, 2008). Most of the data captured in this paper will be quantitative in nature however the research will also be obtaining a lot of qualitative data through interviews.

Both secondary and primary research will be conducted in order to successfully answer the research question. Quantitative research will allow a general understanding of Facebook and Twitter penetration in Ireland as well as other statistics that will inform the development of the research. Qualitative research will also be incorporated to build on the findings of the quantitative research and get a more detailed understanding in order to successfully test the conceptual model. “Because each type of data collection has its strengths and weaknesses, the combination of survey and non-survey research can provide a potentially richer and more complete view of an issue than using a single data source”. (Baker & Mukherjee, 2007: 12)

3.7.1 Primary Data Collection

The primary qualitative data collection will be structured email interviews with both the Marketing Manager of Sony Ireland’s (Aisling Walsh) and a social strategist of a large American marketing agency (Lisa Byrne), Lisa is also a successful blogger and co-founder of DJ Wine Week. Usually structured interviews would form a part of quantitative research, however the interview approaches have been targeted specifically to the organisation in order to get a more in-depth understanding of current practices. Essentially in these interviews the researcher is looking to identify how these organisations approach social media in order to help answer some peripheral questions that may arise from the survey. The interview will also help the research understand what companies are looking to achieve by having a social
media presence. As highlighted by Peisan (2005) interviews will allow the research to gain a more in-depth, company-introspective view.

The primary quantitative data collection will be done through a survey of approximately 150+ Facebook users. Each survey will be 13 questions and will be done electronically through a Survey Monkey link. This will ensure that the survey is easily accessible. The survey will contain a mix of open and closed questions and look to identify information around why people choose to like social media pages, if they actively engage with brands on social media, what types of posts they respond to the most, if they feel their attitudes and trust have been effected by interacting with a brand on social media and if they’ve every purchased a product off the back of interacting with a brand on social media. The survey will also ask age and gender questions to see if there are any other findings that may help develop recommendations and conclusions in the area.

### 3.8 Secondary Data Collection

The secondary data collection will be done primarily through websites such as SocialBakers, Mashable, Facebook and Twitter where one can get insights into social media penetration including demographic and geographic information. The paper will also draw on research around social media from other sources such as academics and organisations.

### 3.9 Data Analysis

As discussed the primary source of quantitative data capture will be done on [SurveyMonkey.com](http://SurveyMonkey.com). SurveyMonkey allows the researcher to create and edit a survey with ease. The full SurveyMonkey package will be purchased which will mean that all the information gathered can be easy transferred into a selection of graphs, charts and other explanatory visual forms. Also, the detail delivered by SurveyMonkey will allow the results to be presented in a way that the reader will clearly be able to identify the impact of different variables in the conceptual model such as means, percentages, mode and medium.

With regards to the quantitative analysis, there will be two people interviewed in structured email interviews. The interviews will work to test the theory set out in the conceptual model, further examine findings from the surveys and develop additional knowledge within the area.
3.10 Population and Sample

As highlighted by Saunders et al (2008), in relation to the survey sample. It is neither possible nor necessary to survey the entire Facebook using population (a census). For the purpose of this research a sample will be taken of this population.

The two types of sampling techniques put forward by Saunders et al (2008) are: Probability or representative sampling and non-probability or judgemental sampling.

This research will use non-probability. As highlighted by Saunders et al (2008), this type of sampling is more appropriate when making generalisations to theory (conceptual model). Saunders et al (2008) also highlights that as this approach is less structured than probability sampling, it is important to back up any research with additional forms until you have data saturation. As it is not feasible to get an appropriate sample of the entire Irish social media using population, this technique offers a sufficient alternative.

For the purpose of the survey, self-selecting sampling will be undergone and a link will be posted on various Facebook and Twitter pages as well as other blogs. Also, convenience sampling will be used but only to strengthen the findings of the self-selecting approach.

For the purpose of the qualitative research (interviews) the research will employ purposive sampling and choose the cases /persons that are best suited in order to answer the research question (Saunders et al, 2008).

3.11 Ethical Issues

As highlighted by Saunders et al (2008), there are many ethical issues that may arise throughout the research and it is important for the researcher to be aware that these can be present at different stages throughout the project.

The potential ethical issues in this research paper are code of conduct within the organisations as well as with the individuals that will be interviewed. One must also be aware that certain areas may be considered company sensitive or confidential. Other issues around data protection must be considered and the organisation and/or individual must be made clearly aware what the research is for and how the information gathered in the research will be used.
3.12 Limitations to the Research

Cost: There is a cost involved in purchasing the SurveyMonkey package. However it is month on month. If the research develops, another survey may need to be conducted and the exercise can become quite costly.

Time: The time taken to conduct the paper including preparation, research, analysing findings and drawing conclusions could be excessive and is limited to mainly weekends. This may mean a lot of the work will have to be done before or after business hours.

Sample Size: It is felt that the sample size needed in order to get a broad understanding of the area would be 150+, and approximately 2 interviews, if this is not achieved the sample may become insufficient.

Access to library / resources: Access to research materials as well as literature is essential to successfully completing the research however this can only be accessed for certain hours during the day and it will likely have to be done during the weekends.

3.13 Conclusion

In the research mythology stage we have identified some key approaches that the research paper will employ when looking to answer the research question. The paper will use both interpretivism and positivism approaches when looking to conduct the research. Primarily the research will be employing a deductive approach when creating and testing the conceptual model, however there are instances in the paper when an inductive approach will be used.

Regarding the research strategy, the paper will be adopting a mixed-method approach as both qualitative and quantitative research methods will be used. When considering time horizons, this paper will be applying a cross-sectional approach. The main variables that will be examined are those outlined in the conceptual model. At the data analysis stage both exploratory and explanatory approaches will be used to answer the research objectives, these include both surveys and interviews. The researcher has also identified any potential ethical issues and limitations that may arise throughout the paper.
4. Data Analysis

This area of the paper will present the results of both the questioners (quantitative analysis) and interviews (qualitative analysis). Here I will simply present the results and am not looking to draw conclusions at this stage. Firstly I will go through the results from my questionnaire which was devised in order to gauge the influence of social media in the consumer decision making process, and then I will present the results from my interviews. Other interesting areas have arisen when examining the research in relation to gender. These areas pose questions that will be discussed later in the paper.

4.1 Information about the survey sample

The sample is made up of 160 people. 73.2% are between the ages of 25 - 34, 13.4% are between 35 - 44, 8.3% are 18-24, 2.5% are 55-64, 1.9% is 13-17 and 0.6% are 65+. The results presented are an almost 50:50 split with 50.3% of respondents being female and 49.7% of respondents being male.

Figure 9: How old are you? - Q2
4.2 Do you use Facebook or Twitter?

This question was devised in order to identify the levels of Facebook and Twitter use across the sample, the question was developed to investigate findings in the industry review stage about the considerable differences between the amount of Facebook and Twitter users.

As highlighted below the largest proportion of the respondents at 62.7% use both Facebook and Twitter, 34.8% only use only Facebook and an extremely small percentage of the respondents, 1.2%, choose to only use Twitter. 1.2% use neither Facebook nor Twitter (these respondents were then automatically removed from the survey).
4.3 Do you follow any company pages on Facebook and Twitter?

This question was devised in order to identify the level at which respondents follow brands on Facebook and/or Twitter.

84.3% of respondents choose to follow brands on Facebook and/or Twitter.

When this statistic was analysed by age it was identified that the highest percentage of respondents that follow brands was 18-24 years with 83.3%.
4.4 Do you read posts in your timeline from brands?

This question was devised in order to identify if followers of brands on social media read posts from brands that appear in their feeds. Overall 74.3% of people read posts by brands on Facebook and/or Twitter.

![Figure 13: Do you read posts in your timeline from companies/brands? - Q5](image)

4.5 Have you ever interacted with a brand on Facebook or Twitter?

The purpose of this question was to ascertain if people who follow brands actively engage with them on social media. It was devised from research which identified that people are utilising brands pages more to converse with the organisation and other fans about the product/service and their experiences.

The graph below shows that the percentage of respondents who actually interact with brands on social media is 67.8%, these interactions can include activity such as liking a company’s post, commenting on a page, asking a question and mentioning a post.
4.6 What types of brand posts interest you the most?

Using information gathered in the literature review stage and incorporating findings from the industry review, this question was devised in order to identify what types of posts from brands on social media consumers respond to the most.

Overall the types of posts that fans / followers prefer are those that supply useful information about the brand, which received approximately 60 number one ratings, followed by non company-specific current event posts (e.g., good luck to the Irish rugby team) and then posts where a company looks to engage their followers in conversation. The type of posts that was rated the least favourable were those where the company looks to engage people in conversations (e.g., How is everyone today?).
4.7 Has liking/following a social media page ever changed your mind about the brand for better or worse?

This question was created in order to identify the effect of social media pages on the respondents' perception of the brand, and was devised to gauge brands’ effect on customer attitudes.

62.8% of respondents feel that that liking/following a social media page has influenced their perception of brands in some way, 31.7% of respondents feel that social media pages have effected their perception on the brand in both a positive and negative way, 29% of respondents feel social media pages have effected their perception in just a positive way, only 2.1% of respondents feel that social media has effected their perception of a brand in a purely negative way, and 37.2% of respondents feel that social media hasn’t effected their perception of a brand for better or worse.
4.8 Have you ever heard of a positive or negative customer experience through Facebook or Twitter?

This question was devised in order to identify the potential "word of mouth" that Facebook and Twitter facilitate.

The results show that 82.1% of the 140 respondents to this question have heard about a positive or negative customer experience through Facebook. The results also show that, of 120 respondents to this question, 52.9% have heard of a positive or negative customer experience through Twitter.
4.9 Do you agree with this statement, ‘I would trust a brand more if I knew they were actively engaging with their customers in real-time on Facebook and Twitter’?

This question was devised in order to identify how impactful social media marketing is on brand „trust”, one of the key metrics we’re looking to measure / test in the conceptual model. 38.2% of overall respondents strongly agreed, 33.3% somewhat agreed, 22.2% neither agreed or disagreed, 2.1% somewhat disagreed, 4.2% strongly disagreed.
4.10 Do you agree with this statement, ‘my interaction with a brand on Facebook / Twitter (good or bad) could affect my loyalty towards a brand overall’?

This question was devised to identify the effect of social media on brand loyalty. The results saw that the highest percentage of respondents found that their interactions with brands on Facebook and Twitter did impact their loyalty. 37.5% strongly agreed, 36.1% somewhat agreed, 18.1% neither agreed or disagrees, 4.2% somewhat disagreed, 4.2% strongly disagreed.

Figure 19: Do you agree with this statement, ‘my interaction with a brand on Facebook / Twitter (good or bad) could affect my loyalty towards a brand overall’? -Q11

4.11 When purchasing a product, have you ever referred to social media brand pages for any of the following reasons?

The question was devised by looking at information gathered in the literature review stage about the reasons people choose to visit social media brand pages as well as information gathered when researching the ‘information search’ section of the consumer decision making process.
The highest number of respondents, 75, choose to research brands on social media to see what other people are saying about them”, the next most popular reason to research a page is to “look for deals” (discounts or competitions), the third most popular reason, 40, is to ask the company a question directly, finally 33 respondents chose other reasons for researching social media pages and these based on the open-ended responses these consisted of people who wished to complain and people who wished to source contact details.

![Bar Chart]

Figure 20: When purchasing a product, have you ever referred to social media brand pages for any of the following reasons? – Q12

4.12 Has a company’s social media page ever prompted or influenced your purchase decision?

The question was devised in order to identify if interacting with a brand on social media has influenced purchase decision or prompted actual purchase. It was created in order to aid in answering the research objectives / questions defined in the conceptual model. The results found that 59.9 percent of respondents found that they have been influenced or prompted to purchase a product by interacting with a brand on social media.
4.13 Additional Findings – Gender Usage

When examining the research some additional findings were identified highlighting some noticeable differences in responses from different genders. These findings are presented below.
4.13.1 Do you use Facebook and / or Twitter?

51.9% of women use both Facebook and Twitter and 48.2% use only Facebook, none of the female respondents use only Twitter, however 73.7% of men use both Facebook and Twitter, 23.7% use only Facebook and 2.6% use only Twitter.

Figure 22 - Women social media use

Figure 23: Men's social media use
4.13.2 Do you follow and company pages on Facebook or Twitter?

89.3% of women choose to follow brands on Facebook and/or Twitter where 78.7% of men choose to follow brands on Facebook and/or Twitter.

Figure 24: Percentage of women that follow brands on social media

Figure 25: Percentage of men that follow brands on social media
4.13.3 Do you read posts in your timeline from brands?

79.7% of women read posts from brands on social media while, comparatively, the lesser amount of 68% of men surveyed actively read brand posts.

Figure 26: Percentage of women that read brand posts

Figure 27: Percentage of men that read brand posts
4.13.4 Have you ever interacted with a company on Facebook or Twitter?

73.3% of women actively engage with brands on Facebook and/or Twitter while the lesser amount of 60.8% of men do.

Figure 28: Percentage of women that interact with brands on social media

Figure 29: Percentage of men that interact with brand on social media
4.13.5 Has liking / following a social media page ever changed you mind about a brand for the better or worse?

When broken down into the genders, significantly less women feel that their interactions with brands on social media has changed their perceptions in some way at only 54.1%, however at over fifteen percent more at 70.6%, men feel that their interactions with brands on social media have influenced their attitudes.

Another noticeable statistic here is that when compared against women’s responses, a higher proportion of men’s attitudes have been affected in a positive way.

Figure 30: Social media’s influence on women's perceptions

Figure 31: Social media's influence on men's perceptions
4.13.6 Do you agree with this statement, „I would trust a brand more if I knew they were actively engaging with their customers in real-time on Facebook and Twitter”?

37% of women strongly agreed, 28.8% somewhat agreed, 28.8% neither agreed or disagreed, 1.4% somewhat disagreed, 4.1% strongly disagreed.

38.2% of men strongly agreed, 38.2% somewhat agreed, 16.2% neither agreed or disagreed, 2.9% somewhat disagreed, 4.4% strongly disagreed.
4.13.7 Do you agree with this statement, “my interaction with a brand on Facebook / Twitter (good or bad) could affect my loyalty towards a brand overall”?

When broken down into the sexes, 34.2% of women strongly agreed, 35.6% somewhat agreed, 20.5% neither agreed or disagreed, 5.1% somewhat disagreed and 4.1% strongly disagreed.

39.7% of men strongly agreed, 38.2% somewhat agreed, 16.2% neither agreed or disagreed, 2.9% somewhat disagreed and 2.9% strongly disagreed.

Figure 34: Impact of social media on brand loyalty for women

Figure 35: Impact of social media on brand loyalty for men
4.13.8 When purchasing a product, have you ever referred to social media brand pages for any of the following reasons?

When observing these findings across the genders, women’s responses were in-line with the initial findings. However, with men it was found that the second most common reason was “none of the above”, theories around this will be discussed later in this paper.

Figure 36: Women’s uses of brand pages

Figure 37: Men’s uses of brand pages
4.13.8 Has a company’s social media page ever prompted or influenced your purchase decision?

When examining the findings of this question across the genders, it was found that 63% of women have been influenced or prompted to purchase by social media and the lesser amount of 56.1% of men gave the same response.

Figure 38: Social media’s influence on purchase decision - women

Figure 39: Social media’s influence on purchase decision - men
4.14 Qualitative Research Responses

Aisling Walsh of Sony Ireland and Lisa Byrne of Pappas Group and co-founder, DC Wine Week were interviewed at this stage. Both of these organisations use social media to engage with their customers and consider it an integral part of their integrated marketing communications.

4.14.1 Organisations” use of Social Media

Sony Ireland’s main form of social media is Facebook, highlighting “that 2.2 million of our population are on Facebook as opposed to 527,000 on Twitter”. Sony feel that Facebook is a place where they can really interact with and engage with their fans, they also highlight the virility of posts on Facebook is 10 time that of Twitter. Sony also state that Facebook is a platform that they can actually “own”, in that, it is closer to a webpage format. They also highlight that the benefits of Facebook come at a cost, but that these costs are of value when compared to those associated with traditional media.

Lisa Byrne uses many social media platforms and highlights the benefits of each for the end-users.

4.14.1 Social Media”s impact on Purchase Decision

Both interviewees are confident that that social media can greatly impact purchase decision. Sony highlights that “22% of all Irish Internet users are more likely to buy a product of a brand that they follow on a social networking site”. Sony is confident that the more a brand engages with someone on social media and looks to “ignite their curiosity” the more likely they are to purchase. Sony also highlight that for this to be effective the rest of the marketing mix also has to be right. Lisa Byrne at Pappas Group highlights that in her experience most social media sites have led to a purchase decision; however Twitter doesn’t seem to be that impactful.

4.14.2 Social Media”s Impact on Brand Perception

Both interviewees agreed that consumers are more likely to trust a brand if they know they are actively engaging with people in real time on social media.
Sony highlights how brands like themselves are often seen as “faceless corporations” and that activity on social media helps to “humanize” their brand and that this helps the customer sense that they are really listening.

Lisa Byrne compares non-interaction on social media to a static website, no different to reading an online menu. Lisa discusses how social media can offer a “human touch” and that brands should embrace this, “thus building credibility and trust”.

In relation to posts being visible on a social media page, both interviewees are confident that this should be the case. Sony highlighted that positive and negative responses are going to be written about brands on the internet and that social media pages give brands a great platform where they can respond to customer queries. Sony will work to resolve all issues on their pages before handing over any escalated issues to their customer service team. Lisa Byrne highlights that people are looking for conversations, dialogue and that they “want to be heard in real time by real people”. Lisa also highlights that the conversation should continue in the same way the question was posted (if on timeline, respond on a timeline).

4.14.3 Social Media and Overall Strategy

Sony initially saw social media as an add-on to their overall company strategy but it now plays a more pivotal role in their marketing campaigns, it is also an important part of their customer service strategy. Sony measures the effectiveness of social media through fan growth, engagement and media spend return. Lisa Byrne feels that social media should be incorporated into every marketing activity a company executes, and discusses how people don’t want to hear about a brand from the brand but they want to hear about a brand from their friends. This is achieved by giving them something to talk about, “something to share, something to like”. Lisa measures the success of social media campaigns not just in likes and followers but looks to attach measurable goals, benchmarks and metrics. In order to identify these benchmarks it is important to identify the where, when, what and why associated with social media campaigns.

4.14.4 Building Engagement on pages

Sony reports that posts with attached photos get the most engagement on their page. Lisa Byrne, who is more concerned with creating content, discusses how content should be
“timely and relevant” but to ensure that it is on-brand. Lisa highlights that posts that don’t relate to the brand are negative, and recommends asking fans what types of information they would like to hear from the company. Lisa also finds that visual posts help to generate more interaction on social media.

When asked if they target posts towards any particular gender, Sony said that it is not something that they currently do but that they do focus posts around lifestyles. Lisa Byrne feels that it is important to consider gender when creating a post, considering things like the tone of voice, volume and ways and places to share.
5. Discussions

5.1 Introduction

This study was designed to gauge the level of impact social media marketing, primarily Facebook and Twitter, has on consumer decision making with a focus on Ireland. Throughout the study the research has been looking to test the conceptual framework drawn from both a literary review of the existing research as well as the industry review of current trends and happenings within the Irish market.

This area will firstly look at the findings and how they prove or disprove the framework laid out in the conceptual model. Examining the conceptual model will be looked at in three sections as outlined in figure 40 (sections of conceptual model). Then some additional findings drawn from the research around the impact of social media marketing on gender will be presented, after which it will then at how these finding can potentially impact marketers. Finally it will also examine any potential limitations that were encountered.

![Figure 40: Sections of conceptual model](image)

5.2 Relevance of survey respondents to findings

The results found that the largest section of respondents is of the 25-34 age group, 73.2%. These findings add additional gravitas to the research as this is the age group that would hold the largest section of people with disposable income, ABC1s. This is also an age group that
has grown up in the world of social media and the topic is very much relevant within their everyday lives.

The 50:50 split across genders is also a very positive finding as it allows for more accurate information in relation to the sexes, being that the number of respondents from each will be large enough to draw admissible conclusions.

5.3 Facebook and Twitter Use

As was highlighted in the industry review, there is a significant difference in the amount of active users of Facebook and Twitter, especially in Ireland (where almost all of the respondents are from). This is highlighted by a few areas in the findings. Firstly of people that use Facebook or Twitter exclusively, 34.8% use Facebook exclusively and only 1.2% use Twitter, that being said, the highest proportion of respondents use both Facebook and Twitter.

These findings would suggest that if an organisation is to use one form of social media more or exclusively it would be Facebook. This argument is also strengthened by findings in the qualitative research which found that Sony find a lot more value in Facebook. Also, as such a large percentage of respondents use both forms of social media, an organisation can leverage both to speak to their customers and generate repetition to help strengthen a message or brand image.

5.4 Interactions with Brands (do you read posts from companies) - Interaction

The results have shown that a high proportion of respondents (73%) actively read posts from organisations on their timelines. Being that ultimately this is a form of advertising, these figures are significant. As highlighted by Mihart (2012) in the literary review, one of the first aspects of the consumer decision making process is the information search stage where people will reference their „evoked set“. Knowing that fans and followers of brands on social media pages are so likely to read posts, one could deduce that brands that are followed would fall into this evoked set, hence increasing the likelihood of purchase consideration.
5.5 Interacting with brands on Facebook and Twitter - Interaction

A very large proportion of respondents have interacted with brands on social media, this finding also strengthens the argument towards the effectiveness of the platform and concurs with McAfee et al (2011) who describes users of social media, not as passive consumers of information, but as collaborators who are constantly editing, sharing, discussing and creating content. As highlighted in the interview with Aisling Walsh from Sony, it’s these interactions with brands on social media that will remove the “faceless corporation” association that people have with larger organisations.

The findings have also highlighted, people are drawn to social media pages not only to find out useful information about the brand but to also see what other people are saying about the organisation, making it even more important for companies to ensure that they’re promptly responding to any customers. With such a high absorption rate and astonishing engagement levels, it’s more important than ever to ensure that dialogue with consumers is effective, not only with who the company is talking to, but with the others who may be watching.

5.6 Social Media’s effect on Attitudes - Effect

The research found that social media marketing can greatly impact customer attitudes, in fact 62.8% of respondents found that following a social media page has changed their mind about a brand for the better or worse, these findings are in-line with those of Akar & Topcu (2011) who also found that consumer attitudes can be affected by social media. The findings also indicate that a higher percentage of respondents have felt that interacting with a brand on social media has affected their attitude towards a brand for the better with an extremely low proportion indicating that their perceptions have been impacted in a negative way exclusively.

Affecting and influencing attitudes is a key facet in the consumer decision making process and is untimely one of the most important aspects of social media marketing. Knowing that social media can be so influential on attitudes highlights the importance of being strategic around planning in this space; this strengthens arguments about the importance of strategic planning highlighted by Kaplan & Haenlein (2010).
5.7 Social Media’s effect on Loyalty - Effect

When looking at social media’s influence on brand loyalty, this paper is looking to identify how the platform can be used in order to strengthen loyalty towards a brand, outside of the standard, more obvious, loyalty programmes such as frequent flyer and so on. Being that we’re looking more at high-involvement, expensive products that aren’t purchased regularly, standard loyalty programmes are somewhat redundant. As highlighted in the literary review, brand loyalty is a term with many facets and represents a consumer’s likeliness to purchase a brand now and again in the future. Loyalty is also greatly intertwined within a customer’s attitude towards a brand, as is represented in the conceptual model.

The results found that over 70% of respondents felt that their interactions with an organisation on either Facebook or Twitter actively impacted their loyalty towards a brand, being that brand loyalty is a massive factor in the consumer decision making process, these findings are significant.

5.8 Social Media’s affect on Trust - Effect

As highlighted in the literary review, building customer trust is an important facet within the consumer decision making process. The survey found that 71.5% of respondents felt that they would trust a company more if they knew that they were actively engaging with their customers in real time on social media. The reason why this question was focused around engagement rather than other types of posts (competitions and so on) is that the customer engagement side of social media differentiates this communication tool from other forms of customer communication.

The fact that customers are more inclined to trust a brand if they know they are actively engaging with people on social media would suggest that it is important for people to be able to discourse with a company. Also, if customers see that companies are actively helping their fans with issues in a friendly and individualist way, suggests that the organisation actively cares about their customers and is not just out to sell their products. This perceived caring would aid in generating the extremely important „trust factor“. These findings concur with the Akar and Topcu (2011) research that highlights that customers tend to trust information supplied on social media pages more than standard modes of communication.
Findings from the interviews also strengthen this argument as both interviewees highlighted the importance of generating rapport and trust with customers. Where openness on social media is important to building trust it can also mean the organisation is more susceptible to negative customer dialogue; the research found that 82.1% of respondents have heard of positive or negative customers experiences through Facebook and 52.9% of respondents have heard of a positive or negative experience through Twitter. This reiterates the importance of the quality of dialogue and investment made in social media as part of a company’s over-arching marketing strategy.

5.9 Social media’s Effect on Purchase - Outcome

One of the simpler yet one of the most important questions asked in the survey. An extremely high percentage of respondents have said that they have been prompted to purchase off the back of their interactions with a brand on social media. This raises some very interesting points. Firstly, it highlights how influential social media can be on purchase, an area where there is a lot of ambiguity in the available research. It also helps justify the massive time and energy investments brands are putting behind this platform. It also highlights that respondents are aware that their interactions with brands on social media are ultimately impacting their purchase decisions, an aspect they would be unaware of in a lot of other forms of advertising. As discussed in the literary review, when interacting with organisations on social media, consumers are considered to be active contributors. Perhaps this higher level of involvement also leads to a higher level of awareness, an awareness that consumers are willing to accept. An information “qui pro quo” may be present where fans / followers are happy to be marketed to if they get the information they require about the brand.

Where social media has been mainly considered a part of a larger integrated marketing communication there is evidence here to suggest that as its influence on consumer behaviour increases in the coming years that it may even be the most important facet in the process.

5.10 Additional findings - Social Media and Gender

When broken down into the genders, approximately half of all women respondents use Facebook exclusively and the other half will use both Facebook and Twitter. Essentially every female respondent uses Facebook, highlighting the importance of this platform when
targeting this segment. When looking at men, we see that 73% of this segment will use both Facebook and Twitter with 2.6% using exclusively Twitter and the remainder using exclusively Facebook. These findings show that when targeting men Twitter becomes an even more important platform and the findings would suggest that in order to target 100% of men then Twitter must be used.

It was also found that a relatively higher percentage of women choose to follow brands on social media, this would suggest that women are more open to the benefits of following brands. In fact the answers given around why respondents go to social media pages would suggest that women understand what brand pages have to offer more than men. In the same findings for men a relative high percentage responded „other“ when looking to identify why they choose to follow brands; however most of the available ways a person can engage with a brand on social media were listed. This would suggest that men have a lesser understanding as to the purposes and, in turn, potential benefits of following brands on social media.

Interesting is the information around weather men and women actively read posts from organisations on their timelines. 79% of women will actively spend time reading posts from brands in their timelines or feeds where 68% of men will. This information adds to the discussion around how men and women perceive brands on social media.

Another interesting finding is that 54.1% of women and 70.6% of men feel that their interactions with an organisation on social media can change the opinion of a brand for the better or worse. What is also evident is that a higher proportion of men, 35.3%, seem to have been positively affected by their interactions with a brand than women at only 23%. These findings would suggest that men’s opinions of a brand are actively more influenced by social media.

The findings have also shown that across the genders that there isn’t much of a difference on the effectiveness of social media’s influence on loyalty, however a slightly higher percentage of men do seem to be of the belief that their brand loyalty can positively or negatively be affected by their interactions with organisations on social media.

When examining the findings around trust it is interesting to see that a higher percentage of men believe that they would trust a brand more if they knew they were actively engaging with their customers in real time on social media. These findings would strengthen the argument that men’s opinions of a brand are actively more influenced by social media.
Interesting given that above findings, that in the final question when looking to gauge if interacting with a brand on social media has ever influenced purchase decision, a higher percentage of women at 63% in comparison to 56% of men feel that a purchase has been influenced by social media. Where these percentages are quite close it does raise some interesting questions around if brands should actively be looking to talk to the different sexes in different ways. This question was raised in the interview section and it was found that brands like Sony don’t differentiate posts based on gender.

5.11 Limitations to the findings

When drawing conclusions on the research there were a few limitations encountered. Firstly, the sample is not a reflection of the entire social media using population as this would have been impractical and given the resources, almost impossible. Also, the age variation of the sample is focused on a particular area, where this area would contain a considerable amount of the ABC1 population it perhaps limits the findings slightly as other proportions of the population are also susceptible to different forms of social media. Also, the number of Twitter respondents is relatively lower in comparison to Facebook followers, a more even respondent rate would have helped develop the findings further, and this is largely due to the penetration of both forms of social media in Ireland.
6. Implications

6.1 Implications for Managers

6.1.1 Work to increase Fan Base

This research has identified that there are different reasons why people choose to visit an organisation’s social media page including, to see what people are saying about a brand, to look for deals and so on. However an important aspect to consider is that whatever the reason they’ve landed on a page, even if it’s only to enter a competition, you will be able to effect and influence their perception of the brand. This can be compared to a website generating traffic, it’s about conversion once they hit the site. For measurability companies need to determine measurable goals on social media.

Another benefit of increased page “likes” is, if a person likes a page there is an increased likelihood that the product will be considered in their “evoked set” in the information search stage of the consumer decision making process.

As highlighted by Bruhen et al (2012) where traditional marketing is great for increasing brand awareness, social media is stronger at increasing brand image.

6.1.2 Be “Always On”

Akar and Topcu (2011) found that not only can customers be positively impacted by their experience on social media but they can also develop and negative brand impression too. This paper identified that the ramifications of a poor customer experience on social media can easily be exacerbated through internet-based word of mouth can spread at an alarming rate. 82% of survey respondents found that they hear about a positive or negative brand experiences through social media. It is for this reason that if a brand is going to invest in building their social media presence that they will in-turn have to invest in a skilled resource to man these pages. If a comment or post goes without a response or if the response lacks tact, bearing in-mind that your consumers are watching, then the negative impact could be considerable.
6.1.3 Be wary of your Audience

Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) discuss how a lot must be considered when planning social media activity. With the insight tools that are currently available to marketers today it is becoming more and more important to identify if your fan base match your target demographic and, considering the product you’re looking to sell, there are times when a more tailored and targeted approach may prove more effective. Some of the most obvious implications we can draw from this research is that men and women react to social media in different ways, in particular it seems that social media can affect men’s loyalty more than women’s.

6.1.4 Be Strategic

In order to be as strategic as possible in such a diverse space it is important to identify those areas that remain unchanged, and use these as a foundation for building both short and long term strategies. The conceptual model that was tested in this research is an example of a fundamental approach that can be adopted and used as a foundation when forming a social media strategy.

It is important for brands to ask themselves if they’re using the correct social media platform. As highlighted in the research, Facebook seems to be the best overall platform however Twitter is an ever-growing space that should not be forgotten about and integrated into the strategy, but in some areas personalisation is difficult on Twitter and consumers tend to research on Facebook. However the ability to go viral on Twitter and the very notion of “real time” communication is born there.

As social media platforms are evolving and new and innovative ways of engaging with fans are being discovered it is also important for organisations to identify these platforms and starting interacting with customers on them as soon as possible. This will not only add clout to the brand but it will give them the competitive edge in this space as it would be less cluttered.

6.1.5 Understand what makes your fans „Tick”

Chung and Austria (2010) discuss that fans aren’t necessarily looking to be entertained on social media, and are looking more for relevant information. Despite the level of engagement and loyalty that is generated through social media activities, fans aren’t necessarily looking to
befriend an organisation, so asking how a fan is doing or asking people what they did for the weekend will disinterest fans, they would much rather prefer to answer these questions when interacting with their actual friends. That’s not to say don’t be playful and casual with fans but it is important to ensure that the organisation remains aware that they are the company and the fan is the customer as, according to the research, it is not something that the customer will forget. As was highlighted by Lisa Byrne at Pappas Group, a recommendation would be to survey fans to identify the kinds of posts and conversations that they would prefer to have with the organisation.

6.1.6 Use social media to influence Attitudes, build Loyalty and develop Trust

Where customers will always be wary of information supplied directly by organisations, they will trust information found on social media a lot more, as highlighted by (Akar and Topcu, 2011). The social media platform is considered to be a lot more open and honest as it’s a place where an organisation can talk to its fans and not at them in a forum-type platform. Up until the advent of social media conversations with organisations were reserved to faceless letters & emails or an often scripted call with a customer care department. There is of course a trade off for this openness, the organisation must identify that in order to facilitate it they will have to let their guard down a bit and essentially expose themselves. Over 70 percent of respondents found that they would trust a brand more if they were actively engaging with their fans / follower on social media, essentially answering questions and responding to tweets. If an organisation is to lock down their timelines to the extent where no customer interactions are viewed the added benefit of building trust with customers who are not actively engaging with the brand is removed; as highlighted in the surveys, one of the main reasons why people visit social media websites is to find out what people are saying about the brand.

6.2 Implications for Future Research

The research has highlighted some really interesting areas for future research. One area would be to look further into what exactly works and doesn’t work on social media posts, and it would be interesting to identify what types of posts different demographics will respond to better, this would work well for companies that have a large product catalogue with many potential audiences, for example a department store.
It would also be useful to further investigate social media marketing’s influence on the “problem recognition” stage of the consumer decision making process as this was not an area this paper focused on. Another interesting area would be to delve further into the area of how men and women perceive and interact with social media. The research has identified some very interesting points that could be investigated here.
7. Conclusion

Social Media is a massive and ever-growing space whose limits extend as far as our own imaginations. Initially social media platforms were created in order to facilitate communication and sharing, essentially to enhance current communication methods; however in more recent years social media has evolved and brought forward many new and exciting possibilities. Social media apps have enabled people to share their lives and experiences with the world and it seems that more and more people are becoming bloggers, reviewers, photographers and critics. Brands have also embraced social media and are forever looking for new and more innovative ways to interact with potential customers.

In the literary review the consumer decision making process was examined in order to identify what aspects of the process are most relevant in social media. Where all areas of the process have relevance within social media it was identified that information search, customer attitudes and purchase decision were the areas that could be most impacted and/or influenced by social media. It was identified that brands are rushing to increase their page likes as they’re aware that if their page is “liked” for whatever reason then a brand is a lot more likely to be considered in a person’s evoked set.

It was also found that customer attitudes towards a brand including perception and trust can also be influenced by social media. The main reason for this is companies are perceived to be more open and trustworthy if they are willing to converse with their customers in an open forum-type platform. Purchase is also a very important area within the decision making process and it was identified that there wasn’t a considerable amount of available information on social media’s impact on actual purchase.

The current social media environment was examined in the literature review and it was identified that the 200+ social media sites can be sub-categorised into discussing, networking, sharing and publishing. It was also identified that Facebook and Twitter are the most commonly used by organisations today.

Brands and their activity and social media was also investigated at this stage and it was found that brands use social media in a variety of ways, mainly as a promotion tool but also because they know there is likely to be a conversation about their brand happening online and it is important to try to bring the conversation to them and monitor and control them as much as possible. It was also found that social media is a great tool when looking to target messaging and ensuring that brands are talking to the right people at the right time. Here it was identified that social media is not about advertising but more about conversations.
Removing the „faceless corporation” tag and allowing the brand to build a relationship with their customers. The research found that traditional advertising is strong at developing brand awareness but that social media was stronger at developing and strengthening brand image.

Social media’s role within the integrated marketing communication was also examined and it was identified that in order to be leveraged as an effective tool and to generate effective customer conversations and IMC approach was required. IMC is a customer-centric approach that puts the customer at the centre of the marketing campaign and works backwards looking at the best ways to communicate directly with their consumers.

An industry review was also conducted in order to gauge the current state of social media penetration in Ireland as well as what types brands Irish people are currently following. Research of some larger brands and what they’re currently doing on social media was also conducted and it was identified that organisations are currently interacting with their fans in three ways on Facebook which include, customer dialogue (conversing with customer), product highlight (highlighting a product or service benefit) and customer engagement (looking to build engagement with customers).

In order to test social media’s influence on buyer behaviour the researcher used the findings of both the literature and industry reviews to create a conceptual model that would combine and build on available theories in the area. In order to test the conceptual model the researcher employed a mixed-method approach of quantitative surveys of 160 social media users and qualitative interviews of two social media strategy managers. Each facet of the conceptual model was considered when creating the survey, the interviews were then created and employed in order to further investigate and develop the survey findings.

The findings identified that social media’s impact on consumer decision making is great and, in fact, perhaps more impactful that the findings in the literature review would have suggested. This is likely due to the fact that social media’s influence is forever growing.

When examining what types of posts customers prefer it was found that most customers prefer product-specific posts. This finding ran in line with information gathered in the literature review which stated that fans of brand pages are not looking to befriend the organisation but mainly interested in finding out useful information about the products and/or services. It was also identified that the posts that fans respond to the least are those where the company looks to actively engage their customer in everyday conversation.

When looking to identify the impact of social media interactions on attitudes, loyalty and trust, the research found that social media’s effect on attitudes was extremely impactful as a very high number of respondents found that their attitude towards a brand can positively
or negatively influenced by interactions on social media, further to this an extremely high percentage also found that their loyalty towards a brand can also be influenced. Another area that was tested was to identify if customer interactions with brands on social media an impact on trust; the results found that social media is very impactful on brand trust.

Another area that was investigated in the research was if in fact these interactions could actually influence a purchase decision or prompt a purchase. The results showed that, yes, building a relationship with customers on social media through developing programs that can influence attitude, loyalty and trust can in fact influence purchase decision.

There were other findings in the research the posed some interesting questions around how different genders interact with brands on social media. The findings showed that women tend to interact with brands more on social media and are also more aware of the potential benefits of following brands, where men showed that they tend to interact with brands less and are less aware of what social media platforms offer, contrary to this the findings showed that men are more likely to be influence by their interactions with brands on social media.

Some qualitative research was also done in order to help develop some of the findings of the surveys in order to find out how companies preview social media, how they measure their interactions with social media and if they converse with different genders in different ways.

The researcher also made some recommendations for marketers. The researcher recommends that organisations should constantly work to increase their fan base as if a person lands on a Facebook page, for whatever reason, (including competitions and so on) there is evidence to suggest that their brand perceptions can be change, also if a person „likes” a page then there is an increased likelihood that that brand will be considered in their „evoked set”. Another recommendation is to be „always on” as leaving a customer question or complaint can have negative implications on the brand in a very short timeframe. The author also recommends that organisations should research their customers and fans and understand what it is they”re looking for in order to make the social media page and interactions more compelling and engaging. The findings also suggest the marketers should be more strategic in their approach to social media and to plan strategically using information that they know will stay static, essentially using a model similar to the conceptual model tested in this paper. Marketers should also be ware of additional forms of social media and rather than playing „catch up” they can add differentiation by being one the first organisations to use emerging social media platforms, this would add credibility to the brand but also reduce immediate competition in the space.
When identifying areas for future research the author identified that further research into exactly what types of post would be the most effective in order to ignite the “problem recognition” stage of the customer decision making process would be beneficial. Also looking deeper into the impacts that social media has across the genders would also be an interesting area for future research.

Finally, the conceptual model that was created at the beginning of the research has been tested and identified as an effective tool when planning future activities and gauging the effectiveness of current approaches.
8. Reflection on learning – Link to Theory

“Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” Kolb (1984, p.38)

In this chapter I will give an overview of the value I have gained from both this research paper and the Masters in Marketing as a whole. This section will highlight the key learning methods adopted through my time in Dublin Business School but also an overview of how I have developed over the past two years and how I plan on bringing these new skills forward into both my personal and work life.

8.1 Learning Theory

Research in the area of learning has identified that there a few stand-out theories in this area, most notably Kolb’s learning Styles model (1984), which is also known as ETL or Kolb’s experimental learning theory. Kolb’s learning cycle looks at four key areas: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. In the college environment, concrete experience would relate to actively going to lectures, reading books in the library and researching information on the likes of Moodle. Reflective observation refers to when someone learns from something that has happened, this might be a reviewing a lecture to identify how it went and potential learning’s from it. Abstract conceptualisation refers to when someone reflects and draws conclusions and allows us to make judgements on what has happened in order to make better, more learned decisions going forward. Active experimentation, essentially as this stage we look to put into practice the learning’s that we have made.

The cycle then begins again
Other academics have also looked at Kolb’s work and used it as the foundation for expanding on learning theories since, another well know learning theory that has been developed out of Kolb’s was put forward by Honey and Mumford (1986). Honey and Mumford looked to categorise learning into four different styles: activist, reflector, theorist, and pragmatist. They highlighted that in order for truly successful learning one must understand which category they fall under and embrace it somewhat. They devised a questionnaire in order to help people better understand what type of learner they are.

Activist: these are those who learn by actively doing something and are people who tend to be a bit more open to new experiences and are usually relatively adventures.

Reflectors tend to think a lot more before making decisions, they like to analyse the data and are usually a lot more cautious.

The theorist tends to think very logically about things and plan carefully. They look to develop theories based on the information to hand.

Pragmatists tend to be a lot more practical and prefer to put available theories into action. Like Activists, they like to make quicker decisions.
So close in origins are the Kolb and Honey & Mumford’s theories that when overlaid one can see how easily the sit together (below).

![Diagram showing Kolb and Honey & Mumford’s learning styles overlaid](image)

**Figure 42: Kolb and Honey & Mumford’s learning styles overlaid**

Even when unaware of the theory I have always considered myself a reflector as I have always looked to assimilate as much information about something before making a decision. That being said, throughout the process of this dissertation I have had to adopt other learning styles, mainly the theorist and pragmatic approaches. The need for these additional learning approaches stemmed from having to look at existing research in social media and consumer behaviour and using this to develop the conceptual model which I then had to test using a somewhat pragmatist approach. I have felt that being exposed to and adopting these learning techniques has really helped me develop my research skills which will not only aid in me in academia but also in my work.

Throughout this masters programme, beyond my academic achievement, one of the most important personal developments is my understating of how I approach the learning process; it will stand to be a valuable skill in my career. As a „reflector” I’ve often gotten somewhat frustrated with the time it has taken me to make important decisions, and throughout this process, and I’ve identified that my „reflector” learning status has helped me
in certain areas but this learning approach alone is not enough when looking to create such a multi-faceted piece of work. It also become evident from the outset that the other learning methods aren’t simply turned on and they themselves are a skill that must be acquired and honed.

8.2 Personal achievements – Added Value

The biggest sense of achievement on completion of the course and dissertation is the overwhelming sense of it was all worth it in the end. Something that people kept telling me throughout the last two years but back then I couldn’t see the light at the end of the tunnel.

I am particularly proud of my dissertation as it is a piece of work that I have invested a lot of time and effort in and is something that I will have forever, I see its completion as a real corner stone in my life.

Another area that I am very proud of is a group project I and my classmates completed around the creation of a new product. As a part of the assessment we were questioned by industry leading entrepreneurs and we were proud to fight for the validity of our product as it was something we were all very passionate about.

8.2.1 Challenges Faced

The main issue that I’ve faced in my dissertation has been time. Almost immediately after completing my academic semester I got a job in the field that I've been looking to get into for years. Being that the role meant a considerably increased work load and significant travel I found that I was working evenings and weekends on work projects to the unfortunate and unavoidable neglect of my dissertation.

Fortunately through the guidance of my supervisor and the extremely helpful teams at DBS I managed to get my submission date postponed. This allowed me to get a firm understating of my role so I was in a position to invest the time need into dissertation.
8.3 Skills obtained

8.3.1 Marketing Skills
Marketing was always an area that I was looking to build my career in but I needed that extra edge to set me apart. I truly feel this MA in marketing course, especially the dissertation stage, helped me not only develop my understanding of the marketing but also help me think beyond standard approaches and bring new and more effective options to the table in my work.

8.3.2 Time Management Skills
My time management skills have benefited greatly from this course. Working full time as well as completing the course meant that every hour of every day counted and there were many occasions where I was under immense time pressure. The advice I received from my lectures and supervisor about how best to manage my time, prioritise my workload and build action plans have been taken on board in all aspects of my day-to-day life.

8.3.3 Researching and Analytics
Researching was an area that I had very little experience in and was an area where I always struggled, however on completion of this masters and dissertation I have developed these skills greatly. This is largely due to the fantastic resources available in the DBS library as well as the advice and support offered by my lecturers and supervisor.

8.3.4 Nothing worth doing is Ever Easy
This masters has thought me that in order to excel you need to ensure that you’re giving 100%. I always knew that a masters would be tough, especially while holding down a full time job however in the first month of the course I wasn’t sure I was going to make it. However I discussed my stresses with my classmates and lecturers and soon realised that so many more people were in the same situation. The answer to achieving this goal was simple: work harder. I feel my work ethic has increased dramatically and has overflowed into every aspect of my life, and is a key factor my career progression in the last two years.
8.3.5 Team work skills

Over the past two years I have worked on some really exciting team projects. The projects have really helped me develop my skills in leadership, negotiation, problem solving, mediation, delegation and conflict resolution.

Working to coordinate on projects, especially on a part-time course was an area that I found particularly tough however the DBS lecturers were always aware of these potential issue and always seemed to ensure to „check-in” with groups to ensure everything was running smoothly.

8.3.6 Plans to apply / Sustain the Learning

From the outset I found that I was incorporating key learning’s from my course and thesis into both my work and personal lives.

I now work in a role that focuses greatly on marketing, the skills and theories I have learned over the past two years have not only helped me bring real value to the role but have given mw the skills needed to bring in newer more effective processes, especially around incorporating social media into our organisation’s overall marketing strategy. I have continued to develop my time management skills throughout the course; this has been a valuable asset to me within my career. Teamwork has also been an asset in my work life.

I utilise the research skills I’ve gained almost daily and find that adding research statistics to discussion around topics to ad a lot more gravitas to my argument and have helped build my profile with senior management.
Bibliography

Books


Tuten, Tracy L. (2008), Advertising 2.0: Social Media Marketing in a Web 2.0 World. Westport, CT: Greenwood


**Articles / Journals**


Bruhn, M; Schoenmuller, V; Schafer. (20120) „Are social media replacing traditional media in terms of brand equity creation?” Management Research Review, Vol. 35, Issue 9


Chen C; Chen P; Huang C. (2012) „Social Behavior & Personality: An International Journal” Vol. 40 Issue 1, p105-114, 10p


Light, L (2005), “Trust is a Must”, Ana Magazine, February


McAfee, A; Howe, J; Surowiecki, J. (2011). „The Revolution will be shared: Social media and innovation”. Research Technology Management, Vol. 54, Issue 1, p64-66


Powers, T; Advincula, D; Austin, M; Graiko, S; Snyder, J. (2012) „Digital and Social Media In the Purchase Decision Process: A Special Report from the Advertising Research Foundation”. Journal of Advertising Research., Vol. 52 Issue 4, p479-489


Yousaf, U; Zulfiqar, R; Aslam, M; Altaf, M. (2012) „Studying Brand Loyality in the Cosmetics Industry” Vol. 8 Issue 4, p327-337

Web


Lunden I. (2012) Techcrunch „Twitter May Have 500M+ Users But Only 170M Are Active, 75% On Twitter’s Own Clients’ Available at http://techcrunch.com/2012/07/31/Twitter-may-have-500m-users-but-only-170m-are-active-75-on-Twitter's-own-clients/ Accessed 02/04/13

SocialBakers (2013), „Ireland Facebook Statistics”, Available at: http://www.socialbakers.com/Facebook-statistics/ireland, Accessed 01/05/13
SocialBakers (2012), „Ireland Facebook Statistics”, Available at:
http://www.socialbakers.com/Facebook-statistics/ireland, Accessed 01/04/12

SocialBakers (2013) „Facebook Page Statistics” Available at
http://www.socialbakers.com/Facebook-pages/brands/ireland/ Accessed on 10/04/13

SocialBakers (Global Facebook Statistics” Available at
(http://www.socialbakers.com/Facebook-statistics/) Accessed on 10/04/12

Wasserman, T. (2011) Mashable, „Social Media Marketing by the Numbers”., Available at
09/04/12

Mashable (No Date). „Social Networking” Available ay
http://mashable.com/follow/topics/social-networking/ Accessed on 10/11/12

Cavazza, F. (2013) „Social Media Landscape 2013”. Available at
http://www.fredcavazza.net/2013/04/17/social-media-landscape-2013/ accessed 20th April

His.ie (No Date) „Social/ Blog Networking” Available at http://www.his.ie/Facebook-
Twitter-social-blog-networking.php Accessed on 01/05/13

Facebook.com (No date) „About Facebook” Available at
https://www.Facebook.com/Facebook/info, Accessed on 01/03/13

Newworld.com (2011) „Twitter Use In Ireland” Available at
Appendices

Appendix 1 - Questionnaire

Thank you for taking my survey about how companies and customers interact on Facebook and Twitter. It’s very short. The survey results will be used to develop thinking in this area and will be presented in a thesis. The survey gathers no personal information about you beyond your age and gender.

Q1. Do you use Facebook and/or Twitter?

Facebook
Twitter
Both
Neither

Q2. How old are you?

13-17
3. What is your gender?
   - Male
   - Female

4. Do you follow any company pages on Facebook or Twitter?
   - Yes
   - No

5. Do you read posts in your timeline from Companies/Brands?
   - Yes
   - No

6. Have you ever interacted with a company on Facebook or Twitter? Eg - Like a company’s post/Comment on page / Ask a question / Mention on post / etc
7. Rating 1-3, which type of company posts would interest you the most?

- Posts that supply useful information about the product
- Posts where the company engages their fans in conversation (e.g., How is everyone today?)
- Non-company-specific current event posts (e.g., Good luck to the Irish Rugby Team)

8. Has liking/following a social media page changed your mind about a brand for the better or worse?

- Better
- Worse
- Both
- No

9. Have you ever heard of a positive or negative customer experience through Facebook or Twitter?

- Yes
- No
Q10. Do you agree with the statement, "I would trust a brand more if I knew they were actively engaging with their customers in real time on Facebook / Twitter."
Active engagement = answering questions / helping with issues

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Q11. Do you agree with this statement, "My interaction with a brand on Facebook / Twitter (good or bad) could affect my loyalty towards the brand overall."

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Q12. When purchasing a product have you ever referred to social media brand pages for any of the following reasons? (choose all relevant)

- To research the product
- To ask a question directly
- To see what other people are saying about the product
- To look for deals
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

Appendix 2 - Aisling Walsh, Marketing Manager, Sony Ireland – Interview Transcript

- What social media platforms do you leverage in your organisation (Sony Ireland)?
  Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest.

- Which of the above do you find to be the most impactful, and why?
  Facebook. 2.2 million of our population are on Facebook as opposed to 527,000 on Twitter. Twitter is used for more tech updates and news. Facebook is where we can really engage and interact with our fans. Facebook is also 10 times more viral than Twitter (Social Bakers).
Also when compared to other media, Facebook offers us the chance to “own” our own medium and although this is certainly not a free channel the CPT to reach our audience is hugely more cost efficient than traditional media.

- How do you feel your social media activities can ultimately effect purchase decision? 22% of all Irish Internet users are more likely to buy a product of a brand that they follow on a social networking site. The more you can engage someone, spark their interest, ignite their curiosity the more likely they are to be aware of your brand and it’s qualities and the more likely they are to purchase your brand assuming the rest of the marketing mix is right for them.

- My research found that most social media users trust brands more if they know they are actively engaging with their customers in real time on Facebook / Twitter. Would you agree with these findings and why? Yes. Brands, particularly huge brands like Sony are often seen as faceless Corporations. Social Media allows us to humanise the brand somewhat and to connect to fans as much as possible on a one to one basis. This helps to make the customer feel that someone is listening and values their custom.

- Do you agree with allowing customers’ posts to be visible on your page, and why? The reality is that customers can post positive and negative comments on the web whether you like it or not. Having your own page gives the brand the chance to respond, answer queries and manage any situation instead of leaving customers with unanswered queries.

- My research found that most respondents have heard of negative or positive customer experiences through Facebook / Twitter. How does your organisation deal with negative posts from customers? We will try to fix any issues as fast as we can. If this is not possible locally it will be passed to our customer services colleagues who have the expertise in dealing with and fixing any issues.

- What types of posts do you find to be the most impactful by way of generating customer engagement?
Photo posts tend to get the most engagement on our page.

* How do you feel social media fits into a company’s overall marketing strategy?
  In Sony Social Media was an ad on to the Communications Strategy. Now it plays a central role in all Communications campaigns and also plays a role in our Customer Services strategy.

* How does your company measure the impact of its social media actions?
  We measure fan growth, engagement and media spend return.

* My research found that woman and men engage with social media in different ways. Does your organisation take gender into consideration when developing posts?
  We don’t focus on male or female fans as part of our strategy. We might focus communications more on lifestyle behaviours such as travel / music enthusiasts etc.

Appendix 3 - Lisa Byrne, Social Strategist, Pappas Group – Interview Transcript

* What social media platforms do you use?
  Regularly (multiple times per week): Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Path, WordPress blog, Foursquare, Pinterest, YouTube. Occasionally (a few times each month): Google Plus, Yelp, Vine, Socialcam, GetGlue, Tumblr, Timehop, Foodspotting.

* Which of the above do you find to be the most impactful, and why?
  Depends on your goals. For keeping up with family and close friends and tracking life events (timeline) – Facebook. To track breaking news and meet new acquaintances, share industry related news – Twitter. To learn about places to eat, go, see and things to do around me – Foursquare and Yelp. To stay in touch with very, very close friends – Path. To save things I find around the web that I like, and to keep myself inspired (for health, or positive thinking) – Pinterest. To share my life via images and indulge in my favorite pastime (looking at pictures) – Instagram. LinkedIn to keep an updated online resume and collection of my accomplishments.
• In your experience, how do you feel your social media activities can ultimately effect purchase decision?

  Hugely. Foursquare friends tell me what’s good to eat near by (in the moment) and strangers on Yelp help me decide where to book the new dining out experience. Pinterest has led to several purchases directly by seeing an image that appealed to me and saving it on my board to shop for later – or going right to the source and buying immediately. Facebook friends regularly give me advice (when asked) on which vendors to choose for larger purchases. Twitter, however, has little effect on my purchases.

• My research found that most social media users trust brands more if they know they are actively engaging with their customers in real time on Facebook / Twitter. Would you agree with these findings and why?

  Yes. Humans trust humans, not brands. A static website is a “thing” like reading a menu. But a waiter tells you the specials or what he likes best – which is a tactic used by restaurants to sell more of what they want or need to on a specific day. Online is no different. If we see a message with more of a human touch – some emotion or engaging ask to invite conversation – awe are more drawn to interact and build a “relationship” of sorts with said brand/person, thus building credibility and trust.

• Do you agree with allowing customers’ posts to be visible on your page, and why?

  Hell yes. Otherwise just go back to your static website. People want CONVERSATIONS, not one-way messages. They want to be heard, in real-time, by real people. Good or bad, all brands should allow messages to be seen publicly and as a best practice they should respond in public (at least to acknowledge the issue) – just as the message was received.

• What types of posts do you find to be the most impactful by way of generating customer engagement?

  Be timely and relevant but stay on brand – stop talking about the weather. Give people a reason to interact with your posts/page and share content that’s of value. Poll the audience; what do THEY want to hear from you? Ask them how you can best serve them. Craft your messaging in a way that invites genuine conversation. Visual
and interactive media (like photo and video) continuously gain more traction than text posts.

- How do you feel social media fits into a company’s overall marketing strategy?
  It should be integrated across every marketing activity your company executes. People don’t want to hear about your brand from your brand – they want to hear about your brand from their friends. You need to give them something to talk about. Something to share. Something to like.

- How does your company measure the impact of its social media actions?
  Measuring success has to be more than likes and followers; it must be linked to goals, leads and sales. If you’ve set measureable goals, benchmarks, and metrics that fit you’ll know what’s working and what’s not. As with all social media platforms it’s important to establish the „Where?”, „When?”, „What?” and „Why?” before you jump in.

- My research found that woman and men engage with social media in different ways. Do you take consideration when developing posts?
  Certainly. Your audience demographics is a very important factor when deciding tone of voice, volume of content, and ways and places to share.
H1. A positive evaluation of brand-based traditional media communication positively influences (H1a) brand awareness (H1b) functional brand image, and (H1c) hedonic brand image.

H2. A positive evaluation of brand-based firm-created social media communication positively influences (H2a) brand awareness (H2b) functional brand image, and (H2c) hedonic brand image.

H3a. A positive evaluation of brand-based user-generated social media communication positively influences brand awareness.

H3b₁; c₁. A positive evaluation of brand-based user-generated social media communication positively influences (H3b₁) functional brand image and (H3c₁) hedonic brand image.

H3b₂; c₂. A positive evaluation of brand-based user-generated social media communication negatively influences (H3b₂) functional brand image and (H3c₂) hedonic brand image.

H4. (H4a) Brand awareness (H4b) functional brand image, and (H4c) hedonic brand image positively influence brand attitude.

H5. Brand attitude positively influences brand purchase intention.
### Appendix 5 - Results of Company Research for Industry Review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post Type</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Instagram</th>
<th>LinkedIn</th>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Email</th>
<th>SMS</th>
<th>WhatsApp</th>
<th>Post Type</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Instagram</th>
<th>LinkedIn</th>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Email</th>
<th>SMS</th>
<th>WhatsApp</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HTC Ireland</td>
<td>Post asking fans what fans think of the phone</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
<td>Post highlighting a product review</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Figure 44: Results of Company Research for Industry Review