Consumer's Participation on Brand Pages on Facebook

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Abstract. *The focus of this study is to analyze consumer's participation and communication in the online brand communities on Facebook. This type of brand community represents a sub-group of virtual communities, which is known as communities of consumption or fan clubs (Kozinets, 1999; Szmigin et al., 2005). Understanding consumer relationships in such communities is important for the success of both the brand and the community. The aim of our study is to investigate how and in what sense consumers participate and communicate with one another via online brand communities, so as to explore the nature of the consumer's participation on brand pages on Facebook. Also, we aim to investigate the importance of the Facebook fan page as a tool for a company's business strategy. n order to investigate all these different aspects, a quantitative audience research was conducted, using a structured questionnaire.*

Keywords: brand, online brand communities, fan page, Facebook, business strategy, Romania.

Introduction

The internet, in a business context, is considered a tool that gives companies opportunities to establish distinctive strategies and strategic positions (Porter, 2001). But internet itself cannot help companies to get a competitive advantage on the market. The main goal of any business is to get revenues therefore the use of technological tools as internet may be related with this specific target. For most of the companies the use of the internet should be a part of their strategy to reduce the gap between price and cost (Porter, 2001). In this context it is important to analyze the companies' online communication. The internet advancements, for example social media, which constitute the already famous Web 2.0, enable easier and faster connection and communication without any

geographical boundaries among countries or people. More specifically Facebook constitutes a space where people who have similar interests or hobbies can interact in many ways. The presence of the company in this online environment is currently not an option for the companies, but already a necessity.

The new technologies of communication have the power to reshape all the domains of society and also reshape peoples' lives, as Sonia Livingstone states "we can no longer imagine living our daily lives- at leisure or at work, with family or friends- without media and communication technologies. Nor would we want to. As we entered the twenty-first century, the home is being transformed into the site of multimedia culture integrating audiovisual, information and telecommunications services" (Livingstone, 2002, p.1). So, is necessary to ask how to create economic revenues or economic value through internet or how internet helps in it? Porter (2001, p.66) suggests two ways:

- Industry structure, which determines the profitability of the average competitor; and
- Sustainable competitive advantage, which allows a company to outperform the average competitor.

Furthermore, the use of internet in a global market does not mean to abandon the classical practices of a company because is not important just to have the tools, the most important is to know how to define a good strategy transforming the strategy into operational terms (Norton & Rusell, 2005, p.5).

The great paradox of the Internet is that it is making information widely available; reducing the difficulty of purchasing, marketing, and distribution; allowing buyers and sellers to find and transact business with one another more easily–also make it more difficult for companies to capture those benefits as profits" (Porter, 2001, p.66). This article will analyze the online brand communities and consumer's participation on online brand communities. The objectives of this study are: to investigate the specific role of identification with the brand in online brand communities, to explore the nature of the consumer's participation on brand pages on Facebook, to explore the importance of Facebook Fan Page in a company's strategy.

Online brand communities

Social Network Sites (SNS) are defined as "*web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system,*

(2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3)
view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the
system" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Currently these sites have come to take an
important place as media communication and as media expression explained
in part because is a very accessible media. The social network sites should help
to maintain existent relationships and create new social connections (Boyd
& Ellison, 2007). Boyd and Ellison (2007) also propose to define SNS as So-
cial Networking Site instead of Social Network Site because the first defini-
tion refers to the creation of new connections and maintaining existent ones
meanwhile the second definition only refers to the development of new con-
nections.

Use of Social networks show a growing trend in popular use since the year
of 1997 when it started the creation of sites the permitted users without ex-
perience in programing language or advanced use of computers, to use ap-
plications to communicate and also to show positive characteristics of their
personality through a mediated media and protect their identity. We mention
Facebook as one of the most important sites. However, Facebook is in part
a consequence of a series of improvements make to SNS, the difference that
made Facebook what it is today was the strategy.

Before the apparition of the first social network site in the form that they
can be identify currently, there were applications like AIM and ICQ buddy
lists that supported lists of Friends. Another application was Classmates.com
that allowed people to affiliate with their schoolmates or colleagues. Thus the
first social network site identified was SixDegrees.com in 1997. This website
allowed people to create a friend list and create a profile. SixDegrees.com
was the first website that integrated all these characteristics (Boyd & Ellison,
2007). Later from 1997 to 2001, other social network sites were developed.
They allowed users to create personal, professional, and dating profiles, such
as: AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet and LiveJournal in 1999, LunarStorm, and Mi-
Gente in 2000, Cyworld and Ryze.com in 2001. Then from 2002 to 2006 other
Social Network Sites were developed, such as: Fotolog, Friendster and Sky-
blog in 2002, Couchsurfing, Linkendin, MySpace, Tribe.net, Open BC/Xing,
Last.FM and Hi5 in 2003. Orku, Dogster, Multiply, aSmallWorld, Flickr, Piczo,
Mixi, Facebook (Harvard only), Dodgeball, Care2, Catster and Hyves in 2004.
Yahoo! 360, YouTube, Xanga, Bebo, Facebook (High school network), Ning,
AsianAvenue, and Black Planet in 2005. Windows Live Spaces,Twitter and
MyChurch in 2006 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Of course that "*like any brief his-*
tory of a major phenomenon, ours is necessarily incomplete. In the following sec-

tion we discuss Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook, three key SNSs that shaped the business, cultural, and research landscape" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

In a global context MySpace was very popular especially in the United States but was growing popularity all over the world. Friendster was very popular in Pacific Islands, Mixi in Japan, LunarStorm in Sweden, Hyves in Dutch, Grono in Poland, Grono captured Poland, Hi5 was adopted in the smaller countries from Latin America, South America, and Europe, and Bebo became very popular in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia, QQ in China, Cyworld in Korea (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). "*In the U.S., bloggingtools with SNS features, such as Xanga, LiveJournal, and Vox, attracted broad audiences. Skyrock reigns in France, and Windows Live Spaces dominates numerous markets worldwide, including Mexico, Italy, and Spain. Although SNSs like QQ, Orkut, andLive Spaces are just as large as, if not larger than, MySpace, they receive little coverage in U.S. and English-speaking countries, making it difficult to track their trajectories*" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

On the other hand, Social Network Sites show a big quantity of personal data of the people that are using them. "*The volume, range, and method of sharing personal information across a variety of publics and audiences on SNSs pose an issue of growing concern for users. The persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability of personal data deposited asindividuals forge social connections present privacy challenges. Individuals gradually realize that the physical barriers that enable privacy offline are not inherent aspects of online-networked architectures. The impact of maintaining privacy without the aid of physical barriers is further augmented as SNSs cultivate practices that prompt users to be more public with their information by default*" (Papacharissi & Gibson, 2011).

The idea of an online or virtual community is not new. The concept was pushed forward by Howard Rheingold, who offered one of the first definitions of such communities as "*social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace*" (Rheingold, 2000, p.xx). This definition focuses on the affective aspect, considering that the online communities are built through affective investment. The same suggestion is also made by Shawn Wilbur who also sees emotional engagement as an essential element: "*for those who doubt the possibility of online intimacy, I can only speak of…hours sitting at my keyboard with tears streaming down my face, or convulsed with laughter*" (Wilbur, 1997, p.18). Leila Green also focuses on engagement when she states that "*communities depend on individuals en-*

gaging with the general exchanges, projecting themselves and their identity in an ongoing conversation" (Green, 2010, p.148). Other authors rather than coming up with a specific definition of online communities, they preferred to focus on "*defining the concept by 'prototypical attributes', so that communities with more of these attributes were clearer examples of communities than those that had fewer*" (Whittaker et al., 1997). The core attributes of online communities that Whittaker et al. (1997) identified are as follows:

- online community members need to have some shared goal, interest, or activity that provides the primary reason for belonging to the community
- members engage in repeated active participation and there are often intense inter-actions, strong emotional ties and shared activities occurring between participants
- members have access to shared resources and there are policies for determining access to those resources
- support and services between members as part of their community interaction.
- a shared context (such as social conventions, language, protocols).

In the same manner, another author, Preece (2000) defines an online community as containing the following four components: social interaction, a shared purpose, a common set of expected behaviors, forms of computer system which facilitate communication.

Armstrong and Hagel (1996) propose four types of online communities: Communities of Transaction – defined as communities that facilitate the buying and selling of different products and services and also deliver information related to those transactions; Communities of Interest – are those communities that bring together participants who interact with one another on specific topics; Communities of Fantasy – communities in which the participant creates new environments, personalities, or stories; Communities of Relationship – it is a type of community that form around certain life experiences that often are very intense and can lead to the formation of deep personal connections. All these communities are not mutually exclusive, meaning that one community can address more than one of participant's needs. Kozinets (1999) provides a similar classification of online communities based on social structure and group focus. His typology includes: boards, rooms, rings and lists, and dungeons. Kozinets (1999) explains that the identified segments are not all equally receptive to the same marketing strategies. Another classification of the online communities is outlined by Szmigin et al. (2005). The authors

describe four types of communities: help group, value exchange, fan club, and defence organisation.

A form of online community that is rapidly and constantly growing is the online brand community in which the users who have common interests in a particular brand are able to share knowledge with each other at any time (Madupu & Cooley, 2010). Kozinets (1999, p.254) describes online brand communities as virtual communities of consumption. He adds that these communities are "*a specific subgroup of virtual communities*" that focuses only on consumption of products and brands. These communities are defined "*as affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific, consumption activity or related group of activities*" (Kozinets 1999, p.254). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) identify three different features between brand communities and other non-brand-related communities, and these are: (1) consciousness of a kind, (2) rituals and traditions, and (3) sense of obligation to the community and its members. At the same time, McAlexander et al. (2002) suggests three additional features to explain brand communities in more detail: (1) geographic concentration, (2) social context, and (3) temporality. First, 'geographic concentration' indicates the community members' location or place regarding distribution. Second, the 'social context' explains the members' knowledge of a brand community. Thirdly, 'temporality' depicts the durability of brand communities whether those are steady or periodic (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010).

Recent technological advancements have enabled online brand communities to grow on a global scale, which benefits both businesses and consumers alike. Scholars believe that an online brand comunity is as important for both consumers and companies (Kim et al., 2008). For consumers, it is important because it helps them to make the proper decision to choose and purchase brand products or services and gives more satisfaction to the consumers. For companies, the online brand communities are important because they help companies to increase their profit. First of all, because the online communities are different from the traditional marketing, the companies are able now to reduce time and cost for market research to investigate consumers' demands (Lee et al., 2009). As a result, the interest of the consumers towards the online brand communities has been increasing, and also, the companies have become more and more interested in how to create and foster successful online brand communities (Carlson et al., 2008). As this phenomenon is amplifying academics have started to concentrate their studies on users' behavior on

online brand communities. Hagel (1999), for instance, indicates that online brand communities have as target four types of consumer needs:
- brand interest - brand interest is a compulsory need to consumer for engaging in an online brand community;
- social relationship building - in any community, social and personal interaction is strongly developed by establishing relationship;
- transaction - 'communities of transaction' are focused on information exchange for facilitating economic exchange;
- fantasy - 'communities of fantasy' means that the online brand communities provide individuals the opportunity to establish new personal identities that differ from the real world such a fantasy world (Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001).

Classification of online community user behaviours

Reviewing the literature we identified three major classifications of online community use behaviours: Kozinets's Classification, Mathwicks' Classification, Preece and Shneiderman's Classification.

1. Kozinets' classification
Kozinets's (1999) dedicated his study to online community members in terms of a marketing perspective. The author identifies four different users' behaviours by relation to consumption behaviour and intensity of the social relationships. These types of behaviours are:
- the tourists – those members on the online brand communities who lack a social relationship to the group and their consumption activities are simply for maintaining a superficial and temporary interest;
- the minglers - members who keep strong social ties, but their interests of consumption are likely to be only casual;
- the devotees – those who have a strong and enthusiastic interest in consumption activities and few social attachments to the rest of the group;
- the insiders – members who have strong brand loyalty and social relationships in the online communities.

2. Mathwicks' classification
Unlike Kozinets, Mathwick (2002) studied online transactional community members, in order to investigate the nature of relational behaviour in online communities. Mathwick's study focuses on the relationship between transactional community sponsors and their patrons. The behaviours of consumers

in transactional online communities are classified by four behavioural clusters:

- the lurkers, members who tend to have low relation with exchange and communal activities. They are not interested in connecting with other members regarding commercial, interpersonal or sharing interests. The 'lurkers' behaviour is similar to 'tourists' in Kozinets' classification (Kozinets, 1999).
- the socialisers, members who are much more interested in communal relationships than exchange relationships. They are interested in sharing their interest such as hobbies and recreational activities and politics and religion. They are similar to 'the minglers' behaviour from Kozinets classification (Kozinets, 1999).
- the personal connectors, members who are not interested in intrinsic value as social interaction but they are close with other members related with their interest. They are loyal customers to the brand as well as Kozinets' 'devotees' (Kozinets, 1999).
- the transactional community members, are those members who have stronger communal and exchange relationships than other groups. They provide feedback about brand products and services and participate in online dialogue with other membersof the community. Their behaviour is similar to the 'insiders' from Kozinets' classification (Kozinets, 1999).

3. Preece and Shneiderman's classification

The study of Preece and Shhneiderman presents the 'Reader-to-Leader Framework' which explains how people join online communities and how people contribute and collaborate to online community activities. Preece and Shneiderman (2009) classify members' behaviours of online communities in the perspective of technology mediated communication. The behaviours of consumers in online communities are classified in:

- the readers, members that gather information related to their interests,
- the contributors, members who start to act in visible, but not vital online communities.The authos believe that the 'contributors' are interested in building relationships with other members of the community; therefore, high quality and quantity of contributions would help themget in touch with the others (Preece & Shneiderman, 2009),
- the collaborators, are important to communicate within groups and gain recognition. Respect and reputation from the other members of the community lead them to engage more and to make collaboration in online communities (Preece & Shneiderman, 2009).

  – the leaders - members who have high visibility in an online community
    and their efforts are important to the other members of the online com-
    munities.

Social networking websites as online brand communities

The use of social media is growing in a business scenario (Bulmer & DiMauro,
2011). Social network sites as applications based on internet´s structure like
email, instant messaging, etc. allow the companies to raise entry barriers (Por-
ter, 2001). But the companies that raise entry barriers should be prepared to
receive the customers and confront other companies of all sizes. The use of
social network sites is related with the company's conception about the cus-
tomer experience. The social network sites help to reduce the distance be-
tween the companies and the customer further than marketing proposals and
should be understood like a strategy to:
  – Collaborate with the customer;
  – Make employees customers;
  – Understand customer experience;
  – Understand customer economics (Goldbrunner, Hauser, List & Veld-
    hoen, 1997).

Thus, social network sites allow not only to position products in the market,
they could be important to understand the company's clients and integrate
that knowledge to the company´s strategy. In this way if the companies would
like to create value is necessary to develop an engagement strategy and not
just create accounts on the social network sites (Culnan, McHugh & Zubil-
laga, 2010). The use of social media technologies helps companies to get new
ideas and to manage new projects (McKinsey, 2011). But also the managers
began to engage in an interactive communication with their current custom-
ers in order to maintain the customers' interest (Dehghani, Nourani & Abar-
deh, 2012).

Currently the most famous social network site is Facebook. DiStaso and Mc-
Corkindale (2013) studied 250 companies in the USA. They found that only
6% of the companies did not have an account on Facebook. 73% had a Twitter
account, and 74% Seventy-four percent of companies had a YouTube chan-
nel. The penetration rate of Facebook is growing in many countries and the
rate is significant for the market. In Romania the penetration rate is 24.6%,
36.5% in Mexico, whereas that in United Kingdom is around 52.3% (inter-

networldstats.com, 2012). That is why companies are considering Facebook into strategies.

Facebook allows establishing an engagement with the stokholders and general customers through two-way communication (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011) if the company has a clear strategy. To define the strategy in social networks, Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga (2010) suggest that is necessary: mindful adoption, community building, and absorptive capacity (to acquire new knowledge provided by their customers). It is necessary to also highlight the engagement with the customer because it is common that a company social network´s strategy fail because companies are not monitoring the internet (Conway, Ward, Lewis & Bernhardt, 2007).

Facebook fan page – an important asset for business strategy

The internet has an effect upon the operational effectiveness and strategic positioning. It makes it harder for companies to sustain operational advantages, but it opens new opportunities for achieving or strengthening a distinctive strategic positioning (Porter, 2001). The internet expands the geographical market and the companies are easily expanding too, because "the digital age we live in has made information available at any time and almost any place" (Pânzaru & Mitan, 2013, p.221). The competence turns aggressive in a global market and this implies that companies count with a strong strategy that needs to consider much more than digital strategies. Porter (1996) considers strategy as "*the creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a different set of activities*". Currently to be visible in the digital world is not an option is a necessity. In the past years companies have witnessed growing business turbulence and the last years in particular. The internet advancements enable easier and faster connection and communication without any geographical boundaries among countries or people. The internet creates a space where people who have similar interests or hobbies can interact in many ways beyond simple chat or information provision. Likewise, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and similar online communities have become an important part of our life as well as the advanced mobile computing technologies. An online community can be defined as a computer-mediated space that has been developed in various forms, such as forums and social groups in social network services. Sharratt and Usoro (2003) argue that an online community has a significant role as an information system based on knowledge management because, nowadays, information technologies and systems are

regarded not only as storage, but also as a collaborative tool of knowledge. One of the differences between traditional communities and online communities is that of the exchange of valuable knowledge and information via the web without geographical limitations.

Social media is an evolving domain each day new programs are created, new applications that are able to measure the effectiveness of coring campaigns through Facebook. The main objectives of this study are: to investigate the specific role of identification with the brand in online brand communities, to explore the nature of the consumer's participation on brand pages on Facebook, to explore the importance of Facebook Fan Page in a company's strategy. In order to investigate all these different aspects, a quantitative audience research was conducted, using a structured questionnaire that was disseminated online to more than 800 Facebook users. Only 700 respondents were considered relevant for this study, 59% women, 41% men. The Facebook users' profile can be easily detected in Figure 1.
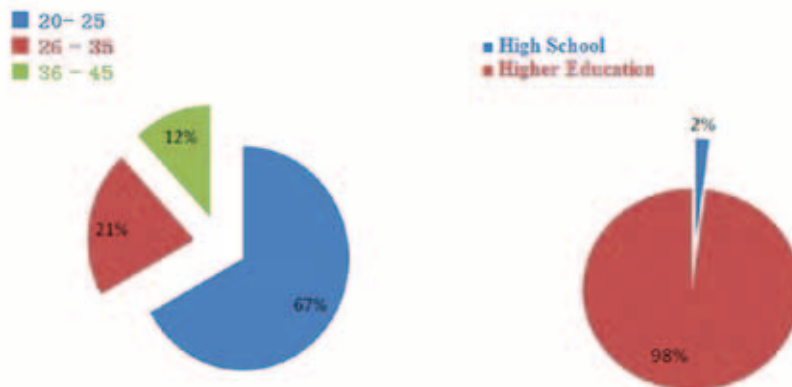

Figure 1. Facebook users' profile

A very important aspect of a company's presence on Facebook is the type of page that the company should adopt in order to have more control and freedom at the same time. For a product, a service or a person's public image, the best way is to use a Facebook Fan Page which is not the same as an ordinary profile page. To clarify this point of view, we will present the results of the conducted study. First of all it was important to investigate what are the most used social network sites among the Romanian consumers. As shown in Figure 1, the respondents choose Facebook, LinkedIn, Hi5 and Twitter.
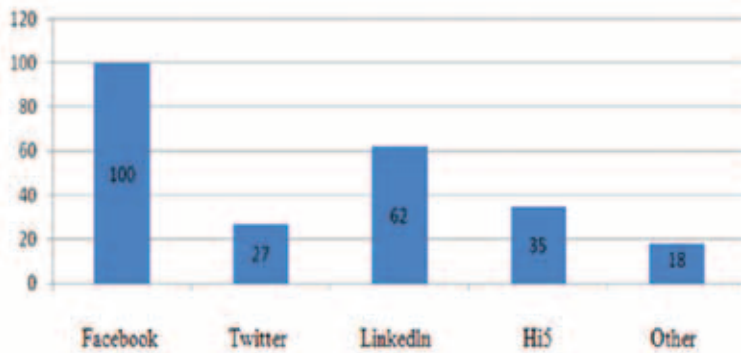
Figure 2. Respondents' use of Social Networks

Being asked to designate the networks that they use, by checking accounts, posting information, or simply staying connected to, it has been proven that most of the respondents use Facebook accounts (100%), ranked first on the list of each respondent. After Facebook, the respondents are active on Twitter (27%) and LinkedIn (62%). Note that among these respondents, the only networks that the respondents use are Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, despite the fact that most of them have the accounts on other networks (Figure 2).
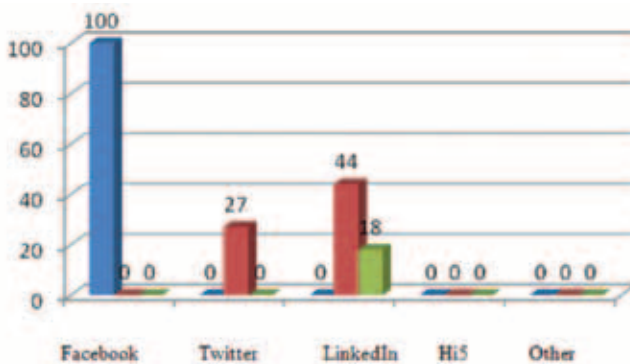
Figure 3. The frequency of using social network sites (%)

The frequency with which these accounts are accessed may offer us an insight into the share they hold in peoples' daily online activity, especially in combination with the duration of these connections. Thus, respondents spend, at the rate of 71%, several hours a day on the social networks accounts. 7% of them are connected one hour per day, 9% just a few hours per week, while 12% grants them even less time (Figure 3).

Figure 4. The time people spend on social network sites (%)

To be able to create an image of the consumers' preferences in terms of so-cial media, but also to determine the reasons why encourages the behavior, we need to find out which are the "online locations" that people choose and what is their importance (figure 4). Thus, the most important activity for the respondents seems to be browsing on various websites (73%), followed by browsing on the Internet via search engines (16%). 6% opted for other activi-ties, placing social networks on the last place, with a rate of 5%.
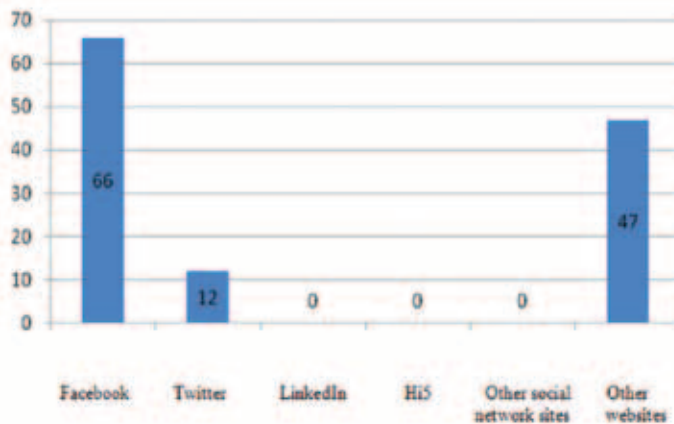

Figure 5. Most popular online locations

When it comes to promoting their activity, even if they have their own busi-ness or not, people choose again social network sites (Figure 5). They consider social network sites the most visible way of promoting yourself or your activ-ity.
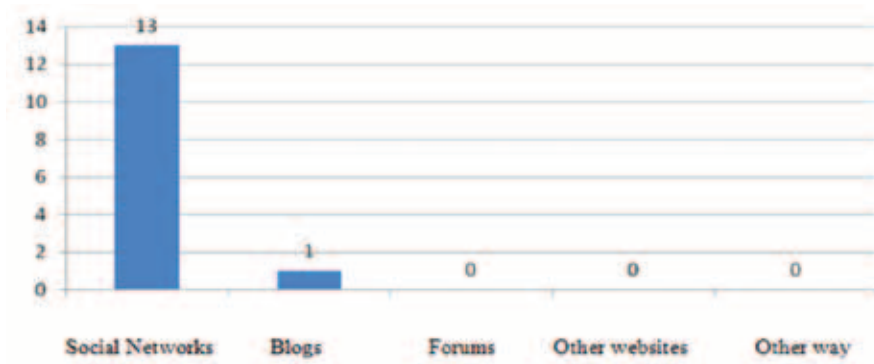
Figure 6. How do you choose to promote your company's activity

This trend is the same when it comes to the way in which people find out about various events. The majority of the respondents said that they find this information directly from the companies' websites (73%), while social networks present a percentage of only 8%. 2% of the respondents consider email a sourse of information, and the remaining 17% use other ways (Figure 6).
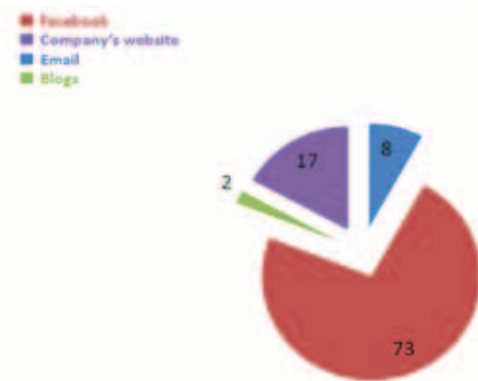

Figure 7. Gathering information about various events (%)

Taking into consideration that the most important brands have accounts on social network sites, it was important to find out if peoples' favourite brands have a Facebook Fan Page (figure 7). When we asked the respondents how they choose to stay in touch with their favourite brands 91% answered that through Facebook, using the Facebook fan page of each brand that they are interested in, 3% via email, and only 6% through the company's website (figure 7). Also when it comes to following one particular company, the respondents consider that they prefer to follow their favourite brands through Facebook

because it is easier, and after that by using the companies' websites in order to look for more information that they might not find on Facebook.
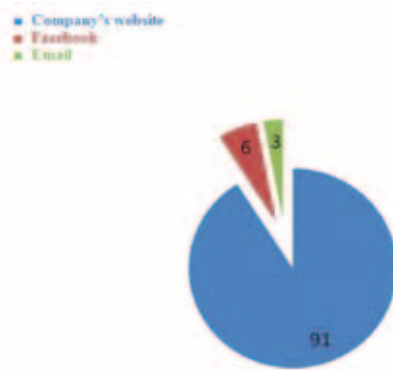

Figure 8. How do you connect with your favourite brand (%)

In order to find out what was the effect of the phenomenon of social media in relation to this brand-consumer relationship it was vital to find out the frequency of using the company's website after they connect with that particular company on Facebook. Thus, following the companies' accounts on different social network sites, the respondents access the companies websites as often as before, at the rate of 64% (Figure 9).
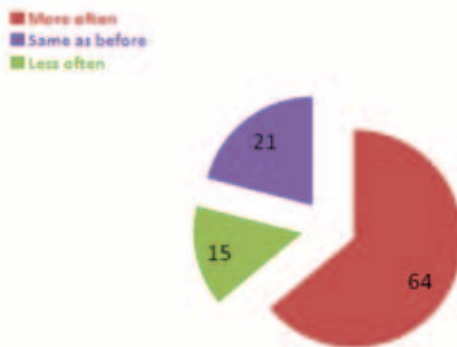

Figure 9. Frequency of using the companies' websites after accesing the companies Facebook Fan Page

As a result of this survey we can state that Facebook Fan page is an important asset for the companies' online strategy but still not so important so as to replace the companies' websites. Although the number of accounts on social network sites is very high, the fact people considered it important but do not

always follow it choosing to find out information from the company's website, denotes that holding such an account it is only a trend. The respondents consider that if you are really interested in following a brand then you will follow the company's website. Although the amount of time that people spend daily on social network sites is very high, the information is being collected in the "traditional" way, from the company's website.

Conclusions

The Internet has an amazing effect upon the strategic positioning of a company. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and similar online communities have become an important part of peoples' life. This study explored the specific role of identification with the brand on brand pages on Facebook, the nature of the consumer's participation on brand pages on Facebook and the importance of Facebook Fan Page in a company's strategy. Facebook Fan page is an important asset for the companies' online strategy but still not so important so as to replace the traditional websites. Although the number of accounts on social network sites is very high, consumers do not always follow the fan page of the companies choosing to find out information directly from the company's website.

Although people acknowledge the merits of the social network sites, such as the real-time dissemination of information and promotion of the events they have a degree of distrust that leads them to always chech out the companies' websites. Facebook fan page could replace the traditional website but it is still considered to be just an extension of the traditional website.. The results of the questionnaire show that users are very attracted to novelty, thus explaining the use of the accounts created within social networks. Furthermore, this study shows that participation on the online brand communities on Facebook is influenced by identification with the brand and the community. An important but unexpected finding of this study is that people still prefer the companies' websites instead of Facebook Fan Page although they spend daily many hours on Facebook. Also the participation on Facebook Fan Page do not influence brand attachment. In conclusion, this study shows that participation and identification on Facebook are important to consumer-brand relationship. On the online brand communities consumers are able to develop and establish strong bonds with the brand that influences their behaviour and also they are able to develop relationships and exchange ideas with the other members of the community. This study was conducted only on Facebook users. The study

could be developed by analyzing the profile and preferences of people that belong to a specific online brand community. It would be necessary to allocate more time to investigate the online consumer-brand relationship in order to be able to fully understand the importance and the potential of online brand communities.

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