Social Networking Site As Platform For Advertisement: Does It Really Work?

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ABSTRACT: The popularity of social networking sites continues to grow, connecting people with just about everything – news, entertainment, gossip, friendship and advertisements. Since Facebook, one of such popular social media, was founded in 2004, users have grown to over one billion. With these very large numbers on Facebook, certain businesses/advertisers are beginning to notice the potential for reaching out to their target audiences through this new medium. However, little is known about how these users perceive such advertisements. This paper, therefore, accumulates tertiary students' perspectives and attitudes towards advertising in online social network sites, using Facebook as a case study, and develops implications for marketers seeking to advertise on those sites. The paper, through a focused group discussion and in-depth interviews, collects information from these tertiary students, who are deemed as heavy users of Facebook, to identify their attitudes towards advertisements on Facebook. Findings indicate that even though respondents see the internet as a supplier of information, the many advertisements on their personal pages on Facebook is nothing but an intrusion since they visit Facebook mainly to socialise, to feel good and to build their own image. Respondents believe that advertisements on their Facebook pages are useful only if they relate to their personal interests, hence advertisers must endeavour to 'personalise' adverts in order to maximise returns.

KEYWORDS: attitude, advertising, new media, social networking sites, Facebook, tertiary students

I. INTRODUCTION

The Internet as we have today was designed in the early 1950s (*Saeed, 2013*). Its main purpose was basically to share information among different people all over the world. It was used by different scientists, engineers and experts for some specific purposes.

Afterwards, people used it for communication and to share information through e-mails. Today, the Internet has become a very important tool for advertising with the aim of attracting customers.

With the birth of Social Networking Sites (SNS) like Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, YouTube and a host of these, the face of Internet advertisement has changed. SNS popularity continues to grow; connecting people with just about everything they watch and buy. Whether it is a brand icon inviting consumers to connect with a company on LinkedIn, a news ticker promoting an anchor's Twitter handle, or an advertisement asking a consumer to "Like" a product on Facebook, people are constantly being driven to social media.

Facebook, the SNS within which this study is situated was founded in 2004 and it has become the top ranked SNS [10]. According to Facebook Statistics [5], there are about 1.23 billion active users of Facebook; out of which Ghana has over 1.63million active users being the 8th highest in Africa.

Facebook users have claimed the site a "necessity, along the lines of oxygen, water, and food" [1]. For many people, visiting Facebook has become an integral part of their daily lives, and has even caused some to have an unhealthy obsession with the site [1].

Since March 2009, Facebook became the world's most popular communication tool, overtaking email [9]. Marketers, who have identified this, seized the opportunity to communicate directly with the consumer in their personal environment [1].

Again, SNS can be said to form a novel channel in the field of communication. Based on a number of recent research evidence [8] [20], it can be argued that such sites can be considered as a new medium for promoting products or services, and as a means for increasing consumption and brand awareness. Nielsen (2010) argues that Facebook is the most popular among the social networking sites, reaching 52% of the social networking sites' population, hence the shift to using it as an advertising medium [14].

With advertising expenditure in this new media said to be over $2 billion [7], it is important that advertising practitioners understand the characteristics of online social networking sites as a medium for advertising and how this advertising might differ from standard Internet advertising. This paper, therefore, examines tertiary students' perspectives and attitudes towards advertising in online social network sites, using Facebook as a case study, and further develops implications for marketers seeking to advertise on those sites.

The choice of Facebook is justified on the basis that it is currently among the highest profiting sites on the web, weighing in at a projected value of 10 billion dollars [6]. The researcher is also much more familiar with Facebook than other social media platforms.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

It is very easy to assemble a number of quantitative statistics that are available for the use of advertising in the Facebook space. Statistics like number of visitors, page views, and frequency of visits, average visit length are available for anyone who owns or advertises on Facebook to find. These basic statistics do not however reflect the essence of the interaction consumers had with the brand, the degree of engagement felt during and after the interaction, or the effects of the interaction with the brand.

To measure the effectiveness of social media advertising, there should be a balance between quantitative statistics and qualitative insights that cannot be gained from simple statistics that are on offer. Such qualitative insights include the attitude of those the brand is exposed to, as to whether they have turned to associate with the specific brand or not. It is the lack of this qualitative insights that despite the faith and advertising dollars/cedis invested in these sites [7], many marketers are not convinced of this medium's effectiveness and feel that there is too much risk involved in advertising in this semi-controlled environment [9]. It is this gap that this paper seeks to fill by examining the perspectives and attitudes of some users towards advertising in online social network sites such as Facebook.

Again is the fact that there are a number of studies on Internet advertisement, as claimed by [15]. However, there is limited academic research about online social networking sites as an advertising medium [1]. This study, obviously will also contribute towards filling the gap of limited research on online social networking sites.

In addressing the gaps as identified above, the following specific objectives have been outlined to guide the study:

- To examine the attitude of consumers towards Facebook advertisement

- To develop implications for advertisers using Facebook as a platform.

III. THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The study is situated within the theory of uses and gratification. The uses and gratification theory provides important insight into why Facebook is so widely used. As an audience-based theory, uses and gratification theorises that different consumers use the same media content for different reasons, depending on their individual needs and goals [2]. The core assumptions of the theory include the following:

- The audience is active and its media use is goal oriented

- The initiative in linking need gratification to a specific medium choice rests with the audience member
- The media compete with other resources for need satisfaction
- People have enough self-awareness of their media use, interests, and motives to be able to provide researchers with an accurate picture of that use and
- Value judgements of media content can only be assessed by the audience.

The use of this theory for the current study is justified when its core assumptions are directly applied to social networking sites (specifically Facebook). It can be argued that the average Facebook user is active, as he or she has willingly created an account, and is a member of the site. Next, the user chooses Facebook as a means to fulfil his or her wants and goals over other sources. Essentially, the Facebook user visits the site for a unique purpose. This can include the need to connect interpersonally as well as the want to promote a business or product (i.e. advertising).

In order to develop qualitative data on potential 'customers' on Facebook, it is essential to study the reason they visit Facebook and the 'gratification' they derive from it. This study therefore uses tertiary students who have created Facebook accounts willingly, and for their own specific reasons as source of data in order to meet the stated objectives.

Learmonth in his study on *Facebook's Plan to Amp up ad Revenue*, argues that Facebook is an effective marketing platform with the reason that there is already a high level of networking and communication taking place on its platform [12]. This, Learmonth notes, allows companies to be directly woven into conversations simply by appearing on the site. Consistent with this argument is that of Swedowsky who also claims that Facebook does not only transform the research and purchase consideration phase, but it also provides shoppers with a platform to advocate for the products and stores they love [19].

Again, Social Media have been acclaimed for having dramatic influences on every stage of the consumer decision-making process as well as influencing general opinions and attitude formation [12] of the users of this platform.

Advertising on Facebook will either be unseen by those to whom it is meant for or simply ignored. White therefore suggest that simply thinking social networking sites as something money promising may cause a failure of investment as customers or online surfers may consider advertisements offensive and intrusive [22]. To this end, White *et al* suggest that personalised advertising is the best when the information used is more unique to the recipient [22].

Contrary to the suggestion of White [12] found that 66 percent of Americans do not want marketers to tailor advertisements to their interests. This is because many of these people see such ads as an intrusion. It is the fear of such resistance to online ads that has led advertisers to limit their tailoring of ads to individuals [12].

However, Tuten seem to still maintain from his study that Social Media, as part of a marketing campaign, can contribute to the brand awareness and improve its reputation and image [21]. He also notes the higher possibility of sales, the higher traffic to the brand's web site, and the overall enhancement of the fundamental marketing strategy.

Similarly, in comparing the traditional means of advertising and that of Internet advertising, Yoon and Kim suggest that internet advertising differs from more traditional advertising media because it provides unlimited delivery of information from unlimited sources of information and has the added benefit of targeting specific groups or individuals [23].

White further suggests that the internet as an advertising medium is characterised as an interactive medium that is highly measureable and supportive of other advertising Media [22]. In his study of Facebook and advertisement, Klaassen reports a recent study, where 43% of online purchasers named social-network surfing as the reason they decided to

make their purchase. This statistic shows the potential power that advertisers have to reach a willing and active audience [11]. However, to fully understand the effect of Facebook advertising, it is important to further understand how consumers perceive Facebook and its advertisers, hence this study.

IV. METHODOLOGY

In order to further understand the characteristics of online social networking sites (in this case Facebook) as an advertising medium and how users perceive it, a two-level qualitative study was undertaken. A sample group of tertiary students, specifically students of a Tertiary Institution aged from 18-26 were purposively selected to participate in focus group discussions and in-depth interviews.

The choice of the Tertiary Institution was decided primarily because of ease of access to the students. Another aspect that sets the university students as an ideal sample population is the mixture of opinion, which results from factors such as cultural background and ethnicity, individual interests and the constant exposure to the internet due to the nature of today's educational system.

The age bracket was also situated in the study of Madden who suggests that people between the ages of 18-26 can be considered as the population with the highest internet consumption rate [13]. Moreover this particular age group is highly exposed to information and communication technologies. Rutherford and Bittman also suggest that this age group is appropriate to study as they are heavy users of online social networking sites of which Facebook is part [16].

The first level of the qualitative study consisted of two focus groups of six participants each which was conducted using a purposive sampling technique. The choice of this technique was appropriate because participants were considered based on their familiarity with Facebook and its regular usage for not less than a year.
The focus groups, which lasted one hour, consisted of semi-structured questions designed to gain the participants' views of Facebook advertisement. This process was audio taped and later analyzed based on the major themes that came up during the discussion. The second level of the qualitative study was five different in-depth interviews. This was done so as to collect a deeper understanding of the issues identified during the focus groups[3]. Here again, open-ended and semi-structured questions were developed to encourage the flow of information. The sampling technique used for the focus group was still applied here to ensure that respondents use Facebook for not less than a year and thus having a fair appreciation of its main features.

Sekaran argues that two levels of qualitative studies, such as the current one, provide better and deeper insights into subjects under study, hence the decision to adopt them [17].

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the focus group and the in-depth interviews conducted, a number of issues came up. The major ones that helped to address the objectives of the study are grouped under various themes and discussed below:

- **Theme 1: Facebook is a platform for socialisation/networking**

First, the average participant in the focus group and the interview had between 300-1,000 Facebook friends. This number is significant because it affirms Facebook's Statistics, which states that the average user on the site has 130 friends [5]. This may indicate that the participants in this survey are more active on the site, and have more fellow 'Facebookers' than the average user. It is significant also because if one is not active on Facebook, one cannot have a good number of friends as identified in this study.

Another significant finding here is that all the participants said they log-on to their Facebook account on a daily basis. This is because they have mobile phones or tablets that always alert them of any activity they or their friends are engaged in. It is interesting that all the participants log-on to Facebook daily which further means that if any

advert is placed on their wall they are able to see it quickly or almost immediately.

The finding above is consistent with the claim by Social Peel, which states that 70% of college students log-on daily to Facebook [18]. The finding also affirms the claim that Facebook users see the site as a "necessity, along the lines of oxygen, water, and food" [12]; and that for many people, visiting Facebook has become an integral part of their daily lives, and has even caused some to have an unhealthy obsession with the site.

As to what makes the participants visit Facebook, many of them claim they need to be in constant touch with their friends to chat, gossip or to while away the time. It is interesting to note that some of the participants say Facebook has taken away boredom because one does not necessarily have to visit friends in order to chat since that can be done through Facebook.

The above finding is not very surprising as the uses and gratification theory clearly explains this to mean that audiences have their own need for which they make use of a particular medium. In this case, socialization and perhaps networking is what keeps these people 'glued' to the medium.

- **Theme 2: Awareness of advertisement on the Facebook site**

All participants claim knowledge of advertisements on Facebook. The most common places participants claim they see these ads were on the "news feed" home page, and on the side bar of other people's profiles.
It is significant to note that some of the participants argued that in as much as they are aware of a number of advertisements, their primary aim of visiting Facebook is not to find or purchase products. They claim if they want to purchase a product they will use a search engine on the internet to locate the specific thing they are looking for.

Interestingly, however, is the claim by some participants that when a particular item which they

are looking for is coincidentally advertised on their page they will click to find the details. Such items, one participant mentioned, is a wedding gown currently being advertised by "Spendwise Bridal" that drew her attention. To this participant, the design and the price of the gown struck her to click and she has further suggested the site to many of her single friends who say they will purchase their wedding gowns from this marketer when they are ready for marriage.

The findings above indicate that when products are customised and advertised on the pages of prospective clients, returns are greater than just placing ads on anybody's page. The findings seem to be consistent with that of White who suggest that personalised advertising is the best when the information used is more unique to the recipient [22]. It is however inconsistent with Lohr's study which claims that social media users see ads as an intrusion, hence advertisers would want to limit their tailoring of ads to individuals[12].

Since individual needs differ as the uses and gratification theory suggests, there are some people who will benefit from such ads, hence marketers can develop some strategies for getting returns from advertising on this platform.

- **Theme 3: Facebook advertisements are nothing but intrusion**

Participants, having acknowledged the presence of ads on Facebook, see them (the ads) as nothing but an intrusion into their privacy especially when a commercial online site tries to 'befriend' them. Interestingly, even though some participants claim Facebook commercial sites are useful if they relate to their personal interests, they believe they would prefer to go directly to a product's official website, which is more credible than a product's Facebook page. This is because social media cannot as of now, be seen to be very credible. Users would not trust the information on Facebook if they needed to make a commercial decision unless they are directly linked to the official website of the product.

There was no consensus on whether Facebook should stop advertising totally. While some claim the intrusion may sometimes be welcomed, depending on their need and circumstance, others say the site should be 'advert free'.

- **Theme 4: Implications for advertisers**

The results suggest that advertisers cannot approach advertising in online social networking environments in the same manner as they approach advertising on the internet. The Internet is generally viewed by consumers as a supplier of information. It is perceived as being vast and global. Consumers understand that there are Internet sites that are trustworthy and have developed strategies to determine which sites are not as reliable. They go to the Internet for information only when they require it. Facebook, one of the sites on the Internet is their private platform for social networking; advertisements must not be used as an intrusion into such private "lives".

Advertisers can make good returns only if they post relevant ads to the user. Advertisers must notice that the potential consequences of interacting with advertising online often pose a risk in the minds of users. Any guarantees that can be given may lessen this risk.

The findings above do not seem to support that of Learmonth who argues that companies can directly be woven into conversations on Facebook simply by appearing on people's pages [12]. This study argues that such "direct" entries are seen as intrusion into people's privacy and that could have negative implications on advertisers.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper took a critical look at Facebook advertising and how it affects the users of the social networking site. As of now, there is no conclusive data as to a "universal" perception of Facebook advertising. This is because individuals see the advertisement differently as the uses and gratification theory suggests.

Even though the study used a very limited sample size, the findings cannot be overlooked because they are very significant to advertisers. Some of the rather significant implications drawn from the study include the fact that Facebook advertisements achieve good returns when it relates directly to the need of the consumer, and that advertisers need to take the privacy of consumers into consideration in packaging ads such that even though it will be seen as an intrusion, it may be welcomed.

Again is the fact that advertisers should always provide their product's website on their Facebook pages so that prospective customers can visit the websites of products directly thereby minimising the doubts in relation to issues of credibility. Finally, a guarantee can be given to consumers to ameliorate the risk that is associated with online purchases.

Facebook advertising and online advertisement for that matter is really growing in size. One study cannot provide answers to all questions available on this subject. More research should be conducted with a larger sample size such that findings can be generalised. Such further studies can also be of interest if specific companies that are already advertising on the platform are followed to determine their returns as to whether the platform helps in promoting their business or not.

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