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Marketing Mavens' Fusion with Social Media

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Abstract

Maven behavior and its fusion with social media was a natural progression from an auspicious beginning. The acknowledgement of market influencers and their impact on consumer behavior emerged in the discipline literature during the 70's with a study by Sheth (1971) who recognized the marketing opportunity of information disseminators. The potential publicizing influence of these brokers was investigated by Kotler and Zaltman (1976) whose findings advocated for their inclusion within a communication stratagem. Further examination produced precise demographic variables and personality traits along with the more accurate terminology of market mavens (Feick and Price, 1987) to delineate their unique dispositions. Laughlin and MacDonald (2010) recently proposed the identification of online mavens as indispensable, predicated on the significant position they hold in web based purchase behavior. This research explores the idea of social media mavens and determines specific actions most likely to transpire by online market mavens.

Keywords: Communication, Influencers, Marketing, Maven, Social Media

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and/or Practitioners:

The spontaneous combustion of social media has left the business community scrambling to control its marketing potential. As more social media sites are introduced on the web (Google+) and social media aspects are added to current platforms (Pandora, iTunes), the need to understand how adoption rates can be accelerated is crucial. The findings acknowledge the existence of social media mavens as people who encourage social media usage and pinpoints pertinent demographic and behavior traits.

Introduction

The fusion of social media with marketing mavens is an explicit example of a marketer's incessant determination to identify and capture opportunities that would deliver a competitive advantage. With almost a third (30.2%) of the world's population using the Internet, the spotlight on this medium has intensified (Internet World Stats 2011). The increasing prominence of the web in the lives of various consumer groups from tweens to seniors has been documented by academic researchers and media reporters (Chan and Fang 2007; Simmons 2008). The latest study by Pew Research (2011) found almost eighty percent (79%) of American adults use the web, which is double the rate from just two years ago. It has been almost a decade since Elkin (2003) documented that teens and young adults were spending more time online than watching television, and this occurred before the flurry of social media site creations. Social Media is an engaging medium that permits the user to compose, amend and circulate digital information, and Anderson Analytics conservatively estimated that 110 million Americans had used a social network within the past month (Bulik 2009).

Current statistics reveal a startling infiltration of social media into everyday life where in addition to half the population connecting through social media, if you are young and female the mobile devices have become an additional appendage. Face Book, Tumblr, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, Blogs, Google +, etc...are now integrated into the consumer's global lifestyle with the average online individual devoting almost six hours per month to social networking (Pew Research 2011). A 2011 study by Knowledge Networks and MediaPost's Center for Media Research indicated that twelve percent of US adults ages 18-80 "discover new products and brands or refer to social media before making purchase decisions (Sass 2011)." Ninety-five percent of women under the age of thirty, participate in online social networking, and this activity occurs 24/7 (Maul 2010). While the business community has concentrated on exploitation of social media for the promotion or sale of merchandise, the academic world has

explored the educational applications. Unfortunately, neither has adequately determined who the crucial influencers are leading the charge to bring additional peers online.

A consumer who possesses the capability of influencing others is a concept initially proposed by Sheth (1971) in a study that revealed the value of disseminators in generating new product information. Kotler and Zaltman (1976) expanded the idea to suggest the inherent marketing benefit of employing consumers to persuade others. Precise demographic variables and personality traits surfaced along with the more accurate terminology of market mavens in the 80's through an investigation by Feick and Price (1987). They identified the fundamental demographic variables of mavens as female, less educated and black. Walsh, Gwinner and Swanson (2004) established the motivational aspects of maven behavior as an obligation or need to assist others by sharing information. Market mavens derive pleasure from the act of telling others about products. Their conviction towards helping others was the primary motivator for circulating merchandise information. This study also documented the swelling number of mavens eager to disseminate personal experience with commodities. The higher total number of market mavens has had substantial implications for the business community. Among the positive aspects include: more influencers; greater word-of-mouth coverage; and additional marketing opportunities. Maven behavior and its synthesis with social media was a natural progression from its auspicious beginning. Laughlin and MacDonald (2010) recently advocated for the identification of online mavens and stressed the significant position they hold in web based purchase behavior. This research explores the possibility of fusing social media with media mavens and determines the specific characteristics and actions most likely to transpire by online social media mavens.

Literature Review

Merriam-Webster defines social media as “forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and micro blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)”. Social media research and articles have primarily focused on its use as a marketing tool (Baker and Green 2008a, 2008b; USAToday 2009; Hampp 2009; Dholakia and Vianello, 2009), and in education as a platform (Baker-Eveleth, Eveleth, and Sarker, 2005; Kelly, et al., 2004; Peltier, et al., 2007; Wassell and Crouch, 2008; Weisskirch and Milburn, 2003). The effects of the Internet are not just encountered on a domestic level but also on a universal one. Bawaba (2009) suggests that social media allows content creation and

sharing to flourish around the world, and Birchall (2009) reports that online product reviews have increased in importance globally. The research has not examined the influencers, or social media mavens, for social media adoption.

The chronological age of Internet and social media users are also being discussed. A poll by Harris Interactive (2009) found that 19-24 year olds were using public online social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and MySpace in greater numbers than older adults. While Business.com's 2009 Business Social Media Benchmarking Study indicated that research is making it "increasingly difficult to pigeon-hole social media as something relevant to only specific demographic groups (Business.com 2009)." The Pew Internet & American Life Project established that 46% of US adults participate in social media (Lenhart 2009). Interestingly, Pew found that Facebook had the lowest median age of users when compared to MySpace and Twitter, who capture an older clientele (Cheng 2009). College students, the Millennials, or Generation Y are seen as the primary users of social media for sites such as Facebook and MySpace, whereas Twitter and LinkedIn have consistently attracted a slightly older demographic.

The gender gap that once existed in technology adoption rates and IT diffusion (Gefen and Straub 1997) started to decrease at a rapid pace in the late 90's. Hargitti and Shafer (2006) discovered no significant differences between males and females concerning online abilities. The former idea of Internet users, being dominantly white males, has expanded to be more inclusive of gender, race and age. Lenhart (2008) reported that social networks reflect a diverse population skewed toward youth. In the United States, gender is no longer a distinguishing variable of online purchasers, unlike in other countries (Comegys, et al., 2006). A study of 13.2 million people conducted by Rapleaf, found that women and men in their 20's are just as likely to be members of social networks (Hoffman 2008)."

As indicated by Lenhart (2008), the idea of males as the influencers for IT adoption is shifting. In their study of gender's effect on self-selected exposure to online news topics, Knobloch-Westerwick and Alter (2007) establish that women preferred social/interpersonal topics, while men focused on achievement/performance issues. The same gender difference was found in a study on Instant Messaging, females were more likely to send expressive messages than were men (Fox, et al., 2007). Hoffman (2008) suggests that female's behavior online is focused on relationships. Women spend more time on social networks than do men, and while on those sites they are building relationships, communicating with friends, and making new friends (Hoffman 2008). These studies suggest that a gender difference may exist between men

and women and their attitudes and behavior towards social media. Research implies primary areas of disparity between male and female social media response include emotional and time investment. Hoffman's (2008) findings suggest that women should be the focus of innovation in regard to social media and that the gender gap in usage will, in all probability, increase.

In a study of social media users, Anderson Analytics segmented users into different categories including a social-media maven group that was important because of their large social media footprint (Bulik 2009). Market mavens have been defined as "generalized market influencers," who "both initiate discussions with others about products and shopping and respond to requests for marketing information (Hawkins, Mothersbaugh and Best, 2007, p. 245)." In his recent publication *The Marketing Mavens*, Capon (2007) documents the success of industries that have incorporated the distinctive ability of marketing mavens to identify, capture and integrate customers as competitive advantages in their marketing strategies. Given the different activities that are available online, potential mavens may differ based on activity (i.e. blogs vs. social media). Specifically, social media mavens can be defined as individuals who encourage and inform others about social media. To determine consumers that are potential social media mavens requires looking beyond usage of social media towards who is communicating with others about social media both in the form of recommending and encouraging the usage of social media.

Purpose and Methods

The purpose of this study was to conduct a preliminary investigation of consumer's online web activities, such as their likeliness to use and recommend social media, and social media's level of importance to the consumer. The value placed on social media was based upon self-reported actions, including saying positive things about social media, recommending social media to other and encouraging others to use social media.

The examination was conducted in part as an effort to systematically comprehend the college student market. The intense scrutiny of the target market was part of an environmental analysis with the goal of producing a comprehensive online promotion. The population for the study was the academic community at a southeastern state university. A 103 item, online, questionnaire was initially randomly distributed to university email accounts. To secure respondents that reflected the statistical characteristics of the university as a whole in terms of gender, major, educational level, age, etc..., the questionnaire was hand distributed at strategically selected spots on campus. 999 usable

questionnaires were obtained through a combination of convenience and quota sampling.

Findings

The basic demographic profile of respondents closely paralleled the hosting university's environment. The actual research study participants were primarily women with 537 (53.75%) of the respondents female and 462 (46.25%) males, for a total participation of 999 students. The respondents were predominantly between the ages of 17 to 26 (68.1%), followed by 27 to 33 year olds (20.7%). This is an expected dispersion for the sample, with the majority of respondents in the age range of typical college students. Racial distribution of the study included over three-fourth of the respondents as Caucasian (75.83%), 11.10% African-American, 3.85% Hispanic, 3.27 Asian or mixed race. The marital status designations indicated 85.4% of the students were single, 12.4% married and 2.1% divorced. The personal incomes of the sample are exhibited in

Table 1. Almost a third of those responding have incomes of less than \$4,000 and almost 70% earning less than \$20,000. Again, this is an expected income for the population.

Table 1. Income

Annual Personal Income	
Under \$4000	31.1%
\$4001-6000	9.6%
\$6001-8000	5.0%
\$8001-10,000	10.0%
\$10,001-20,000	17.9%
\$20,001-40,000	13.6%
\$40,001-60,000	6.0%
\$60,001-80,000	3.3%
\$80,001-100,000	2.3%
Over 100,000	1.2%

Participants were asked to respond to a series of behavioral questions using a 5-point Likert scale. The scale ranged from 1 strongly agree to 5 strongly

disagree. Respondents were also quizzed on a variety of online behaviors including the following: text and multimedia messaging, blogs, social networking sites, photo and video sharing sites, content sharing sites (e.g., Digg, Wikipedia) and podcasts and webcasts. Earlier, social media maven was defined as an individual who encourage and inform others about social media. The selection of scale items takes into account the defining aspects of maven behavior such as: having discussions with others, recommending to others and encouraging usage. Tables 2-6 illustrate the specific distribution of responses to social media maven behavior. Maven behavior emerged more intensely with text and multimedia messaging and social networking sites where mavens were more likely to say positive things and make recommendations to friends and relatives.

Table 2. Text and Multimedia Messaging

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	MEAN
I say positive things about to friends and relatives	23.3%	44.2%	26.6%	4.0%	1.8%	2.17%
I say positive things about to others	18.6%	44.6%	31.2%	3.8%	1.9%	2.26%
I recommend to friends/relatives who seek my advice	18.2%	41.1%	35.0%	4.0%	1.7%	2.30%
I recommend to others who seek my advice	16.9%	41.1%	35.6%	4.7%	1.7%	2.33%
I encourage friends/relatives to use	19.0%	43.4%	31.3%	4.4%	1.9%	2.27%
I encourage others to use	18.8%	41.9%	32.5%	4.7%	2.1%	2.29%

Table 3. Blogs

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	MEAN
I say positive things about to friends and relatives	5.8%	16.8%	62.1%	10.5%	4.7%	2.91%
I say positive things about to others	4.5%	15.6%	64.7%	10.2%	5.0%	2.96%
I recommend to friends/relatives who seek my advice	4.3%	13.5%	65.3%	11.6%	5.2%	3.00%
I recommend to others who seek my advice	4.2%	12.2%	65.4%	13.0%	5.3%	3.03%
I encourage friends/relatives to use	3.8%	12.6%	65.0%	13.3%	5.4%	3.04%
I encourage others to use	3.8%	12.4%	65.1%	13.4%	5.3%	3.04%

Table 4. Social Networking Sites (Facebook, Myspace, Ning)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	MEAN
I say positive things about to friends and relatives	22.4%	47.4%	21.0%	6.2%	3.1%	2.20%
I say positive things about to others	20.9%	45.7%	23.6%	6.8%	3.0%	2.25%
I recommend to friends/relatives who seek my advice	19.1%	39.1%	30.6%	7.2%	3.9%	2.38%
I recommend to others who seek my advice	18.2%	36.9%	33.6%	7.3%	3.9%	2.42%
I encourage friends/relatives to use	20.5%	40.8%	28.5%	7.0%	3.2%	2.32%
I encourage others to use	21.1%	40.0%	29.4%	6.3%	3.2%	2.31%

Table 5. Photo and Video Sharing Sites (Flickr, YouTube)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	MEAN
I say positive things about to friends and relatives	15.5%	44.1%	35.2%	3.4%	1.7%	2.32%
I say positive things about to others	13.3%	43.0%	38.6%	3.5%	1.6%	2.37%
I recommend to friends/relatives who seek my advice	12.3%	36.6%	43.7%	5.6%	1.8%	2.48%
I recommend to others who seek my advice	11.4%	35.2%	45.9%	5.5%	2.0%	2.51%
I encourage friends/relatives to use	13.0%	38.9%	41.7%	4.6%	1.8%	2.43%
I encourage others to use	13.6%	35.0%	44.9%	4.6%	1.9%	2.46%

Table 6. Content Sharing Sites

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	MEAN
I say positive things about to friends and relatives	12.6%	40.4%	37.3%	7.5%	2.2%	2.46%
I say positive things about to others	11.3%	39.1%	39.9%	7.7%	2.1%	2.50%
I recommend to friends/relatives who seek my advice	11.0%	35.2%	43.0%	8.5%	2.4%	2.56%
I recommend to others who seek my advice	11.1%	32.9%	44.7%	8.4%	2.8%	2.59%
I encourage friends/relatives to use	10.5%	36.4%	42.5%	7.6%	3.1%	2.56%
I encourage others to use	11.3%	34.6%	43.3%	8.0%	2.9%	2.57%

Gender differences can be seen in regard to several of the studied online behaviors (Table 7). Females were rated high (low means) in maven behavior on text and multimedia and social networking sites, whereas males were rated higher in blogs, content sharing sites and podcasts and webcasts. Female maven behavior appears to focus on relationship building, whereas the male behavior focuses on information sharing.

Table 7. Gender Response

	Males	Females
Text and multimedia	2.3730	2.1873
Blogs	2.9851	3.0047
Social networking sites	2.4531	2.1834
Photo and video sharing	2.4254	2.4219
Content sharing sites	2.4314	2.6247
Podcasts and webcasts	2.8127	2.9325

Tables 8 and 9 contain information related to the t-test between males and females in the study. As can be seen, the tests show there is a statistical difference in the level of agreement between males and females on the statements concerning text and multimedia messaging, social networking sites, content sharing sites and podcasts and webcasts at an alpha of less than .01. These findings suggest that females are more likely to engage in maven behavior in regards to both social networking and multimedia messaging. Both of these behaviors are centered on relationship building and follow the suggestions outlined by Hoffman (2008) and would indicate that women would be a focus for marketers interested in mavens in these arenas. While there was no difference in the maven behavior based on gender for blogs, photo and video sharing, males self-reported a greater degree of maven behavior for content sharing sites and podcasts and webcasts, both of which are focused on information sharing instead of relationship building. Also, the findings suggest that the gender gap of online adoption has been closed, but that males and females are focused on slightly different activities online.

Table 8. Equality of Variance

Levene's test for equality of Variances	F	Sig
Text and multimedia	2.097	.148
Blogs	8.342	.004
Social networking sites	4.492	.034
Photo and video sharing	2.468	.117
Content sharing sites	.822	.365
Podcasts and webcasts	27.230	.000

Table 9. Equality of Means

T-test for Equality of Means	t	Sig (2-tailed)
Text and multimedia	3.710	.000
Blogs	-.404	.686
Social networking site	4.727	.000
Photo and video sharing	.072	.942
Content sharing sites	-3.658	.000
Podcasts and webcasts	-2.593	.010

Conclusions

The results of this research advocates for the designation of Social Media Mavens who possess identifiable traits and behaviors. Social media mavens who encourage and inform others about social media are more likely to be female and strongly agree with saying positive things about text and multimedia messaging and social networking sites. They are also more likely to say positive things and make recommendations to friends and relatives regarding all social media activities. For new social media sites (Google+) or for sites that are adding social media content for users (Pandora), these are the users that are the most likely to spread the word and encourage others to adopt the social media service. Interestingly, Google+ attracted a male user base during beta launch with 87% of the first users being male. Our research indicates that they will need to encourage more women to use the service to continue their initial growth rates (infographic by findpeopleonplus.com). Quentin Hardy echoed this concern in an op-ed piece for Forbes (2011).

Feick and Price (1987) identified mavens as female, less educated, and black. The results of this study do not concur with their findings. Social Media mavens were female, but they were Caucasian and highly educated.

Historically, the Internet has been seen as primarily male driven with young, highly educated, above average income demographics. Over time, this traditional pattern of demographics and usage behavior has evolved to encompass more diversity. Other studies have pointed out females are online to either an equal or greater extent than men, putting them on equivalent footing with their male counterparts. This research study suggests that both men and women are engaged on-line and acting as mavens, but that the areas of maven behavior differ.

Gender differences indicate that women are more likely to be involved in relationship building and interested in social topics. This is congruent with the findings that women were more likely to talk about, recommend and encourage others to use text and multimedia messaging and social media than were men. Males on the other hand, were more likely to recommend and encourage the use of content sharing sites, podcasts and webcasts. In an attempt to differentiate the 'market mavens' of social media, the research findings points to the initial indications that women may be more likely to be Social Media Mavens than men. Results of the study show signs the gender dominance of males is leveling, signaling the potential of females to drive social media acceptance and usage to ultimately reign as Online Social Media Mavens.

Limitations and Future Research

This research is an initial study of the idea of online mavens with a focus on Social Media Mavens. Several limitations need to be addressed. Future research can include the development of a theoretical model of online maven behavior that takes into account the gender differences found in this study. The scales for determining maven behavior, while showing internal consistency, need to be refined and expanded to include an indication of level of involvement for different online activities. Focusing specifically on social media, more work is needed to refine what differentiates social media users into different groups of consumers and separates Social Media Mavens from other users. Also, expanding the study beyond university students would allow for a more in-depth look at maven behavior as the adoption age range expands for many online activities

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