“An Investigation into the Use of Social Media Sites by Young Irish Consumers during the Buying Process”.

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MSc Marketing with Digital Media
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Declaration

I declare that the work described in this dissertation is, except where otherwise stated, entirely my own work and has not been submitted as any type of exercise for a degree at this or any other college/university.

Signed: _______________________________

Lee Phillips

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Abstract

Over the last decade Social Media has altered the way consumers live their everyday lives and how marketers get their messages seen. Social Media has changed not only how businesses interact with customers but it has also heightened the level of expected interaction between the business and its customers. It’s no wonder with the increasing number of users on Social Media platforms that businesses are showing so much interest in how they can use Social Media to their advantage.

This study aims to discover what Social Media sites are being used by young Irish consumers during different stages of the buying process and what content they interact with during different stages of the buying process. These are important factors for businesses when deciding on how they should target their marketing to reach their customers.

Two group interviews were conducted as sources of primary research. Respondents were split depending on their location. Group 1 were respondents living in an urban area and Group 2 were respondents living in a rural area.

The study found that different Social Media platforms are being used by young Irish consumers depending on which stage of the buying journey they are in. Therefore, it is important for companies to recognize that having a single online presence is no longer enough. Consumers interacted with different content on different platforms depending on which stage of the buying process they were in. In the early stages customer reviews played an important role and in the later stages interacting with the company directly had an important part to play.
This study sheds light on how marketers should be using Social Media and which Social Media platforms they should be using to increase the power of their Social Media campaigns.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Social Media Phenomenon

Social Media is considered to be the biggest phenomenon to hit the 21st century marketer. According to the Business Week (2005) “Social Media is the biggest change since the industrial revolution”. Economist magazine (2005) went further and simply said “companies that don’t understand digital communities will die”. Although it might be going too far as to say a company will die if they don’t use Social Media but they will definitely lose out on the valuable benefits of Social Media. There are plenty of companies that choose not to use Social Media and there are some companies that it just wouldn’t make sense for them to use Social Media. However, for the companies that use Social Media correctly the benefits can be huge.

Social Media Content

Making the best possible use of Social Media has become a vital tool for competitive advantage, new product development, market share and marketing research to just name a few. This is why Social Media has become one of the most important aspects of a marketer’s job. In particular, Social Media has changed the business/consumer interaction. Almost any business can use Social Media from the giants such as Coca Cola to your local Coffee Shop. It is all about knowing your target audience and being present where they are. It is generally not a smart idea to use every Social Media site available because chance are your customers aren’t using all of them and it would be extremely hard work trying to manage all of them. However, businesses can do a much better job by using targeted Social Media aimed at their target audience. Chances are that if your target
audience are over 65 they won’t be on Facebook. A better strategy would be to use Email marketing which you can then integrate with offline marketing by sending out brochures. The advent of Social Media and advances in other technology such as mobile technology has completely changed the world we live in. “It has given consumers new ways of communicating with each other, new sources of information and most importantly has given them greater power” (Carvill & Taylor, 2013). No longer are marketers in control of what is said about their products or brand. Consumers through Social Media have found a voice which they can use to great use. Through the use of Social Media consumers are able to customise the information that they want to see. Through sites such as Facebook and Twitter users can follow people, companies or events that interest them and only receive news that has to do with those areas.

However, Social Media hasn’t just advantaged the customer, there are huge advantages for marketers as well. Before Social Media and Web 2.0 companies just put out their marketing messages to the masses hoping that their target audience would see it enough times to convert. We have all heard the saying “half of my advertising works. I just don’t know which half”. Traditional marketing was seen as an annoying message that interrupted the viewer from content that they really wanted. Social Media brings a more targeted approach for marketers. Digital marketers can create different ads for different customers and target them on targeted platforms relatively cheaply. More and more Social Media sites are providing analytics as a marketing tool. Facebook analytics provides marketers with details of how many people seen the companies page, post or advertisement, and how many likes, clicks, shares and visits all for free (Carvill & Taylor, 2013).
However, it also gives the users a two way communication stream where they can interact with businesses and other consumers. Mangold and Faulds (2009) stated that “Consumers feel more engaged with products and organizations when they are able to submit feedback”. This means that it is hugely important for businesses not only to have Social Media pages but to also commit to interacting with customers on them.

Many businesses that start using Social Media begin getting a person within the company or by employing someone part time to answer any customer questions or complaints. It is a much harder strategy to develop rich interactive content that customers want to engage with and share. This is definitely a full time job and should be embedded within your traditional marketing campaigns by having your Facebook page on business cards or by having your Social Media pages accessible from your website. “Marketers who achieve a high level of customer interaction enjoy the greatest benefits from Social Media” (Carvill & Taylor, 2013). It is important for marketers to realise that there is no secret formula for creating a successful Social Media campaign. It takes time to build up a following, find out what content they want to receive and develop a strategy to provide it to them on an on going base.

According to research conducted by Divol, Endelman and Sarrazin (2012) “Companies have quickly learned that social media works: 39 percent of companies we’ve surveyed already use social-media services as their primary digital tool to reach customers, and that percentage is expected to rise to 47 percent within the next four years”. Social Media platforms are seen as a great way to build a following online that businesses can then turn into a following offline and into their stores.
Companies deploy online social networks, tools and services in various activities aiming to create better experience’s for consumers which is suppose to lead to loyalty, better branding and an increase in sales. According to Owyang (2010) about one-half of companies use social media to promote themselves through social media messaging (56%), monitor trends among their customers (53%), and provide ways for customers to interact with their company (52%). About one-third use social networks to research new product ideas (34%) and about one-fourth advertise on social networks (27%). It is still difficult to say how businesses should use Social Media simply because each business is different and has different customers and different goals that they want to achieve from Social Media.

**Consumer Behaviour**

Consumers’ online behaviour is developing at a fast rate. They are not only viewing content but they are creating their own content known as CGC (Consumer Generated Content) by participating in discussions, sharing knowledge with other consumers, creating videos and reviews. The usability and functionality of YouTube makes it easy for users to create their own channel and to post content that can be shared almost instantaneously to a wide audience all over the world. YouTube also enables a variety of social interactions whereby users can choose to friend or subscribe to other channels, comment on or choose favourite videos, and even post response videos to other channels. Given the ease of creating a personalized page or channel, a user on YouTube can engage in self expression as well as obtain peer recognition from social interactions with other users (Carvill & Taylor, 2013). A channel allows users to display content that they uploaded, videos from other members, videos followed by the channel, their friends, and
subscribers; as well as channels that they subscribe to. The ease of creating a personalized channel on YouTube therefore blurs the boundaries between creators and consumers of content. This dual nature of user participation, in content creation as well as opinion formation, is in contrast to earlier online communities that did not enable such rich features of social interaction (Parameswaran and Whinston 2007). One of the best features of YouTube is the tremendous variation in the success of content, where a handful of videos acquire Internet superstar status while most languish in obscurity (Crane and Sornette 2008). Social contagion broadly describes a class of phenomenon where preferences and actions of individuals are influenced by interpersonal contact, impacting the aggregate diffusion and spread of behaviours, new products, ideas, or epidemics (Christakis & Fowler, 2012). With the rise in mobile phones with camera’s which are more portable than most digital cameras and, more importantly, offer faster connection with the internet (Jeffries 2010) it can be very easy for a businesses mistake to become a viral sensation and damage the brands reputation beyond repair.

Smith and Zook (2011) feel “Organizations that are not looking out for and listening to online conversations about their brand are missing a major opportunity”. Several Social Media sites such as Facebook and Twitter allow companies to receive notices when a consumer mentions their brand or something to do with their company. They can then decide to leave a comment or just read what consumers are saying about them. This active consumer behaviour is changing the media and marketing landscape as consumers are invading companies’ marketing sphere (Berthon et al., 2008). With the enormous interest in social media and user-generated content on sites, such as YouTube, MySpace and Facebook consumers are seen to be actively contributing to the marketing content. At
the same time, although the opportunities for active involvement are good, some academic studies on the topic indicate that consumers are not necessarily as active online as it has been believed (Heinonen, 2011). Interestingly, consumers are typically described as being active and creative (Heinonen, 2011), neglecting the fact that depending on differences in interest and resources only a small number of consumers in fact produce the majority of online content (Courtois et al., 2009).

People once went online seeking the anonymity it offered (McKenna & Bargh, 2000) they now more often use the Internet to socialize with people they do know and expand their circle of friends (Jones, 2009). This is largely due to Social Networking Sites. More than half of American teens and young adults send instant messages and use social networking sites, and more than one-third of all Internet users engage in these activities (Jones, 2009).

**It’s a Social World**

In today’s current economic situation many marketers are coming under increased pressure from their CEO and CFO to justify why they should use Social Media and what the benefits to the business and its customers will be. Taking this into consideration, the purpose of this research work is to illustrate how Social Media is being used by young Irish consumers during the customer buying process and how marketers should use the different Social Media platforms at different stages of the consumer buying process.

**Dissertation organisation**

Chapter 1- is an overall introduction of the dissertation

Chapter2- is the Research Methodology which includes several parts such as the research area, research objectives, research question and so forth.
Chapter 3- is the Literature Review which resumes the whole academic materials read by the researcher about this dissertation topic.

Chapter 4- is the Findings of the primary research. In this section the researcher will excavate the key themes that appeared from the primary research.

Chapter 5- is the Discussion section. In this section the researcher will highlight how the findings differ or reflect the current literature.

Chapter 6- is the final chapter which is a summary of what the researcher has found out and any recommendations he has for businesses or for future research.
Chapter 2: Methodology

The main purpose of this research is to test a consumer decision making process that suits online consumers and to then map different social media platforms to different stages of the consumer decision making process to discover which tools are used by young Irish consumers at different stages of the buying process. There has been a lack of research carried out on young Irish adults in terms of how they use Social Media during the buying process and as (will be discussed later in section 3.3 page 54) young adults are one of the highest users of Social Media in Ireland. Therefore understanding how they interact with businesses and other customers on these platforms can greatly enhance a business’s Social Media strategy.

For the purpose of this research the researcher asked respondents to map which Social Media sites they use during different stages of the buying process. The buying process that will be used is one created in a whitepaper by the organization Wildfire in 2012. This model has been chosen as it is a simple design that respondents can understand and unlike many other models developed it does not place buy/purchase towards the end of the process. It is important to recognise that in an online environment getting the customer to purchase a product or service is not a marketer’s job done. Consumers are now more than willing to interact with businesses and other customers online after a purchase. They can leave positive or negative reviews which will be seen by prospective customers. It is therefore important for marketers to recognise that the after sales interaction with a customer on Social Media sites can influence how positively or negatively they refer to your product or service.
This chapter explains the methods of design, sample selection, data collection and analysis used in order to research the topic.

2.1 Research Questions

The research aims to deeply gather information about the role Social Media plays in the consumer buying process. The proposed research questions are:

1.a) **What Social Media Platforms are used at the various stages of the consumer buying process?**

The purpose of this question is to discover what tools young Irish consumers are using to help them through different stages of the buying process. Are they using social media throughout the entire buying process, are they only using social media for peer reviews or complaints or is there a difference in the type of Social Media used at different stages of the buying process? The age which is considered to be a young adult would be between the ages of 18-25. However, respondents of this research all fell into a narrower age range of 21-23.

1.b) **What type of content do consumers interact with most using social media platforms during the buying process?**

It can be very difficult to say what content works and what doesn’t work because each business has a different audience and the content that will work for one business may not necessarily work for another. The aim of this question is to find out what content young Irish consumers interact with most often during the buying process and to shed some light on what content works and what doesn’t work on Social Media at different stages of the buying process. Whether humour versus sales content works best and if video and images are better used than text based content.
2.2. Proposed Methodology

This research is intended to analyze in depth the role that Social Media plays during the consumer buying process. For this reason, this research will adopt the interpretive approach and case study philosophy within an inductive approach using qualitative data through interviews (multi-method). Following, is an explanation for the reasons of each choice by using the research “onion”.

![Figure 1: Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009)](image)

2.2.1 Research philosophy: According to this model, each layer is important in the process. This process starts with the research philosophy which according to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) is:

“The development of the research background, research knowledge and its nature”.
This research adopts the interpretivism approach because it believes in understanding human behaviour rather than explain it. Hudson and Ozanne (1988) sustain that:

“For an interpretivist researcher it is important to understand motives, meanings, reasons and other subjective experiences which are time and context bound”.

This research seeks to better understand the reasons why consumers use Social Media during the buying process and which elements of Social Media affect their decision making at different stages.

Based on the foregoing, this philosophy is aligned with the research that will be conducted, providing a better understanding of Social Media and highlights its importance for consumer interaction.

2.2.2. Research approach: There are two main researching approaches: inductive or deductive. The inductive approach will be used because it fits better with the research objective. Regarding this approach, Thomas (2003) stated:

“The purpose for using an inductive approach is to establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data”.

The raw data of this research is the recording of the two group interviews. It is then the researchers job to gather information from the raw data in regards to the research objectives and come up with the research findings.
2.2.3 Research Choice: A **mono-method** selection is considered appropriate for this research as conducting in-depth interviews allows the respondents to interact with each other and allow the researcher to be uninvolved in the findings. In order to answer the research questions, young, active online consumers located in Ireland will be interviewed. In-depth interviews were conducted with participants in order to find the qualitative data needed to answer the research questions. Qualitative data is needed because the research findings are of a qualitative nature and seek better understand why consumers use Social Media during the buying process and what influences them during different stages.

The experience and opinions of the participants will be very important for the research as each respondent’s past experiences will affect how they answer questions during the interviews.

Regarding in-depth interviews, Kvale (1996) stated:

> “Knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal. The interviewer digs nuggets of data or meanings out of a subject’s pure experiences, unpolluted by any leading questions”.

The respondent’s experiences of using Social Media platforms during the buying process will affect how they answer the interview questions. It is then the researcher’s job to identify themes/issues that could be of importance.

The interview format was semi-structured. There were predetermined questions (which can be found in the appendix on page 90) to identify key issues and to receive detailed answers. Since, respondents will be consumers and may not have marketing experience
the questions will not contain any terms that they have not come across before. Therefore there is no need to provide the interview questions to the respondents before the interview. Thus, the interviews will be open to additional questions depending on the responses.

2.2.4 Time Horizon. Cross sectional was applied in this research because there is a restricted time to finish the dissertation. Thus, consumer interaction on Social Media platforms will not be studied over a period of time. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009), cross-sectional study is:

“The study of a particular phenomenon at a particular time.” Therefore, the study is a “snapshot”.

This method has come under fire because it only takes into account data from a short period of time. However with the restricted time that the research can be done in it is the only one available. Perhaps for further research a more longitudinal approach could be taken to gain a deeper understanding of how Social Media is used over a longer period of time and how interaction levels are affected by time.

2.2.5 Qualitative: The choice of method is qualitative research since this type of research enables the researcher to make investigations about consumer interaction on Social Media platforms. According to Wahyuni (2012):

“Qualitative research seeks to produce credible knowledge of interpretations.”
The research findings are interpretations of the respondents opinions and actions towards Social Media and the content used.

In order to answer the research questions, primary data will be collected through in depth-interviews with consumers. The aim of this research is to explore the importance of Social Media during the consumer buying process, especially for young Irish consumers; therefore, new data will be collected for this purpose. However, secondary data (which can be found in the literary review starting on page 27) such as articles and research papers will also provide a useful source.

2.2.6. Non-probability sample: It is not possible for this research to identify total population; therefore, non-probability sampling will be used. The first step in the sample selection is to define who will be in the sample. In this research, young Irish adult Social Media users will be analyzed. When using Non-probability samples, it is impossible to generalize on statistical grounds, which is why quantative data will not be used.

Eight online consumers will be interviewed in order to understand how they use Social Media platforms during the buying process. This will be split into two separate focus groups based on the location of the respondents. This is due to the difficulty in conducting eight separate interviews due to time constraints and the difficulties in conducting one focus group with eight people. Group 1 is comprised of four urban Males who are all college graduates aged between 21-23. Group 2 is comprised of rural respondents; three Males and one Female. Two of the Males from this group are graduates and the other Male and Female have Secondary level education. All of these members are aged between 21-23.
2.2.7. **Snowball sampling** will also be used for this research. To start the snowball two respondents were asked to refer any of their friends that would be willing to take part in the interviews that were 21-23 years old and active on Social Media sites and then ask their friends to pass it on to their own friends. Using the snowball sampling method allowed me to collect data from members of the target population that I could locate and then get access to other members through the previous respondents.

2.3. **Implementation:** The group 1 interview was conducted in Dublin in a location which could be easily accessible for the respondents. Once the respondents were together the researcher informed them of what the purpose of the interview was and provided them with any other information they required. The respondents were sat around a table and asked to fill out the mapping sheet (which can be found in the appendix on page 92) and then interview was recorded. After the interview

2.4. **Ethics:** With regards to research ethics Bryman and Bell (2011) sustain:

> “Ethical issues arise at a variety of stages in business and management research.”

Diener and Crandall (1978) classify principles into four main areas:

- Whether there is harm to participants.
  - All interviews were conducted in a comfortable setting and there was be no pressure forced on respondents to answer questions. No harm was placed on respondents either mentally or physically.

- Whether there is a lack of informed consent.
  - All respondents were informed on the purpose of the interviews beforehand and had the option of not taking part in the primary research.

- Whether there is an invasion of privacy.
• All respondents had to opportunity to be kept anonymous to respect each respondent’s privacy.

• Whether deception is involved.
  o There was no forced participation in the interviews. During the interviews there were no leading questions that could hamper how respondents answer questions.

The information obtained through the interviews was used only for the dissertation purposes. Participants were informed in detail about the purpose of this research beforehand and therefore, they could decide whether to participate or not. They could also decide to take part in the interview but keep their name anonymous.

Furthermore, the right of privacy of participants was respected. They had the opportunity to refuse answering any question that they considered inappropriate. It was ensured that participation was voluntary, that participants could withdraw at any time and confidentiality was protected.

2.5. Limitations: In conducting this research, some practical efforts were required. Time Management can be a limitation. Not only was there a short time period for the research to be conducted in but there was also the challenge of finding time for jobs, college work and personal activities for both the researcher and respondents. Since the research had to be conducted during the summer months it was difficult to plan the interviews for a time when respondents were not on holiday. During the time allocated to complete the
research the researcher began working for a new company which complicated the issue of finding time for the attention needed to conduct this research. It was difficult to come home after work and find the motivation to continue working on this research.

The final limitation that was encountered was the lack of relevant literature in this area. Although there are plenty of academic papers available on such a fresh topic as Social Media the limitation occurred because much of the literature just repeated what others had said in other journals. It seemed that there was a lack of fresh content or new ideas in this area which led to a difficulty in gathering enough information to conduct the research.

2.6. Bias: Finding an unbiased starting point for the snowball sample was important to prevent the information from the interviews being corrupted. Obtaining the information required proved to be somewhat difficult since some respondents remained relatively quiet during the interviews as a method of protecting themselves against any embarrassment despite my best efforts to give each respondent a chance to answer.

In addition, research bias can interfere with the process of interviews. For example, since the respondents know the other respondents they may have tried to answer questions with what they assume is the “right” answer instead of giving the true answer. Finally, the interpretation of data could also be a bias because of the way the researcher perceives different aspects such as tone of voice or body language of the respondents.

2.7. Data Analysis: The raw data from the interviews was analysed using the inductive approach. This was done by firstly gathering the raw data from the group interviews. The raw data was then coded to provide the researcher with an explanation of why young
Irish consumers use Social Media during the buying process and what influences them during different stages.

2.8. Suitability of Researcher:

The researcher has a lot of interest in Social Media and how it can help consumers during the buying process. At the beginning of this research the researcher was studying in DBS with the hope of becoming a digital marketer. During this research the researcher was employed to be a sales and marketing intern for 4pm which is a web design company in Dublin which gives the research both an academic and professional view of how Social Media can be used. The researchers academic and work background are discussed below to give a better understanding of the researchers suitability to study the topic of Social Media’s influence during the buying process.

Academic background

The researcher has five years academic research in the area of marketing. The researcher studied four years at IT Tallaght where he obtained a Honours degree in Marketing Management. The researcher then went on to do a one year master degree in DBS for which this thesis is for, on Marketing with Digital Media which has greatly improved his knowledge of marketing and more specifically Social Media marketing.

Work background

The researcher has started his first internship for a web design company in Dublin as a Sales and Marketing Intern. It is during this internship that the researcher gained on the
job experience of how Social Media can be used to market products to customers and the different stages a consumer goes through starting with an acquisition to loyal customer. It was the researcher’s duty to promote the company and its products using different Social Media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, Wordpress and Youtube. It was also the researcher’s job to follow up potential customers and help them through the different stages of the buying process.

**Contribution of the study:**

This research provided the researcher with a better understanding of Social Media marketing and the process consumers go through when purchasing a product or service. The research was conducted to take into account the consumer and company’s point of view.

As the technology around us changes at an ever increasing pace it is important for companies to understand how it can be used to benefit both the company and its customers. Moreover, the research topic is of great interest to the researcher because he is currently working in this area and hopes that this research will not only help him with future jobs but also add to his knowledge that he can then use in the workplace.

However, this research also has wider implications for Irish marketing professionals. This research shows how marketers should use Social Media platforms during different stages to better target young Irish consumers.
2.9. Time Allocation:

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Chapter 3: Literature Review

This chapter discusses the different types of Social Media platforms available to customers and businesses. It provides details of what the different platforms are and why businesses should use them to connect with their customers. This chapter will then go on to discuss how Social Media should be used as an integrated marketing tool during the consumer decision making process. The research then looks at how customers are using Social Media and how businesses can use the different platforms to create brand ambassadors and a greater online following.

3.1 Social Media:

3.1.1 What is Social Media?

When Social Media sites were starting to become popular Porter (2001) described “Social media as a unified term for multiple types of technologies, whose popularity has grown significantly over the past years”. Porter (2001) said that there are eight types of social platforms which is still true today, the only thing that has changed is the functionality available on the different platforms. This research will categorize Social Media platforms as Blogs, Micro blogs, Social Networking Sites, Media Sharing Sites, Social Bookmarking, Review Sites, Forums and Virtual Worlds.

Blogs: A blog is a type of content management system that makes it easy for anyone to publish content called posts. According to Dr. Saravankumar in the Life Science Journal (2012), “Blogs make great hubs for other social media marketing efforts, as they can be integrated with nearly every tool and platform”. Blogs can be a great tool when integrated with a company website as it can be a source of fresh content for the website. “Blogs also
aid search engine optimization and reduce the burden of post purchase support and customer service” (Saravankumar et al 2012). However, blogs can be tedious for consumers because of the detail of the posts created, which is why Micro Blogs were created. According to research by Pew Internet (2010) less teenagers and young adults are using blogs which is down to 14% compared with 28% in 2006.

**Micro Blogs:** Micro blogs are similar to blogs with one main difference. Micro blogs such as Twitter limit the size of each post. Twitter limits their posts to 140 characters. “Twitter; it’s easy, requires very little investment of time, and can quickly prove worthwhile in increased buzz, sales and consumer insight” (Saravankumar et al 2012). Twitter was originally set up as a more advanced way of texting. The sites mission statement is “To instantly connect people everywhere to what’s most important to them”. In the USA Twitter has 107.7 million users and in the UK there are 23.8 million accounts (Carvill & Taylor, 2013). Micro blogs have seemed to benefit from the number of teens and young adults that stopped using blogs because of their tedious nature and wanted something simpler and quicker.

**Social Networks:** The most popular social network site is Facebook, which according to Carvill & Taylor (2013) has over 1.1 billion users in 2013 2.2 million of which are located in Ireland. Facebook was originally set up as a way for friends to communicate easily with each other online. Floated on the Nasdaq in May 2012 Facebook has geared itself up to try and take on the internet itself by offering users an alternative to the World Wide Web. Facebook is seen as a great tool for marketing and almost every company of any size can create a Facebook page. It is seen as a tool to build a brand image, increase market share, market research, networking with likeminded individuals and targeted
advertising. “73% of wired American teens now use social networking websites, a significant increase from previous surveys. Just over half of online teens (55%) used social networking sites in November 2006 and 65% did so in February 2008” (Pew Internet; 2010). Facebook isn’t just an American success globally Facebook has millions of users each day. Some of the latest figures from Carvill & Taylor (2013) show that in Europe, Facebook has 232.8 million users. With so many potential consumers using social media it is no surprise that marketers are trying so desperately to interact and engage with them. The problem is that it is difficult to say what methods will work and what won’t work on social media sites. (This research aims to answer these questions later in the Findings chapter starting on page 57).

![Figure 2: Pew Internet (2010)](image)

As shown in Figure 2 above the young adult section makes up for a huge amount of social media users, which is almost equal to that of teens. The Pew (2010) research also found that “within the under-thirty cohort, those ages 18-24 (73%) and those ages 25-29 (71%) are equally likely to use social networking sites. Men and women are equally likely to use these sites. However, usage of online social networks among adults does vary by educational attainment—50% of online adults with at least some college
experience use these sites, compared with 43% of such adults with a high school degree or less.

**Media Sharing Sites:** These sites allow users to upload photos, videos and audio to a website. By far the most common are YouTube and Flickr. YouTube is now the third most visited website and the second most used search engine in the world. According to Carvill & Taylor (2013) YouTube has over 800 million users each month. These sites allow users to share their interests with others and develop a profile of who they are using not only the media uploaded but by also commenting on other user’s images and videos.

**Social Bookmarking:** Social bookmarking began in 1996 when itList allowed users to organize and maintain useful links. Social bookmarking really took off in 2003 when Delicious allowed users to tag the links with keywords and allow other users to search for the article using the keywords.

**Review Sites:** The emergence of Web 2.0 has allowed for review sites such as TripAdvisor to become extremely popular. Users can rate different locations that they have stayed in, which can then be seen by other users. Review sites show the importance that recommendations and word of mouth plays especially online.

**Forums:** This type of Social Media platform such as Boards.ie allows users to have conversations. They differ from chat rooms in that messages are temporarily stored and that some messages must be approved by a moderator before it can be made visible.

**Virtual Worlds:** These are computerized communities where the users use avatars to interact with each other. These have come under scrutiny lately especially in the Chinese market because of their addictive nature (Matthew Dubois; 2013). China is even the first country to classify internet addiction as a disorder and have even registered it as a
condition with the World Health Organization. Marketers have attempted to transfer this addictiveness outside of games in a technique called gamification. Gamification is a technique used outside of a gaming environment to create an addictive level of use. Techniques used include leader boards, point collection and achievement badges.

3.1.2 Why Do Companies Go Social?

We have moved away from a traditional conversation where the company throws out information and hopes it lands with the right consumers enough times to a conversation where consumers can not only talk to the business but other consumers. Businesses that pay lip service about wanting to understand how and why their customers behave and act can no longer hide. As mentioned earlier there are a growing number of Social Media sites that are providing analytics as a marketing tool. Therefore, there is no need to conduct lengthy, expensive customer surveys, instead every minute of everyday millions of consumers are using Social Media sites, and it is within these Social Media sites that a business can conduct its customer surveys. They can find out how many people seen, liked, followed or clicked on their page, post, video or advertisement. They can then build a profile of which customers are interacting online and what content they are interacting with.

“The 21st century is witnessing an explosion of internet based messages transmitted through social media. They have become a major factor in influencing various aspects of consumer behaviour including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behaviour, and post purchase communication and evaluation” (Mangold et al 2009). Even political figures have recognised the potential power of Social Media as
shown in the huge Social Media campaign run by Obama during his re-election. Consumers spend on average 22% of online time on social media sites (Nielsen Wire 2010). Lilley (2007) calculated social media messages have twenty times the reach of traditional marketing channels.

DEI Worldwide conducted a survey in 2008 on the Impact of Social media on consumer behaviour. The study found that:

- 70% of consumers have visited social media sites seeking information.
- 49% of these consumers made a purchase decision based on the information found.
- 60% of people are likely to use social media to pass along information to others.
- 45% of people who searched for information on social media sites engaged in word of mouth compared to 36% who found information on a company website.

There has been a long running debate whether or not social media can generate any ROI for businesses. To create some sort of structure around Social Media ROI the IAB’s Social Media Ad Metrics Definitions splits social media into three sections (Social media sites, Blogs, Widgets and social media applications) and defines the metrics specific to each category which can then be used as the ROI goals for each section.

**Social Media Sites:** Unique visitors, Cost per unique visitor, Page views, Visits, Return visits, Interaction rate, Time spent, Video installs, Relevant actions taken.

**Blogs:** Conversion size, Site relevance, Author credibility, Content freshness and relevance.

**Widgets and Social Media Applications:** Installs, Active users, Audience profile, Unique user reach, Growth, Influence.
Other authors such as Donna Hoffman and Marek Fodor (2010) suggest that these measurements are still focused on traditional marketing channels and are not appropriate to measure Social Media campaigns solely on. They suggest that marketers gauge the success of Social Media campaigns using consumer interaction as a key measurement rather than an outcome. In their article ‘Can You Measure the ROI of Your Social Media Marketing?’ they use the example of Procter & Gamble’s social networking site which has over 350,000 members who talk about P&G products. The site has been credited with market response increases of up to 30%.

In the book by Olivier Blanchard (2011) “Social Media ROI” a very simple strategic approach to Social Media is outlined. It follows a five step approach. Firstly decide what your overall Business Objectives of using Social Media are. Then Plan what you want to achieve on the different Social Media sites. Businesses should then Listen to other users on the different Social Media sites to learn what is being said about your product or service and who is saying the most. Businesses should then Analyse this information in order to improve their products or services. The final stage is then to Engage with the users that you found during the Listening stage and to provide content on the issues that they had.
Carvill and Taylor (2013) “The Business of Being Social” agree with Blanchard and go on to say that if you follow the model your Social Media marketing should be a steady stream instead of a “stop-start” approach. They claim that using Social Media correctly it can fill in the gaps in your marketing to keep the conversation continuous.

There are twelve key ways that companies can use Social Media according to Carvill and Taylor (2013):

1. Customer Support and Service- Before Social Media and Web 2.0 if a customer had a complaint they would have had to write in or speak to a complaints department and in more recent years the use of call centres have been used to outsource customer complaints. The delay in time and not dealing directly with the company meant that quite often customer problems were never resolved. With the advent of Social Media sites consumers can now communicate directly with the company through Facebook and Twitter. Many businesses use Facebook and Twitter as a tool for customer support. This allows for the customer to deal directly with the company and get a quick response. The benefits for the company are good publicity and loyalty. When other customers see that a problem has been
resolved quickly it gives them better trust in the company which in turn creates a better loyal relationship. The good publicity comes from potential customers seeing problems dealt with quickly and then trusting the company for future purchases.

2. Brand Reputation Management- It is not only important to manage your own online presence but it’s just as important to monitor what other people are saying about your brand elsewhere in blogs, forums and other Social Media sites. The majority of online content about brands is done outside of their own online presence. When businesses listen to what is being said whether it is good or bad it is then important to plan and manage how you respond in different scenarios.

3. Polling and Product Feedback- In such a rapidly changing market place where customers buying decisions are determined by so many outside factors it is important to gauge what people think about your products as well as other subjects that are related to your business.

4. Lead Generation-According to Hubspot (2012) LinkedIn is the most successful Social Networking Site for lead generation. They found that LinkedIn (2.74%) had three times higher visitor-to-lead conversion rate than both Twitter (.69%) and Facebook (.77%). This is taught to be because people join Linkedin to improve their expertise and make their professional lives better. Therefore, businesses who target other businesses will naturally find a higher percentage of their target audience on Linkedin. The mindset of someone on Linkedin compared to someone on Facebook is an important consideration. When most people use Facebook it is to keep in touch with friends, when people use Linkedin it is often
to learn something new or to extend their business connections which makes them inherently more receptive to business content.

5. News Distribution and PR- For many years PR professionals have issued press releases first by post then via email. Now sites such as Twitter, Google+ and Tumblr are perfect media’s to get your message across to a wide audience. The likes of Twitter allow for all businesses to share news immediately with a huge audience with relatively little effort.

6. Brand Awareness and Establishment- Now with Social Media pages and a website, businesses can move from having a single online presence to having a multi-dimensional online presence ensuring that they get the maximum exposure possible.

7. Product Promotion and Launch- Using Social Media sites such as Twitter is a great way to build excitement and keep consumers up to date during a product launch. Twitter hashtags, live tweets, streamed videos from YouTube and updates on Facebook give much greater depth to different events. In fact Facebook’s mobile advertising revenue is set to overtake desktop in the coming months after increased spending from advertisers on video and its smartphone services helped lift quarterly revenue (Marketing Week, 2013). Facebook posted a 53 per cent year-on-year increase in revenues for the three months to 30 June. Ad revenue accounted for 88% of that figure $1.60bn, representing a 61 per cent jump on last year.

8. Gathering Support for a Cause- Social Media sites such as Facebook and Twitter can be used to great affect for charities when it comes to gathering support and
collecting donations. The use of Social media has changed how charities and not-for-profit organisations get across their messages. No longer is it necessary to go door to door collecting signatures for petitions. They can set up a page or an app that allows people to come to them donate.

9. Humanising your Brand- In a society where customers have the voice to praise or damage you’re your brand it is important to go back to person to person marketing. No longer is it acceptable to have a bland brochure website. Instead businesses are interacting with customers on Social Media sites. Pictures and videos of your staff having fun while at work is often a great way to show the faces behind the logo.

10. Networking- Social Media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn have continuous conversations 24/7 seven days a week. Using these sites and others such as Google+ can allow a business to strengthen existing relationships and build new relationships with potential clients. According to Social Media Examiner.com (2013) Twitter chats are a good way of developing conversations. Each chat uses a particular hashtag so that other Twitter users can follow the conversation. LinkedIn Groups are made up of a variety of subject areas, bringing together professionals of similar interests to discuss topics that relate to business. Google+ Hangouts on Air give you the ability to communicate directly with your audience online, in real time. Many businesses host hangouts focused on their offerings as a business to show the audience their unique value and, most importantly, to show a human face behind their business. The types of hangouts that are beneficial for lead generation are:
- Customer service sessions
- Interviews with experts and leaders
- Giveaways and contests
- Free product demos

11. Business Intelligence- Social Media sites have made it easier than ever before for companies to gather information and analyse it effectively. The likes of Twitter hash tags are a great way for businesses to find out what is being said about their brand or products. It is also a great way to find out if your traditional marketing campaigns are working correctly. How often have you seen a Tweet that someone has just seen a new ad and whether it was good or not.

12. Thought Leadership- Social Media sites such as blogs allow for individuals to raise their profile within a certain area of expertise. A similar achievement can be accessed by getting knowledgeable employees to use blogs and forums to share their knowledge and at the same time advertise the expertise that is within your company. Similarly Linkedin can be used to share knowledge with existing connections or use the knowledge to entice new connections.
3.2 Consumer Behaviour:

3.2.1 Social Media Consumer Decision Making Funnel:

There has been a general acceptance from marketing professionals such as Endelman, Gartner and Cort that due to Social Media Sites the traditional consumer buying funnel was outdated and did not take into account the nature of today’s online, socially active consumer who is influenced not only by personal factors but by outside influencers. There have been several different models developed to try and redefine the buying process to take Social Networking into account. However, none so far have been widely accepted as the standard model to use. For this research the researcher looked at several different possible models.

The traditional model developed by Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1968) had five stages which were Need Recognition, Information Search, Evaluation, Purchase and Post-Purchase.

![Diagram of Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1968) model](image)

Figure 4: Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1968)

Following the same structure Gartner (2010) developed a table which showed the Social Media opportunities during each stage of the buying process.
Using the traditional model Heidi Cohen (2013) suggested how businesses could interact on Social Media during the different stages of the buying process as shown in Figure 6 below. However she fails to discuss which Social Media platforms should be used at each stage to carry out the marketing action.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Social marketing opportunities</th>
<th>Enabling services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need recognition</td>
<td>Create and raise awareness</td>
<td>Connecting and sharing with friends services allows spending more time and identifying new needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information search</td>
<td>Provide context</td>
<td>Bookmarking, information sharing, personalized pages services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Build trust</td>
<td>Opportunities to provide feedback and reviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Transaction</td>
<td>Transactional (group buying, buy for friends, etc.) services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-purchase</td>
<td>Increase satisfaction</td>
<td>Supporting and personalized services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Gartner (2010)

Figure 6: Heidi Cohen (2013)

Cort, Elzinga, Mulder and Vetvik (2009) basing on qualitative and quantitative observations in automobile, skin care, insurance, consumer electronic and mobile –
telecom industries came with the proposal that the consumer decision process is more circular than linear.

The proposed approach was based on 4 stages:

- The consumer considers an initial set of brands, based on brand perceptions and exposure to recent touch points.
- Consumers add or subtract brands as they evaluate what they want.
- Ultimately, the consumer selects a brand at the moment of purchase.
- After purchasing a product or service, the consumer builds expectations based on experience to inform the next decision journey.

However they fail to discuss which Social Media platforms should be used at each stage to carry out the marketing action.

Endelman (2010) claimed that each company will have a slightly different Consumer Decision Journey depending on the nature of their business. He stated that there are five steps to follow to develop a consumer decision journey.
Endelman (2010) extended the previous thinking of the customer buying process and explains “marketers assumed that consumers started with a large number of potential brand and methodically winnowed their choices until they’d decided which one to buy”. This assumption is based on offline market precondition while consumers used to get limited access to information and brands. Meanwhile with the tsunami of information consumers are overwhelmed with various propositions, interactions and services from companies. Within this context consumers “add and subtract brands from a group under consideration during the extended evaluation phase” (Endelman, 2010). The importance of this evaluation process might be resulted as purchase decisions and after acquiring the product, information or service customer enters open-ended relation phase.
In the same manner D.C Endelman (2010) stick to consumer decision journey and assumes this process is “how consumers engage with brands”. The important issue is to mention that “customer’s engagement with a brand doesn’t necessarily begin or end with the purchase” (Endelman, 2010).

Following these ideas P.Marsden (2011) proposed that the decision making process is neither a cyclic activity nor a linear process.

Figure 8: Endelman (2010)

Figure 9: Marsden (2011)
P. Marsden (2011) builds his proposition on Endelman (2010) and McKinsey consulting company research explaining the shift from tunnel (traditional stage approach) to consumer decision journey and emphasizing the cyclic nature of the consumer decisions. Owyang (2012) also agrees on proposed consumer journey approach, but tends to consider this journey dynamic due to 3 factors:

- Recent development and advance in technologies deployment.
- Change of devices used.
- Increasing power of word of mouth.

While doing work for McKinsey & Company, Endelman et.al (2011) developed Endelman’s previous customer decision journey and discussed the key touch points and how active businesses can be on Social Media sites when looking to interact with customers throughout the buying process. However they fail to discuss which Social Media platforms should be used at each stage to carry out the marketing action.
The buying process that will be used in this research is one created in a whitepaper by the organization Wildfire in 2012. The article claims that the traditional customer funnel was outdated for Social Media users and that the traditional model didn’t take into account any outside influence that come from Social Media. They propose a new customer funnel more tailored to Social Media users.

![Diagram of the customer funnel](image)

**Figure 11: Wildfire (2012)**

**Discovery:** In the Discovery phase the consumer is noticing relevant content on Social Media sites such as photos, reviews, blog posts from other users and businesses. Each they claim “Create opportunities for consumers to discover new brands”. What is of interest here is that Social Media might trigger needs through advertisements displayed on a Facebook page for example or through a discussion with a friend that could make consumers recognize that they have an unfulfilled need. Some Social Media sites are allowing their users to build wish lists of things that they see and like. The users’ friends can then see what their friend’s likes and wants.

**Evaluation:** In the Evaluation stage the consumer is interacting on Social Media sites such as forums and discussion boards to evaluate products or services. It is at this stage that peer reviews can play an important role in the consumers’ decision making. After been exposed to these various reviews and opinions it is at this stage that the consumer will evaluate the different options. Companies who have a loyal customer following should take advantage of this and allow for customer reviews to be found easily by
potential customers. This can be done easily by allowing customers to leave posts on the brands Facebook, Twitter and Blog.

**Buying:** In the Buying stage the consumer can use built in commerce functions to purchase from a company. They could also sign up for newsletters and contact the company. At this stage, consumers will decide whether they will buy a product or services or not. This purchase decision depends partly on the motivation of consumers but also on the influences that they received during the previous stage.

**Access:** The Access stage is when the consumer is interacting with branded Social Media pages interacting with other customers and interacting with content generated by the company. It is important to recognise that although the customer has already purchased your product or service they can still leave a positive or negative effect on your company. The great thing is that marketers can ensure that the customer has positive opinions towards the brand by using Social Media for after sales interaction. If the customer is not happy with the after sales interaction they may not purchase from you again.

**Use:** In the Use phase consumers are using Social Media features that are linked into the product. In the article they use the example of Social Media users reading on news sites such as the Huffington Post while still logged into their Social Media accounts. Facebook claim that “22% more pages are viewed by Huffington Post users that are still logged into the site using their Facebook credentials”.

**Support:** When consumers are in the Get Support phase they are interacting, seeking help or directing complaints using Social Media sites. It is important for companies to respond quickly and effectively to customer complaints. In a study conducted by American Express (2012) social customers will tell an average of 42 people about a good
experience but will tell 53 people about a bad experience. When customers complain about a product or service a quick response that resolves the situation can be all that is needed to turn a disgruntled customer into a pleased customer. The added benefit of dealing with customer complaints quickly is that potential customers will see this interaction and develop trust towards your brand.

3.2.2 Word of Mouth:

WOM marketing is a particularly prominent feature on the Internet. The Internet provides numerous venues for consumers to share their views, preferences, or experiences with others as well as opportunities for firms to take advantage of WOM marketing. As one commentator stated, “Instead of tossing away millions of dollars on Superbowl ads, fledging dot-com companies are trying to catch attention through much cheaper marketing strategies such as blogging and word-of-mouth campaigns” (Whitman 2006). Social Media sites rely upon user-generated content to attract and retain visitors, obtaining revenue primarily from the sale of online display advertising. They also accumulate user information that may be valuable for targeted marketing purposes. These sites provide easy-to-use tools for current users to invite others to join the network such as inviting people to join from your email address book. The electronic recording of these outbound referrals opens a new window into the effects of WOM, giving researchers an unobtrusive trace of this often hard-to-study activity. When combined with data that also tracks new member signups, it becomes possible to model the dynamic relationship between this form of word-of-mouth and the addition of new members to the social networking site.
Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) defined word of mouth as “the act of exchanging marketing information among consumers, which play’s an essential role in changing consumer attitudes and behaviour towards products and services”. According to research by Frost and Sullivan “Increasingly, current and prospective customers are using Social Media to communicate about products and services they buy or intend to buy”. They split Social Media channels into two categories in terms of relevance to customer interaction.

1. Customer community/forum on your own website.

2. External Social Media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and customer community/forums on external websites.

They claim that successful businesses “Engage with customers in Social Media do so in both avenues and more importantly monitor and extract market intelligence from Social Media customer activity and interactions using various monitoring and listening tools”.

With only a small percentage of online ads such as banner ads getting clicks WOM plays an important role in advertising your product or service. Consumers, especially online consumers are relying on the word of mouth/word of mouse of sometimes complete strangers. When referring to the importance of traditional WOM Feick et al (1987) stated that “because WOM is created and delivered by a more trustworthy source of information about products and brands than company generated persuasive messages”.

When we take into account the four dimensions that identify social relationship, tie strength, homophily, trust and interpersonal influence (Bearden et al, 1989, Gilly et al, 1998, Brown et al, 2007, Handcock et al, 2007) and apply them to social network sites we can see the main influencing factors of peer to peer communication.
1. Tie Strength

Tie strength refers to strength of the bond between members of social network (Mittal et al, 2008). The closer the source of information is to you offline such as a friend or family member the greater level of trust will be placed on the information they provide you. However, on Social Media sites although family and friends can still play an important role in directing a consumer’s decision it is quite often a stranger or a group of strangers that will affect a purchase decision, such is the case on TripAdvisor.

2. Homophily

Homophily refers to the degree to which individuals who interact with one another are similar in certain attributes (Handcock et al, 2007). Individuals tend to socialize with others who share similar characteristics and interests. Therefore, the source of information shares some qualities with the receiver of the information, which is the case on blogs and forums. According to Chu and Kim (2011) the higher the level of shared interest the more likely the consumer is to engage in eWOM.

3. Trust

Trust is defined as a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence and in online environment, trust has an essential role for virtual community member’s intention to gather information from other members (Ridings et al, 2002). The trust level can be linked to the previous two factors of tie strength and homophily. The stronger the link between the source of information and the receiver the higher the level of trust will be. Similarly, the more similarities between the source of information and the receiver the higher the level of trust will be.
4. Interpersonal Influence

Interpersonal influence refers to a social factor that plays an important role in influencing consumer decision making (D’Rozario and Choudhury, 2000). From the literature, interpersonal influence has been identified as normative and informational influences (Bearden et al 1989). Normative influence refers to the tendency to confirm to the expectations of others, by affecting attitudes, norms and values (Bearden et al, 1989). An example of normative influence in Social Media would be liking a page on Facebook because a friend liked it or buying a pair of shoes because you seen a picture on Pinterest of your friends shoes. On the other hand, informational influence refers to tendency to accept information from knowledgeable people and be guided in product or brand (Bearden et al, 1989). An example of informational influence in Social Media would be purchasing a certain brand of laptop because it got good reviews on an IT blog. An example of when a consumer could be influenced by both normative and informative influences could be that they want a new phone. The consumer could look at some review sites or blogs. This may have helped narrow the choice down to just two or three options. The final decision could be influenced because all of the consumers’ friends have iPhones, so if one of the three options was an iPhone the consumers’ final decision will most likely be the iPhone because of both normative and informational influences.

3.2.3 Online Users:

Increasingly, current and prospective customers are using Social Media to communicate about the products and services they buy or intend to buy. These peer-to-peer or customer-to-customer communications are sometimes happening instead of contacting the companies who offer the products and services. Businesses that understand the
potential benefits of this customer-to-customer communication are trying to create an atmosphere to allow for more communication to evolve. They are following a number of paths to learn from, participate, support their customers and ultimately find ways to leverage these social conversations for their business benefits.

According to Lewis and Lewis (1997) there are five different types of web users who have different searching behaviour based on the purpose of using the web. This research will discuss these five types in relation to Social Media users.

1. Directed information-seekers: These consumers often know exactly what they are looking for and require no outside help. They often ignore online advertisements and use search engines to find what they are looking for. On Social Media these users know what brands they like and who they want to interact with.

2. Undirected information-seekers: These are the users usually referred to as ‘surfers’, who tend to be novice users and may be more likely to click on banner advertisements. These consumers are usually not looking for anything in particular but are just searching the web to get some ideas. On Social Media platforms these users are online to communicate with friends and can be influenced by Facebook ads which show their friends have liked a brands page.

3. Directed buyers: These buyers are online to purchase specific products and they have high tendency to compare product features and prices. These buyers will often use blogs and forums to get opinions on product details.

4. Bargain hunters: These users want to use the offers available from sales promotions such as free samples or prizes. These consumers will often use
comparison sites and special offer sites such as Groupon when purchasing a product.

5. **Entertainment seekers:** These users are looking to interact with the web for enjoyment. These users will be the ones who share pictures and videos with friends and take part in online quizzes.

The five types of web user that Lewis & Lewis described in 1997 are still relevant today. However, perhaps the most important type of online consumer from a company’s point of view would be Lead Users. When referring to experienced employees as lead users Pitta, Franzak and Katsanis (1996) defined lead users as “educated, knowledgeable employees with considerable experience with a vendor’s product”. This definition can be used for online customer lead users. They can also be referred to as an employee because they can help with customer complaints, product development and their followers can often be a good source of market research. Once a company finds out whom its lead users are they can listen to what’s being said about their products or brand. In a more active role companies can decide to sponsor a lead user and their community of followers by paying for the up-keep of the community. This can provide the company with a much more efficient market research method. Thomke and von Hippel (2002) found that companies that provide customers with the tools to design new products as well as description of what they would like to see has led to much more valuable information than the traditional focus group method. However, in innovative areas relying on customers to tell you what they want can be insufficient because customers don’t always know what they
want. Henry Ford has been cited to say that “If I had asked my customers what they wanted they would have said a faster horse”.

3.3 Social Media in Ireland

According to statistics by eightytwenty (2013) 52% of Irish people over the age of 15 use Facebook, 35% use YouTube, 23% use Twitter, 20% use LinkedIn, 15% use Google+ and 9% have an Instagram account.

It is then no wonder why according to research by Amas (2012) more and more marketing professionals are diverting a larger portion of their budgets to Social Media “because of better opportunities for customer engagement and greater return on investment than they experience with traditional channels”. Social media has gained in popularity, “with 70% of Irish marketers maintaining a business Facebook presence and 44% with their own YouTube channels” (Amas, 2012). Eightytwenty (2013) also found that 61% of Irish businesses had a Twitter and LinkedIn account.

Developments in technology have been a vital tool in the success and increase in usage of Social Media sites. With the rise of smartphones consumers are now able to use Social Media sites from anywhere. IAccenture (2012) found that 69% of all internet access was done so through a mobile device of which 61% did so via a smartphone and 62% used their mobile device to access their Social Media accounts. Of the 61% of smartphone users over 70% of them were between the ages of 14 and 39. The survey also showed that the frequency of mobile phone users accessing their Social Media accounts is growing. They found that 80% did so more than once a week with younger people being more active than older generations.
Young Irish consumers are spending more of their online time on Social Media sites. It’s where they go to socialize, play games and seek information. According to the Amas study out of the 900 million Facebook pages over 2 million of them are Irish. According to the statistics from eightytwenty (2013) of the 51% of Irish consumers that talk about brands on Social Media sites:

- 74% talk about brands for offers and promotions.
- 44% seek advice
- 19% use group buying
- 15% post praise about the company or its products,
- 15% post a complaint about a product or service.

When eightytwenty studied the use of Facebook by Irish consumers they found that:

- 70% return daily.
- There are 133 million likes per month.
- Irish consumers send 77 million messages per month.
- They use check ins 471 thousand times per month.
- Have an average of 268 friends.
- Comment 81 million times per month.
- Upload 24 million pictures per month.
- Irish consumers share 103 thousand videos per month.
IAB Ireland and PwC (2011) asked Irish businesses why they use Social Media. 95% of the sample said value for money was a driver, either “very important” or “important”, customer engagement ranked second with 97%, optimizing reach was third with 93% and fourth most important reason was that 89% found Social Media to be more measurable than other forms of marketing. These results coincide with the results of the research by Nielsen and IAB Ireland (2011) which stated that digital advertising was the third largest sector in Ireland behind press and TV. However, in the same study they found that digital marketing was the only area to experience double digit growth between 2010 and 2011 and according to the PwC/IAB Ireland (2011) research social media in Ireland was valued at €5.8 million in 2011.
3.4. Conclusion

Social Media is still a growing sector not only in Ireland but around the world. However, its full benefits to customers and businesses are still a relatively unknown area. Creating and sustaining customer interaction on Social Media sites is seen as a key objective but the method of creating the interaction and making it last is still an enigma for many businesses in Ireland. This research looks to clarify these unknowns and to gain a deeper understanding of just how useful Social Media is for interacting with young Irish consumers during the buying process and what type of content works best.
Chapter 4: Findings

The findings of the study were developed from the respondents answers during the interviews. The findings from both group interviews were then cross-coded to identify key themes and issues.

Social Media Platforms Used & Why:

All respondents were asked when did they first use Social Media and what was it. Every respondent in both group interviews said that the first Social Media site that they used was Bebo. The respondents then stated that they no longer use Bebo because “it’s for kids”. All the respondents had moved from Bebo to Facebook as well as other Social Media sites. On average each respondent used between 5-10 different Social Media sites. These included Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, Groupon, Foursquare, Tripadvisor as well as other comparison sites, blogs and forums ranging across different business categories from IT to beauty.

When asked what made them join other Social Media sites the majority of respondents stated that peer pressure was the number one reason for joining a new Social Media site. They felt that they “would miss out on something” if they didn’t join a site that their friends were on.

The ability for respondents to keep up to date with friends was an important feature for them to have when it came to Social Media sites. It was only after respondents had joined a Social Media site such as Facebook that they started to notice deals and special offers and would then join special offer sites, “Facebook I just joined to talk to friends but then you have deals on that as well. But GrabOne.ie and Groupon is purely because they give
good deals and offers. So that’s the only reason why I joined them. Then hotel comparison sites just to get reviews off other customers”.

**Usage:**

The majority of respondents claimed that they only use certain Social Media sites everyday and others only a few times a week. When asked what differentiates the sites the respondents seemed to pick the sites that they could contact friends easily on to use everyday such as Facebook and Twitter and the more professional sites such as Linkedin would be only used a few times a week.

**Brand Involvement:**

Most respondents still see Social Media sites as a tool to stay in touch with friends for the most part and that businesses are butting into the conversation with sales and marketing material. When asked about the use of Social Media sites such as Facebook and Twitter by companies every respondent was happy to have company posts appearing in their news feed as long as it wasn’t the same content repeated and that they didn’t post multiple times during the same day, “it’s depending on the company if they have a large range of products then if they are consistently posting different products then it’s ok but if it’s a company that only has 4 or 5 products and they keep repeating the same posts then it gets annoying”. Respondents seemed to conclude that 3-4 posts per day would be acceptable and anything under that wouldn’t get seen and anything above it would be viewed as spam.

One group of respondents even claimed that eventually we will just get use to seeing ads on Social Media and we will just automatically ignore them the way we do with traditional marketing channels. This would mean that either marketers need to get more
creative with their ads or that Social Media sites will no longer be a useful marketing tool and that we would have to rely on traditional marketing channels or develop a new marketing channel to succeed Social Media.

**Brand Types:**

When respondents were asked what type of companies they follow on Social Media sites, the number one answer were beer companies followed by IT, sport and beauty. When asked why they follow these businesses the majority of respondents answered it was for deals or to stay up to date, “for the likes of sport companies I would follow to show that I am loyal to them. If you like say Manchester United that’s because you support them but then for the like of Heineken or Miller you just like them to see what deals they have. So it depends on the company”.

**Interaction:**

The respondents were then asked about their online interaction with these companies. The findings were that the majority will “like” a page especially for a prize or discount with only a few of the respondents willing to leave a comment unless they felt strongly about the issue, “it depends on what they are posting, if it’s just a picture of a product more than likely I wouldn’t write a review I’d probably like it if I find it interesting but if it’s something that interests me then I might take part like if it’s a debate”.

When respondents were asked about what Social Media sites they use during different stages of the Wildfire customer funnel these were the majority of answers.
**Stage 1:** Discovery - Noticing relevant content on Social Media sites such as photos, reviews and blog posts from other users and businesses.

The most common answer for this stage was that review sites and blogs were used the most during the discovery stage. When asked why the respondents use these sites during this stage the answer given was that they were a good source of customer reviews and allow them to read other customer opinions towards the product or brand. The respondents felt it was important to have customer reviews for an unbiased opinion, “then you’d have a better chance of getting the real truth in real life situations such as battery life. Which is something that the company will say will last all day but it might only last a couple of hours”.

**Stage 2:** Evaluate - Interacting on Social Media sites such as forums and discussion boards to evaluate products or services.

For this stage again the review sites and blogs were a common answer so to was Facebook. When asked why the respondents use these sites customer reviews and opinions were stated again as well as allowing the respondents to ask specific questions that they have about a product or service. When asked why they trust customer reviews by complete strangers the respondents felt that “a business is going to try and lie to sell their product where as a stranger isn’t partial to the company so they’ll tell the truth about how it worked”. However, the respondents were also weary of trusting people online and
claimed “if one person said a comment then I wouldn’t trust it but if there’s a lot of people saying the same thing then I’d trust it because it’s coming from the majority of people”.

Stage 3: Buy- Can use built in commerce functions to purchase from a company. They could also sign up for newsletters and contact the company.

During this stage comparison sites such as Tripadvisor and deal sites such as Groupon were common themes. The reasons why the respondents used these sites were for newsletters about the latest offers and to read previous experiences from other customers.

When asked about their loyalty level towards companies that they follow online there was a split in answers given. One group of respondents claimed that “if I see a deal that they post they I’m going to go out to buy it. So I’d choose them because of their good deals but if they hadn’t got a deal up then I wouldn’t go into a shop and only buy their products just because I like them on Facebook”. While the other group of respondents claimed that they would follow brands that they have had offline experiences with before. This group stated they would be loyal to the different brands that they follow “that I’d like the company because I prefer their product over another companies. So in that sense I would choose that company”.

Stage 4: Access- Interacting with branded Social Media pages, interacting with other customers and interacting with content generated by the company.

For this stage there were two common answers which were the companies own website and the companies Facebook page. The respondents claimed that they use these sites to
leave reviews of the company’s products or the company itself and to show other customers the strengths or weaknesses of the company. They also used this stage to ask questions about products that they have purchased and to stay up to date with any upgrades available. When asked if the respondents taught it was a good idea for companies to use Social Media sites every respondent said that they should depending on what type of business they are, “definitely, just purely because people can post comments and the company can give them feedback. It gives them free advertising basically. The likes of Facebook or Twitter lets them reach so many people that they probably wouldn’t be able to using other types of advertising. On Facebook and Twitter companies can reach out to pretty much the whole world for free”.

Stage 5: Use- Using Social Media features that are linked into the product. Example of Social Media users reading on news sites.

At this stage there was a variety of Social Media sites used the most common were Facebook, Groupon and Foursquare. The respondents claimed that they use these sites to get the latest discounts, free upgrades or to win free products. When respondents were asked except for discounts what the main benefits they achieved through Social Media sites they had a variety of answers, “product information to keep up to date”, “free give away”, “reviews of the product from both the company and its users”.
Stage 6: Support- Interacting, seeking help or directing complaints using Social Media sites.

During this stage there were four main sites used which were Blogs, Forums, Facebook and Twitter. The reasons for using these sites were to get technical support quickly and to see if anyone else had a similar problem and how they dealt with it. The blogs and forums were used to get in touch with other customers that may have the same problem or know how to solve the issue. Facebook and Twitter were used to get in contact with the company and ask them what can be done. When respondents were asked if they taught it was a good idea for companies to use Social Media for after sales service each respondent said that it is definitely a good idea, “the great thing about Social Media sites is that it is so quick, I have tried ringing companies before over complaints and you’re there for nearly an hour on the phone listening to the same song over and over again waiting for a response. Whereas with Social Media you can send your message and you usually get it back within a few minutes or an hour. You can walk away from the platform you’re using and know a response will be there when you log back in”. The respondents also recognised that if companies aren’t doing a good job on Social Media sites especially with customer complaints then it looks bad on the company and would lead to a loss in trust.
Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter will explore the findings of the primary research and discuss what they mean, what their consequences and implications are, how they relate to the current literature and their implications towards the research questions.

1.a) What Social Media Platforms are used at the various stages of the consumer buying process?

During the primary research respondents stated that they use different Social Media tools during different stages of the consumer buying process.

Figure 15: Wildfire (2012)

![Diagram showing Social Media platforms used at different stages of the consumer buying process]

Figure 15 shows the different Social Media platforms used during the different stages of the consumer buying process. From the primary research conducted it has been found that young Irish consumers join Social Media sites to be part of a community, keep in touch with friends and see what the latest technology has to offer. There was not one respondent who stated that they joined to interact with businesses. Therefore businesses need to create a community around their brand on the different Social Media platforms used by their companies if they truly want their customers to be part of their brand and for the brand to be part of who their customers are.
From the primary research conducted it has been found that a lot of the online communication by customers about a product or brand is done away from the companies own online presence. In this section this paper will look into why this is happening, what companies can do about it and the benefits for a company of creating a community that allows customers to interact with each other.

**Word of Mouth**

The significance of WOM in influencing consumer decision making has been well recognised in marketing and advertising literature (Engel et al. 1969; Gilly et al. 1998). WOM is defined as the act of “exchanging marketing information among consumers, and plays an essential role in changing consumer attitudes and behaviour towards products and services” (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955). All respondents stated that they trust an online customer review by someone they didn’t know over the businesses own content.

Posts on Social Networking Sites such as ads, pictures or videos enable consumers to engage in some kind of social interactions by commenting, liking or passing along to their social connections. Through these interactions, consumers voluntarily display their brand preference along with their persona (e.g. name and picture). By sharing useful product information and experience, Social Media users can help their social connections with purchase-related decisions.

Because WOM is created and delivered by a more trustworthy source of information about products and brands than company generated persuasive messages (Feick & Price 1987), consumers often rely on it when they search for information on which to base their purchase decisions. The emergence of Internet-based media has facilitated the development of WOM online – that is, electronic word-of-mouth (referred to as eWOM
Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) defined eWOM as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet”.

**eWOM**

Advertising on Social Media platforms enables consumers to engage in some kind of social interaction by commenting, liking or passing along to their social connections (Interactive Advertising Bureau 2009). Through these interactions, consumers voluntarily display their brand preference along with their persona (e.g. name and picture), which can engender eWOM communication. Voluntary exposure to brand information on Social Media platforms is important because consumers are seeking ways to interact with brands and other consumers, which enables truly interactive eWOM.

Internet companies commonly employ several types of WOM marketing activities. The major categories include the following:

1) Viral Marketing – creating entertaining or informative messages designed to be passed on by each message receiver, analogous to the spread of an epidemic, often electronically or by email. YouTube has become one of the most popular Social Media sites to be used for viral marketing. Not only can marketing material become a huge success such as the Cadbury ad of a gorilla playing the drums but it is even capable of creating celebrities e.g. Justin Bieber such is the power of Social Media sharing.

2) Referral Programs – creating tools that enable satisfied customers to refer their family and friends. In a modern shopping centre it is rare to see a shop window without a sign saying “find us on Facebook”. Social Media is a great way for consumers to share their experiences of a brand with friends and family.
3) Community Marketing – forming or supporting niche communities that are likely to share interests about a product or brand (such as user groups, fan clubs, and discussion forums) and providing tools, content, and information to support those communities. By allowing customers to talk to each other about your products can lead to a greater level of interaction and acts as free advertising to potential customers.

Indeed, word of mouth is the primary factor behind 20 to 50 percent of all purchasing decisions. Its influence is greatest when consumers are buying a product for the first time or when products are relatively expensive, factors that tend to make people conduct more research, seek more opinions, and deliberate longer than they otherwise would. And its influence will probably grow due to the digital revolution, which has amplified and accelerated its reach to the point where word of mouth is no longer an act of intimate, one-on-one communication.

Today, it WOM operates on a one-to-many basis: product reviews are posted online and opinions disseminated through social networks. Some customers even create Web sites or blogs to praise or punish brands.

Understanding how and why messages work allows marketers to craft a coordinated, consistent response that reaches the right people with the right content in the right setting. That generates an exponentially greater impact on the products consumers recommend, buy, and become loyal to.

As consumers have become overloaded with marketing content, they have become increasingly sceptical about traditional company-driven advertising and marketing and increasingly prefer to make purchasing decisions largely independent of what companies tell them about products.
Once consumers make a decision to buy a product, they start with an initial consideration set of brands formed through product experience, recommendations, or awareness building marketing. Those brands, and others, are actively evaluated as consumers gather product information from a variety of sources and decide which brand to purchase. Their post-sales experience then informs their next purchasing decision, while word of mouth has different degrees of influence on consumers at each stage of the consumer journey. The right messages resonate and expand within interested networks, affecting brand perceptions, purchase rates, and market share. The rise of online communities and communication has dramatically increased the potential for significant and far-reaching momentum effects.

**Community**

Creating a community or relationship between the customers and the business is not a new idea. Relationship marketing which focused on long term customer relationships was first seen as a competitive strategy by Webster (1992). Since maintaining relationships with each individual customer is impossible for most companies brand communities should be used as a way to support sharing information, perpetuating the history and culture of the brand, and providing assistance to consumers. Brand communities should also “provide social structure to customer-marketer relationships and greatly influence customer loyalty” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

A brand community is a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Consumers join brand communities for different reasons depending on what type of business they are interested in. Companies with strong recognised brands such as Nike or
Apple “fulfil important psychological and social needs by expressing who a person is and what group the person aligns oneself with” (Elliott & Wattanuwan, 1998). In their own ways, consumers search for the symbols or signs in the communities which help them decipher who they want to be and how they really want to be identified by others. In the primary research respondents recognised that they are more likely to follow brands on Facebook if they have a good relationship with them offline. Schembri, Merrilees, and Kristiansen (2010) show that identification of this type of inter-relationships is inspirational since consumers want self-association with signs which are desirable to them. In consuming brands such as Ferrari and BMW, the interpretant assumes the symbolic meaning as a part of self. Companies should also have incentives to enhance and support brand communities. The advantages of online brand communities include the opportunity for effective communications with their customers and obtaining valuable information. “These communities not just provide an additional communication channel, but a possibility of establishing linkages with devoted users” (Anderson, 2005). Companies like Dell and Cisco Systems transformed suppliers and customers into members of their corporate communities, thereby enabling exchanges of information and knowledge. McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) show that through participation in brand-fests, companies are able to manage and increase the feelings of integration into the brand community and positive feelings about the brand and product category. Today, the concept of brand community is tied with media. Brands transcend geography because media transcend geography (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), and technology made the constraint of geography almost irrelevant. The use of mobile phones, internet, and television made people closer than ever before. When respondents were asked how many
Social Media platforms they use the first place they checked was their phones. The role of social media therefore holds the key for brands to get existing and potential customers together in order to create an environment which nourishes the bond between customer and brand and to find new ways to foster this relationship, all without the constraint of geography (Kang et al., 2007).

The core platform of social media is Web 2.0 plus User Generated Content. Originally brand communities were established on the Web 1.0 platform, on companies’ portals or initiated by customers (Jang, 2008). However, with the popularity of social media websites, several companies are using social networking sites to support the creation of brand communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). These sites provide the user with a sense of freedom and allow them to converse in various languages, topics and issues, which foster an environment that allows for the free flow of information. The only Social Media site that respondents didn’t feel comfortable talking to others on was Linkedin. They felt that the professional status of Linkedin members meant they couldn’t say what they wanted to say in case it harmed their job opportunities.

The communities that are formed for the purpose of sharing information rather than for mere commercial reasons exert the greatest influence on members’ opinions and purchase intentions (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005).

Unlike traditional media where individuals consume content passively, content should be created by community members through active participation. This active creation of content shapes the character of the community and also determines the influences of users and participants on each other (Werry, 1999; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002).

Moreover, since digital environments facilitate the archiving of past content
inexpensively, these communities come to represent an aggregation of collective expertise on individual topics, difficult to match elsewhere, and create a capital of knowledge, increasing its value for all members.

A new stream in the literature regards customers not as mere recipients of the products and values of the firm but as co-creators of value, competitive strategy and the firm’s innovation processes (Franke & Piller, 2004; Schau et. al., 2009).

Over the years, social media sites have gradually increased in popularity and it is assumed that social media will only continue to increase in popularity and create new forms of social media. When looking at the number of respondents who have Facebook accounts, it is important for companies to first have a Facebook account when appealing to young Irish consumers. As social media continues to evolve, companies will need to engage in market research to understand which sites are popular during a given moment and focus on acquiring the same social media sites in an attempt to reach their target markets effectively.

With the increasing popularity of social media sites with consumers, companies need to be engaged consistently to keep their company positioned as the top company in the minds of their customers. However, companies also need to keep in mind consumers do not want to be overloaded with updates from their favourite companies, or their once favourite companies. According to the respondents 3-4 posts a day containing different content is acceptable but what is not acceptable is being constantly shown the same message several times a day.

One of the core findings of the primary research was that Social Media sites such as blogs and forums were used heavily during the early stages of the buying process. These Social
Media platforms allowed respondents to communicate with other consumers about products that they have bought or are planning to but without being hounded with marketing content. In the later stages of the buying process Social Media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were used heavily. These Social Media platforms allowed consumers to still interact with other consumers but more importantly allowed them to interact directly with the brand.

Research Question 1.b

1.b) What type of content do consumers interact with most using social media platforms during the buying process?

From the primary research conducted it has been found that the majority of respondents had low online interaction with companies that they follow. Those that did interact with businesses through Social Media said that they would like pages or photo’s to receive discounts or win prizes. This means that the life time customer value to a company can be very low due to repeated marketing content and a lack of sustainable interaction. In this section this paper will investigate how companies can better interact with customers and generate higher levels of online engagement.

Changing Channels

Firms are now confronting a conundrum with the multiple channels they can use to get in touch with their customers. In turn, customers can employ multiple channels to search, purchase, and receive after-sales services for those offerings (Neslin & Shankar, 2009; Neslin et al., 2006). Before the widespread emergence of the Internet in the 1990s, firms
typically used only a limited number of channels. Today, sales channels include the store, the Web, catalogs, sales forces, third-party agencies, call centres, and so on. And the number of channels just keeps increasing. New channels, such as mobile or smart phones, and new social media, such as social networking sites (e.g. Pinterest & Foursquare) have created new challenges and opportunities. Forrester predicts that by 2014, as much as 8% of retail sales will likely occur online and 53% will be enabled by a website. Firms are facing the new challenge of how to manage their customers across all channels in such a way that customer value is created and maintained (Schonfeld, 2010).

In an increasingly networked society customers can interact easily with other customers and firms through social networks and other new media. The term customer engagement is seen as an important new trend within customer value. Customer engagement consists of multiple behaviours, such as word of mouth, blogging, customer ratings, and so forth. In an interactive context, consumers have more influence on the process and on subsequent marketing communications by searching for, using and responding to information.

**Interaction**

The real power of the Internet and the characteristic that differentiates it from traditional media is its potential for interactivity. Leckenby and Li (2000) defined interactive advertising as the presentation and promotion of products, services, and ideas by an identified sponsor through mediated means, involving mutual interaction between consumers and marketers. Interactive advertising places the consumer at the centre of the study of marketing communication because its effectiveness hinges not only on how the marketer’s message influences the consumer but also on how the consumer shapes the
interaction. There are degrees of interactivity, and interaction exists along numerous dimensions. In fact, many media are not inherently interactive or not. Media themselves may possess characteristics that facilitate or impede interaction.

When online advertising was becoming a popular issue in the late 90’s Drèze and Hussherr (1999) found response to advertising on the Internet to be similar to response to advertising in other media, except that advertising on the Internet appears to be easier to ignore. This coincides with this paper’s primary research as respondents claimed that they felt that eventually they will just ignore online advertising the same way they do with traditional advertising. While consumers may decide to interact with the marketer in a variety of contexts, consumers have only limited motivation, time, and processing capacity for such interaction.

Therefore, consumers are likely to interact when the focal product or service is of high importance to them, when they are convinced that this interaction will be beneficial to them. This was highlighted during the primary research when respondents claimed that it is only when they feel strongly for or against an issue that they would comment on a business’s Social Media page. This means that marketers cannot just repeat the same marketing content that they use on traditional media channels. They need to invite consumers to interact by posting interesting and relevant content. Of course there is no blue print of what will work and what won’t because each company is going to have a different target audience and each audience will want different things from their engagement with a business.
According to Carvill & Taylor (2013) when considering what content you should post on your businesses Social Media pages there are seven different categories that posts will fall under:

1. **Your Own Content**: This could be content from your blog, a version of a press release or an opinion piece by a member of staff.

2. **Share Someone Else’s Content**: By reposting or re-tweeting a post from someone else’s page that is relevant to your company or your customers.

3. **Ask a Question**: Social Media sites are all about generating a continuous conversation. Businesses want to engage with their customers and one of the best ways to do this is by asking them for their opinion. This can become a good source of information for a business. They can ask what customers think of their latest products or latest marketing campaign. Facebook allows businesses to target questions even more by creating a poll. The poll option allows marketers to narrow down the possible answers that can be given. This could be used to replace the traditional surveys which take a lot of time of tracking down consumers who are willing to fill out a survey on the spot. With a poll they can answer online when they are ready.

4. **Observations**: These posts are when you pass comment on subjects that might be of interest to your followers.

5. **Recommendations**: Showcase any recommendations that you have been given or praise members of your staff or a person in the public that you think is worth a mention.
6. Talk about Another Page: Businesses can mention a partner organisations page or post about something that is of interest to your followers.

7. Respond to Comments: Businesses using Social Media should recognise that Social Media is exactly what it says “Social”. Blocking comments from consumers is generally a bad idea. Consumer comments whether they are good or bad should be answered. From the primary research respondents claimed that when they see a complaint being answered on Social Media it gives them more trust towards the company.

Respondents seemed to prefer interacting with posts that either:

- Interested Them- Respondents claimed that they would be willing to comment on an issue that was of interest to them. The area respondents highlighted most was product information. From the primary research businesses should display general product information on Facebook and for more technical information it may be worth their while creating a Blog to answer any questions. They could instead of creating a blog sponsor a blog already established which talks about the same area that the business operates in.

- Offered Discounts- The posts that got the most interaction from respondents were discount offers. Posts such as like this page and win a free prize were constantly mentioned. Although these types of posts are a great way of getting consumers onto your Social Media page it usually dies out quickly unless you are able to constantly do new competitions. The value of these “likes” will be less than the likes you get from a customer who has used your product and is willing to leave reviews. The discount post is usually seen as a short term answer and has no real
long term worth compared to starting a discussion about an area of interest to your followers.

- Pictures/Video - Similar to the traditional newspaper, images are easy to notice and often get much more interaction than text based posts. When you add in video’s of how to use your products the interaction can be greatly improved.
Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

With the emergence of Social Media over recent years the traditional marketing channels have been over taken by faster much more interactive forms of media. The interaction between consumers offline has always been recognised as a powerful source of persuasion. When you combine this power of persuasion with the power of Social Media it is clear to see how review sites, blogs and forums can have such an influencing affect over what products or services consumers purchase.

During the Discovery stage of the consumer buying process search engines such as Google are still the first place consumers go to search for products. However, instead of then clicking onto a company website consumers are finding product reviews on blogs and forums.

During the Evaluation stage blogs, forums and review sites such as TripAdvisor are having a huge impact on consumer decision making. Consumers are more than happy to trust comments left by complete strangers on these review sites rather than trust the usual marketing content that companies provide them.

Once again peer reviews impact on a consumer’s decision making during the Buying stage especially when alternative products are being offered which is the case on sites such as TripAdvisor and iTunes.

During the Access stage Social Media pages that are owned by the company are seen as a great opportunity by consumers to give feedback to the company and provide their own product reviews for future customers.

During the Use stage of the consumer decision making journey YouTube “How to” videos and updates that are available from Facebook have been recognised as a great
benefit to consumers. It is important to recognise that although the consumer has already purchased the product they can still damage a brand's reputation by leaving a negative review on Social Media sites. It is important that businesses recognise the need to make the consumer feel positive about their purchase especially after they have just spent their money buying your product.

The Get Support stage was seen as a great opportunity for businesses by the respondents. They all recognised that it is when you need help with a product that they are in most need to contact a company. This could be as easy as a chat on Facebook or a quick five-minute video on YouTube which not only informs your customers on how to use your product but can also be used to help them with any problems that they are having with your product and in turn reduce the need for them to contact your company directly through phone calls or emails. This can then save your company money by reducing the need for call centres or employee’s time wasted on the phone dealing with disgruntled customers.

From the primary research it can be stated that not only are consumers willing to interact with brands on Social Media sites but that they actually want businesses to provide them with content that they can engage with. Respondents stated that they interacted with content for different reasons. Businesses need to identify which content would best suit their customer. As an example a small discount store could use Facebook to advertise its latest offers but they wouldn’t be interested in showing their knowledge in the retail sector. On the other hand an expensive name brand retail store might use Social Media to share pictures of their latest fashions instead of using Social Media to display special offers.
Every respondent during the primary research had a Facebook page and then other Social Media accounts such as Twitter, Foursquare, Groupon, Pinterest and so on. Having a Facebook account seemed to be almost an inherent thing to have. This then means that the first place businesses should be placed when targeting young Irish consumers online is Facebook. Once they have established themselves on Facebook they can then research into what other Social Media sites are being used by not only their Facebook followers but other potential customers that may not follow them on Facebook. This can be easily done by tracking what other Social Media sites your content from Facebook is being shared onto by customers.

From the primary research it is clear that different types of Social Media platforms are being used at different stages of the consumer decision making journey. Therefore it is important that businesses are able to be present at each of these touch points. A common theme that was present during each stage was the ability to interact with other consumers. For each respondent the ability to interact with other consumers was a huge factor when deciding on what product to purchase whether this involved writing to other consumers on blogs/forums or by just leaving customer reviews. This is why businesses need to create a community around their brand. By allowing customers to leave comments and videos of their experiences with your products the greater the level of trust will be towards your business. It is also important that companies interact with these customers and give them a reason to praise your product or service to potential customers.

Social Media technology has greatly changed the way companies interact with customers online. Through Social Media sites it is possible for companies to build a relationship with their customers and always stay fresh and current in the customers mind. It is
important that marketers recognise that the content they publish on Social Media sites cannot be totally sales driven similar to what they do with traditional marketing channels. The content on Social Media sites needs to be either helpful, informative or create an emotion. If marketers continue with their sales driven approach they will get very little interaction and consumers will just see them as spam. However, if marketers post helpful tips or videos that interest their consumers the content will have a much greater level of interaction compared to the traditional sales pitch.

It is no longer the marketer’s sole job to push content towards consumers. Marketer’s that live in the Social Media age are now responsible for collecting content from outside the companies online presence and use it to build participation and a community. Social Media allows for marketers to connect on a whole other level with customers, which in return makes the customer feel a part of the company.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

During the literary review different factors were highlighted which affect a consumers decision making such as word of mouth, lead users, peer reviews etc. However, missing from the current literature was how all these factors when looked at together affect a consumer’s decision making and what factors have affect during different stages of the decision making. For future research I recommend a longitudinal study is conducted on how Social Media affects consumer decision making in the long term. I feel that a more longitudinal study would give a greater insight into the real influencers of Social Media users over time and which factors have the greatest influence at different stages of the buying process.
Having conducted this research I would also recommend as an area for further research that the use of Social Media during the buying process is researched on an industry bases. I feel that a research that studies the use of Social Media by customers of different businesses could provide a clearer view of what types of businesses should use Social Media and how. At the moment it seems nearly every businesses sector from IT to Governmental is trying to figure out if they should use Social Media and if so, how they should use it. This recommended research could provide the answer to what businesses should use Social Media and how they should use it, whether it is a tool to use for engaging with customer, building leads or sharing knowledge within their industry. This research would have to be based over a long period of time and in multiple business sectors. Although the time needed for this type of research wouldn’t be suitable for a master’s thesis it could be an option for a sponsored research project. The researcher could get funding from businesses within different sectors and carry out studies on their customers which would provide the researcher with the time and finance needed and provide the businesses with the crucial research they need about their customers.
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APPENDIX: Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been using Social Media?

2. How many Social Media platforms do you use and could you list them?

3. How often would you use each Social Media platform?

4. What were your reasons for joining the different Social Media platforms?

5. Why do you use Social Media?

6. What type of businesses do you follow on Social Media platforms?

7. What were your reasons for following those businesses?

8. Which of those businesses do you interact with most, and why?

9. In what way do you interact with that business online?

10. How does your interaction with that business affect your feelings towards that company?
11. How does your interaction with businesses on Social Media platforms affect what products or services you buy?

12. In your opinion do you think interacting with customers using Social Media is a good strategy?

13. On the Wildfire Consumer Decision Journey what Social Media platforms would you use at each stage and why?

14. What benefits do you get by using the Social Media sites that you named previously?

15. Is there anything a business could do to help you through the buying process using Social Media?

16. Is there anything more you would like to add concerning this subject?

Thank you for your cooperation.
Fill Out Sheet Prior To Interview:

Group:

Name:

Stage 1:

Discover: Noticing relevant content on Social Media sites such as photos, reviews, blog posts from other users and businesses.

Social Media Used:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Reasons Why:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
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Stage 2:

Evaluate: Interacting on Social Media sites such as forums and discussion boards to evaluate products or services.
Social Media Used:

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Reasons Why:

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Stage 3:

**Buy:** Can use built in commerce functions to purchase from a company. They could also sign up for newsletters and contact the company.

Social Media Used:

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Reasons Why:

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Stage 4:

**Access:** Interacting with branded Social Media pages interacting with other customers and interacting with content generated by the company.

**Social Media Used:**

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**Reasons Why:**

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Stage 5:

**Use:** Using Social Media features that are linked into the product. Example of Social Media users reading on news sites

**Social Media Used:**

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Reasons Why:

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Stage 6:

Get Support: Interacting, seeking help or directing complaints using Social Media sites.

Social Media Used:

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Reasons Why:

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