The impact of social networks on consumer behavior of young people

El impacto de las redes sociales en el comportamiento de consumo de los jóvenes

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Contents

ABSTRACT:

The article presents the authors' vision of the role and influence of social networks on students' consumer behavior. The influence instruments on consumer behavior in social networks are revealed. The authors consider consumption as a way of impression management and self-identification in social networks. The consumer behavior of young people who are university students is considered from the point of view of the desire to acquire a social status through the establishment of social ties in social networks.
Keywords: social networks, youth, consumer behavior, impression management, self-identification.

RESUMEN:

El artículo presenta la visión de los autores sobre el papel y la influencia de las redes sociales en el comportamiento del consumidor de los estudiantes. Se revelan los instrumentos de influencia sobre el comportamiento del consumidor en las redes sociales. Los autores consideran el consumo como una forma de gestión de impresiones y autoidentificación en las redes sociales. El comportamiento del consumidor de los jóvenes que son estudiantes universitarios se considera desde el punto de vista del deseo de adquirir un estatus social a través del establecimiento de vínculos sociales en las redes sociales.
Palabras clave: redes sociales, juventud, comportamiento del consumidor, gestión de impresiones, autoidentificación.

1. Introduction

Since the late 1980-ies significant social changes have occurred in the Russian society, the development of information and communication technologies and their accessibility for young people played a special role in these social processes.

One of the outstanding features of the young people is that they respond to social changes faster than the older generation and adapt to new life circumstances. This has also manifested itself in the use of information technology in everyday life. Nevertheless, while

studying the influence of networks on the consumer behavior of young people, we noticed social passivity of the majority of representatives of this socio-demographic group.

Formation of young people's consumer behavior is under the influence of the current situation in the market of goods and services, as well as by the mass media.

Under the influence of the media, the consumer behavior of young people is changing due to the abundance of advertising in the streets, on television, on the Internet and social networks. A special place in the system of mass communication is occupied by social networks. Every year the number of registered users is growing, and the time spent online is increasing.

Social networks are very popular among students. Various goods and services are actively promoted on social networks, a culture of consumption, patterns of behavior and a certain lifestyle, in the center of which lies consumption becomes an end in itself. Social networks encourage young people to purchase certain goods and services, they also establish standards of consumer behavior, values and attitudes. As a result, the structure of impression management changes - the social need for recognition is satisfied not in real life, but in social networks. In these conditions, social networks become a special tool for forming consumer behavior of young people.

Since the second half of the 90ies, new information and communication technologies, the Internet are being introduced into all spheres of society. The opportunities they offer in the process of cultural, socio-economic and political transformation become a subject of interest for sociologists, political scientists, philosophers, lawyers, economists. The methodological basis for the organization of research in this aspect is provided by the basic theoretical propositions presented by D. Bell, (Bell 1971, 1979) M. McLuhan (McLuhan 2011, 2014), E.E. Toffler (Toffler 2002, 2004). The stated subject implies an appeal to the scientific creativity of the researcher of the information age and the network society of M. Castells (Castells and Cardoso 2005) and to the problems of the formation of the information society, the development of technical innovations and their introduction into all spheres of human life. To study how young people, construct their images in social networks, the works of P. Berger and T. Lukman (Berger and Lukman 1995) were considered. The problem of the influence of virtual network communities on the development of society was analysed in a number of works by Russian researchers Bondarenko S.V. (Bondarenko 2011), E.D. Nevesenko (Nevesenko 2012).

Our study implied the study of the youth, in this regard, the youth was studied as a special socio-demographic group as in the works of Russian authors: M.K. Gorshkova, F.E. Sheregi (Gorshkov and Sheregi 2010), G.B. Kosharnaya (Kosharnaya 2012).

As a working sociological definition, by consumer behavior we understand a form of social action influenced by the array of many factors that determine the dynamics and structure of demand for goods and services, consumer preferences, the principles of using personal income.

The authors were not satisfied with the economic interpretation of the term 'consumer', since consumption is as much a social as it is an economic process. A consumer is a social role in a society that is conditioned by the object of consumption, and consumer behavior is a form of social action manifestation. The desire to satisfy one's own needs is not always confined to the increase of the consumed good, but can be based on the desire for communication, respect, power or competition. The actions of the consumer from the sociological point of view are not always based on the desire for communication, respect, power or competition. The consumer actions from the sociological point of view are far from being always based on the rationality of actions. There is such a phenomenon as irrational behavior from the economic point of view, which can be explained from the point of view of sociology.

These phenomena include "bandwagon effect" - the desire to acquire what everyone has, even if this product is not really worth buying; the "snob effect" - the desire to stand out from the society in some way, even by buying an unnecessary product; "Veblen effect" (Veblen 1984) or "conspicuous consumption" - the growth in demand for goods with an

increase in its value, etc.

In this article we investigate the consumer behavior of students. The authors imply that this group of young people has its own specific features. This is a social and professional group that stands out on the basis of its age, social status and is characterized by specific interests and values and is combined with the implementation of special educational and social functions.

2. Methods

Our assumptions are based on the results of our survey. For the subsequent interpretation of the results, semi-formalized interviews were conducted, which allowed us to interpret the results of quantitative research more deeply.

Respondents aged 20-24 participated in the survey (the total sample size was 380 students (167 men and 213 women). The survey was conducted between January and February 2017.

The information was initially processed with the help of the computer programs IBM SPSS Statistics, Excel.

Students of Moscow universities (studying at social, humanitarian, technical and natural science programmes) took part in the study of the totality of the quantitative research (questioning). Student of these universities who have different socio-demographic characteristics come not only from Moscow, but also from different regions of Russia. Selection of respondents in this study was carried out using the method of *probability sampling*, namely by the method of a serial sampling: the general population was divided into homogeneous parts (series), where the given attribute is the university where the students are currently studying.

Each block of questions of the questionnaire pursued its own goal, namely it revealed certain characteristics of the subject of research. In our study, this corresponds to the characteristics of the networks use, the characteristics of consumer behavior, the factors that influence the choice of goods, the features of advertising perception and the socio-demographic section.

For a semi-formalized in-depth interview, male and female respondents were selected, as well as students of various universities, the search for respondents was carried out using the "snowball" method. This type of interview allowed the informant to speak on free topics, but the conversation vector was directed in the right way with the help of a guide that helped not to deviate from the main theme. The data obtained were processed as follows: the most relevant interviews were fully transcribed. The main quotations correlated with the main topic of the study were written out from the remaining interviews.

3. Findings

To determine the degree of student activity in social networks respondents were asked to choose from the list of possible answers to the question: "Do you consider yourself an active user of social networks?". As a result, it was revealed that 82.6 percent recognize themselves as active users of social networks. According their own judgement by an active user of social networks Moscow students mean a person spending at least 3 hours a day in social networks. 44 percent of those who consider themselves an active user spend 3-6 hours on the network, and 14 percent spend more than 6 hours there. Girls spend more time on social networks than boys. 76 percent of girls spend more than 3 hours a day in the network, which means that they are active users of social networks. Among the surveyed young men, 51.4 percent of respondents consider themselves to be active users of social networks, but among young men the proportion of those who try to spend less time on social networks (32.4 percent) is also sufficient (32.4 percent).

More than half of the respondents (57.9 percent) use social networks from home and away from home, spending more than 3 hours a day on social networks. We can assume that there is a complete immersion in social networks, which means that they permanently

influence users. At the same time, it is important to note that the boundary between "online" and "offline" is extremely blurred, communicative spaces are mixed and young people do not realize that they are on the Internet. An example is the interview with one of the respondents:

> "I: How much time a day do you spend on social networks?
>
> R: Well, I cannot say for sure. Well in the evening after uni I sit, I listen to music, I look through pictures, I scroll through the feed... Well, maybe about three hours.
>
> I: Well, look, recently, at 14:35, for example, you posted a photo. Now you looked at who liked her and commented.
>
> R: Well, I did not use it with purpose. I posted a picture and that's it."

We continued to study the special features of the social networks influence on forming of consumer behavior and came to the conclusion about the need to identify the characteristics of their impact on young people.

Among young people the focus moves towards the social network VKontakte and Instagram. Instagram is much more popular among girls, and Youtube is more popular among boys. This trend is understandable. Using Instagram means constantly posting your own photos, there is also active advertising of cosmetics, fitness programs, ways of losing weight and so on. On Youtube there is a large number of channels on a variety of topics (from guitar lessons to explaining the laws of astrophysics), as well as entertaining humorous content.

Social media are an important channel of information which have a great impact on modern youth. Most often respondents turn to the Internet to obtain information about products before buying them.

The conducted questionnaire survey also allowed us to determine the nature of information preferred by young people aged 20-24. The results of the survey showed that most students received information about new products on the Internet (82.1%), social networks (52.6%) and friends (57.7%). We believe that young people spend a lot of time on the Internet, both at home and at university. On the street and in public transport they are most often interested in their gadgets and do not pay attention to the surrounding ads.

The students' consumer choice is also influenced by a large number of reviews posted by users who have purchased this product in social networks. Almost half of the respondents (48.1 percent) often look at the product recommendations of other users before they buy it.

Based on the nature of information we can say that there can be different groups in virtual networked communities among which there are popular users who become reference people for other users. They may not have such a significant social status in real life, but on the network, they have recognition and can exert both positive and negative impact on users, forming appropriate attitudes and values in their minds.

If we are talking about making a consumer choice, in social networks one can focus on positive reviews about the product (from different users), on positive feedback from friends and acquaintances posted in their profiles or on the popularity of the product (a large number of assessment marks on social networks – likes and reposts). As it turned out, the most important thing in choosing a product is the presence of a large number of positive reviews (this is the most important factor for 59.8 percent of respondents). Moreover, feedback from users is also important. The popularity of the product is not as important, because it is not always clear to users who evaluated the product and for what reason.

The purchase decision analysis showed that the most important thing for students is how the environment will react to them, and it turned out to be more important than reviews about products on the Internet, their friends' opinion or advertising.

As a result of the survey it was found that only 15.4% believe that their decision to purchase is based on advertising. Moreover, 66.7 percent of the interviewed respondents considered it an important factor.

Thus, students do not believe that advertising influences their choice when they buy a product.

It was also revealed that they often do not single out advertisements in social networks, as they adapt to the content of users.

Thus, we can say that respondents do not realize that advertising on the Internet and social networks has a big impact on them, which means that advertising on social networks is extremely effective.

In the course of studying consumer behavior, it became clear that the importance of product characteristics (quality, price, and functionality) varies depending on income.

For respondents assessing their financial situation as very good, such characteristics as price, functionality are an important characteristic when choosing a product. "Attractive design and outer appearance," "This brand is used by successful people" and "Famous brand" for this group of young people is more important, because they need to maintain their high social status. The value of this characteristic falls with a decrease of the financial status. However, its value improves unexpectedly in the lower financial segment. The characteristic "This is fashionable now " also has a greater significance for a segment with a poor material position than for other segments. Presumably this is due to the fact that, without having enough money, students want to rank themselves alongside people from a higher class.

Young people self-represent themselves in social networks using their user profile which is filled with such information about themselves that will help them to design the desired image.

Providing information about yourself and your consumer behavior on social networks is connected with the fact that the user profile on the social network is a way of self-representation of the young person and *allocating their position* in the social structure.

Sharing all the events of their lives in social networks has become a global trend among modern young people. Having made a successful purchase, about 1/5 of the respondents (20.9 percent) share it on a social network. Review and recommendation sites with detailed descriptions and shared impressions from buying and using these products are also popular. Brands promote self-expression in social networks and recognition by other users. Here is the example, an interview with one of the respondents:

"I: Do you post pictures of successful purchases on the Internet?

R: (a little shy) Well, yes ... Sometimes ... Well, what's wrong with that? All people post the photos! Well, I bought myself a perfume, well, I want to boast! Or a bag matching my shoes - why shouldn't I take a photo? It looks beautiful ... ".

The purchases are not posted by all respondents, but the information about places of entertainment (exhibitions, concerts, bars and restaurants, clubs, etc.) they visit is shared by more than half of the respondents (53 percent).

"I: Tell me, if you go somewhere, for example to a cafe, a bar, a museum, a concert, do you post pictures later?

R: Yeah, I usually post them.

I: Why?

R: Well, I do not know, it's conventional ... Am I an old maid who does not go anywhere? (laughs) I need to maintain the image of a young girl who lives her life to the full, otherwise everyone would think that I'm a bookworm of some sort. (laughs)".

Also, young people often post pictures of food on the social network that triggers different reactions. The interviews showed that this is also one of the ways to indicate that they belong to a higher status, despite the fact that such places may not be affordable for them, and they would not go there alone, but if they visit them with friends, they do not admit that they do not have enough money. For instance, here is the interview with one of the respondents:

"R: It's not just food! (laughs) Do not you see? This is a red king crab!

I: Do you order such dishes when you go out without your friends?

R: Well, no, it's quite expensive. If I eat alone, I'd rather eat at home or eat something less

pricey.

I: Do you frequently upload photos of food?

R: Well, if this is an unusual dish in a good restaurant, why not? I will let them know where I go. "

We assume that we can talk about a new type of modern consumption - public consumption. Goods and services are consumed only if other people see the act of consumption, and these should be not just common people, but reference people for this individual, as well as friends and acquaintances - all those people in whose eyes he wants to raise his status and whose opinion is important to him/her. If the act of consumption is not carried out in front of the reference person, the photos are posted on social networks, where everyone can see what the individual is consuming.

Thus, the students' conspicuous consumption is caused by the desire to acquire social status through the consumption of the benefits they would have in the desired social status.

The students' consumer behavior is seen as a way of self-presentation in social networks and the desire to achieve a social status through the establishing social connections in social networks.

Users of social networks express their approval of good products and places of entertainment with likes and reposts. In this case, the likes are given more often than reposts are. The approval of goods and places of entertainment is expressed by likes by 52.7 percent of the respondents and reposts are made only 20 percent.

68 percent of respondents believe that reposts help users express themselves, allow other users to better understand them. 78 percent believe that reposts help build relationships with other people, meet the interests of their community. Moreover, 62 percent of respondents say they feel more confident if other users react positively to the content they post on social networks. Therefore, reposts are much more filtered than information, which is liked, because it's not displayed to their friends the way reposts are. People often like photos and other posts to show their friendly attitude towards the author. What is more, the effect of rendered service is also at work here: by giving a like you are more likely to get a like from this person in return.

Young people believe that their page on the social network is their image, that is why they carefully filter information that is displayed on their page. Here are the examples of interviews:

"I: By what criteria do you like the posts or repost them? Do you use the 'like' button more than the 'repost' one?

R: I don't know, I just like some things, I like the photos my friends upload. I repost something not to forget about it, for example, when that I want to go somewhere to gather people together. Well, of course, I use 'like' buttons more. I don't want everything on my page, I don't want it to get clogged up, I want to see only what is needed.

I: For example, what?

R: That I visited an exhibition, or to show a beautiful photo in the dress (shows the photo). Lacoste, by the way. A young man will see me in this dress and he'll take away on a white convertible! (laughs) ".

The girl posts photos of herself in brand things, shares the photos from her visits to exhibitions, shows that she is educated and interested in art, as she believes that she will thus attract the attention of an interesting young man.

Another example is a young man who bought a foreign-made car on loan, hoping to attract girls.

"I: There are a lot of photos with your Mercedes on your social network page. Is this your car? It's too expensive for a student.

R: I bought it on credit. Well, what, girls like guys with cool cars. "

An important factor influencing consumer behavior is the individual self-image, on the basis of which he builds interaction with others, positions himself in society. The important issues

raised during the analysis were how their image is evaluated by the surrounding people, whether they pay attention to how others look, how important to them are the brands of goods they use.

As a result, it was found that more than 2/3 of respondents (63.1 percent) care about what people from their community look like and dress. This indicator is more important for respondents with a very good financial situation, and there is a direct proportional dependence - the better the financial situation, the more attention is paid to what the surrounding people are wearing. But how well their appearance is evaluated is even more important for almost 3/4 respondents (72.6 percent). Here we can no longer talk about direct proportional dependence – the most important thing for young people (the so-called middle class) with a good and average financial situation is how they will be evaluated. At the same time, the correlation coefficient between these indicators is quite high and amounts to 0.667.

An important place in consumer behavior is taken by brands. Buying goods, young people pay attention to the brand. 12.5 percent of respondents choose the product only by the brand, with the share of such respondents increasing with the improvement of their financial situation. Among those who estimate their financial situation as very good, they are 25.5 percent.

Almost a third (30.7 percent) of respondents prefer to save money for the goods of their favourite brand, if they can not immediately buy it. Among the students with an average material situation, there are more such people - 43.5%. Branded things act as a mechanism for self-presentation, so students are ready to wait but then buy exactly this brand. Young people believe that acquiring a brand name, they acquire a certain status, even if they did not earn it themselves, but asked for money from their parents.

"I: When you choose a product, do you pay attention to the brand?

R: Well, yes. There are brands that suit my style. There are brands that are simply cool, and everyone knows that they are great.

I: But branded things can sometimes cost more.

R: Yes, but I can do nothing with that. But, if you buy, it is clear that you have some kind of status. "

Despite the desire to have branded things, in general for young people the value of friendship is more important and it does not matter what brands their friends use. It was important only for 20% of the respondents. Nevertheless, the social stratification within the student group affects the values set. Among the more affluent students for 31.3 percent it turns out to be important what brands their friends use. The same situation is with respect to novelties. 37.5 percent of students with a high financial position tend to try new products as soon as possible, they follow fashion trends and want to be in a trend. This share falls noticeably among people with a lower financial position, the share of these does not exceed 15-20 percent, they will rather buy the goods after their friends try them.

4. Discussion

As motives for young people's consumption in social networks, we see the following:

- the desire to create an attractive image in social networks

- an attempt to acquire a certain social status, which will help improve their social status.

- Fear of being worse than your own circle of contacts and being such a person outside the group

- being permanently "online" - young people communicate a lot with friends in the virtual space, so they want to look attractive there.

The consumer behavior of students is influenced by a number of factors. They can be divided into two major groups: external factors and internal factors. External factors are vied by the authors as powerful. They include: the processes of globalization, culture, social stratification, technological revolution, reference groups.

Internal factors of consumer behavior include the individual personality and his or her mental processes, as well as mental states that are a reaction to the influence of culture, social groups, marketing influences, etc. Among the internal factors the following can be identified: characteristics of consumption, cognitive processes, motivation for consumption, consumption needs.

In today's Russian society, young people studying in the capital's universities are a special group that is characterised by a high degree of consumer activity in relation to novelties and fashionable goods, a large range of consumer needs, hedonism, loyalty to youth brands, a propensity for impulse purchases. Due to the fact that young people actively use the Internet and social networks, they are the most informed consumers, and also they are most susceptible to the influence of advertising distributed on the Internet.

A characteristic feature of this consumer group is limited financial resources and financial dependence on their parents and older relatives in making consumer decisions.

Young people borrow the models of consumer behavior from their environment and social communities, which they would like to enter. Also, it is possible to note mainly entertaining and a recreational orientation of students' consumption.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, social networks are a significant social force capable of forming socially positive value orientations in the minds of young people, giving them opportunities to develop direct participation in social processes, which, for various reasons, can be difficult to implement in real life.

Young people are characterized by the practice of self-assertion through consumption, therefore in the student community the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption is vividly manifested. Consumption serves as a means for young people to identify their belonging to certain status groups that provide the opportunity to be accepted by these groups and to participate in relevant communication processes. The social need for recognition is satisfied in social networks, not in real life.

Acknowledgement

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