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ESTIMATING THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CONSUMERS' EDUCATION AND INFORMATION USING NEW TECHNIQUES

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Abstract

The social media is composed of easily accessible web tools through which people converse, participate, create, recommend, valorify information and respond online to everything that happens around them. These web tools offer a dynamic virtual environment where users are engaged in a continuous traffic generated by information and interactivity. Internet development and access to information led to a change in consumer behavior in Romania. In this context, it must be taken into account that the buying decision and the decision to include certain foods in daily diet is significantly influenced by the views and experiences of other consumers, expressed in the virtual environment. Thus a new communication channel provided by the internet through social media (forums, chat, blogs, sites reviews) appeared.

In this respect, we conducted a research - using the main search engines – with the aim to analyze the evolution of the number of forums and blogs, and also of the posts on these, related to the words bio-eggs, eggs from battery raised chickens and eggs numbering, during December 2009 – June 2010.

Keywords: Social Media, consumers' education, ecological food, forum, blog

JEL Classification: D83, M31, Q13

Introduction

Traditional media has been reflected first by the print media (in the 17th century, the first newspapers appeared in Venice). At the end of the 19th century, the telecommunications revolution followed, which led to the emergence of the technological media, through two compounds: the analog media (represented by telephone, radio and television) and the digital media (represented by internet). Technology has advanced at a rapid pace, so the internet became the most conducive environment for global communication.

Digital media is different from traditional media through several communication features such as: environment and methods of communications - through search engines, websites, blogs, social networks, forums, or the type of the searched interaction - looking for

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information, purchase of products, dialogue, and proficiency in a particular field. This is measurable and flexible, allowing communication to improve.

1. Social media - the communication channel of the 21st century

We live in the 21st century, an era of online communication and transactions in which social media and social networks have experienced a real growth and have been known throughout the world in the last decade. On everyone's lips, from 10 years old children until persons belonging to the third generation, a few common words such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Hi5, LinkedIn, forums, or blogs, are.

Social networks have emerged as a result of public desire for something new and exciting. These social networks provide a dynamic virtual environment where users are engaged in a continuous traffic, generated by information and interactivity. The idea of being able to communicate easily with a simple platform to use, it has become increasingly popular, resulting in an explosion of social media.

In the online environment, social media is a complex term that can take various forms, being mostly used to describe the social aspect or the art of communication in media; a phrase - composed of two words - that leads to one meaning. Media refers to advertising and transmission of ideas and information through various channels, while social involves the interaction between individuals within a group or community. The term *social media* refers to communication platforms generated and sustained by interpersonal interaction of people, using specific methods or procedures.

The introduction of this term is attributed to Chris Shipley, co-founder of Guidewire Group, a company from San Francisco dealing with studying and making reports on trends and technological innovation. This company has used the term to describe online communication and information, and participation and collaboration in this environment.

A social network can be defined as an application that helps, expands or gains consistency with human interaction, interaction between groups who share the same interests, coming from the same cultural, geographic field or, according to certain criteria, can join and form a community of interests. A social network is the place where the passion for something, the mutual interest gathers people. People stick to a label, stick to a certain class, or stick to a group or they simply gather because they belong to the same region.

Another definition of social media describes it as media for social interaction, using easily accessible display techniques. Social media uses web technologies to transform communication in interactive dialogues. Companies define social media as being generated by consumers (CGM – consumer generated media).

Social media is composed from easily accessible web tools through which people converse, participate, create, recommend, valorify information and respond online to everything that happens around them.

The term social media “is a generic term that defines a series of online communication channels, social networking and systems of information dissemination that include forums, groups, blogs, social networks and mobile content / video / audio sharing and instant communication.”

The term refers to new online media types, characterized by:

- Participation – social media encourages the contribution and feedback from anyone interested. Social media covers the line between media and audience;
- Open – the services of social media are open to feedback and participation. They encourage the voting, comments and information distribution. There are rare the cases in which the access and usage of the content is hindered (because the password – protected content is not authorized by the users);
- Conversation – while traditional media (newspapers, magazines, television, books, radio) is defined by the broadcast term (transmitted and distributed content to an audience), social media is seen mostly by analogy with a two-way conversation (dialogue);
- Community – social media allows communities to rapidly form themselves and to communicate effective. Communities share joint interests, such as the passion for photography, political problems or favorite TV shows, etc.;
- Connectivity – most types of social media are expanding by their interconnection, making possible the inclusion of links to other websites, resources or people.

The communication model, promoted by traditional media, is the monologue. In social media, this is replaced by dialogue. Thus, in the new social media types, communication takes on the characteristics of dialogue: it is transparent, authentic, vibrant and driven by the consumer.

Generally, the following main types of social media applications are used: social networks, blogs, wiki, podcasts, new channels (RSS and Atom), communication for the organization and share of a specific type of content (photo, video, and documents), micro-blogging, forums, chat, and virtual worlds.

2. The relationship between the new consumer and the organic food

As a consequence of the unprecedented development of electronic commerce, with its known business models, the Internet became the development generator of the new economy. In this context, the consumer, acting on a globalized market, strongly connected through the Internet, became a consumer with a complex life style, skilled and competent, which can be named the new consumer.

The new consumer manifests the tendency of displaying an increased confidence in the information gathered from the online environment. He reads the opinions of other consumers before making a purchase. For the new consumers, as they are very informed, the consumption of organic food is very important. They appreciate organic products for their rich content of mineral salts and vitamins, and for the high level of hygiene employed in their production.

In Romania - although at a smaller scale compared to other countries - there is an increase in the consumers' interest in organic food; consumers become more aware of the long-term health benefits of these products.

Internet expansion in Romania changed the Romanian consumer's behavior. In the current context, the new consumer's purchase decision - that includes also food purchase - may be

significantly influenced by the opinions and experiences of other consumers expressed in the virtual environment, on the strength of the development of the new ways of communication offered by the Internet (forums, chats, review websites, blogs etc.).

We anticipate that there is a link between social media and the decisions taken by the new consumer. To explain different aspects of this issue we conducted a survey in which we pursued:

- The role of Internet as an information/educational resource for the new consumer in Romania
- The way news in traditional media are presented and shared in social media
- The possibilities regarding the education of the new consumer in Romania through the internet and social media in what concerns the consumption of organic food.

Our research was carried out online by using the main web search engines in Romania and worldwide.

The focus was on the evolution of the number of forums and blogs on subjects concerning the following key words “organic eggs”, “battery raised chickens” and “egg labeling”, during the period December 2009 - June 2010.

These subjects were chosen due to the emergence of various news related to them in the traditional media, such as the news issued by Gheorghe Mencinicopschi.

Gheorghe Mencinicopschi, PhD, professor of biology and biochemistry and expert in human nutrition, food safety, and nutritional planning, is the director of the Romanian Institute of Food Research. In January 2010, professor Mencinicopschi published a book on nutritional advice, entitled “Noua ordine alimentara - Și noi ce mai mâncăm?” (“The new food order. So what do we eat now?”). While promoting the book, he appeared on a popular TV talk show on the evening of February 3rd 2010. One of the topics reached during the show, was about the mandatory eggs labeling. He argued that it is best to consume the eggs whose first digit on the label is 0 as these eggs are organic or those whose first digit on the label is 1 or 2 (coming from free range chickens and barn-raised chickens). The other eggs, with the first digit 3, are from battery raised chickens, and he argued that their consumption is recommended to be limited or avoided.

The research aimed at showing the connection between this news and the interest of the new consumer in organic food.

Although the news first appeared in February 2010, the online research covers a wider interval in order to identify how the interest in organic food (mainly in organic eggs) is reflected in online posts, both before and after the news emergence on TV. We were interested in identifying whether there is a growth in the interest of the new consumer for organic foods after the emergence of the news and whether an expert’s opinion on the matter is important.

Concerning the interest in organic food - in this case, organic eggs – we carried out an online research with the aim to identify the number of discussion on blogs and forums in Romania. To obtain a higher accuracy, we used combinations of words, further on defined as models:

- Model 1 (keywords 1): the relationship between *specialist's message* and *egg labeling*
- Model 2 (keywords 2): the relationship *eggs-labeled egg-battery raised chickens*.

3. The evolution of discussions on blogs

Table no. 1, table no. 2, and their associated figures present the evolution of the number of discussions posted on Romanian blogs, related to model 1 and model 2.

Table no. 1: The evolution of the number of discussions posted on Romanian blogs for model 1 (the relationship between specialist's message and egg labeling)

Month	Dec. 2009	Jan. 2010	Feb. 2010	Mar. 2010	Apr. 2010	May 2010	June 2010
Number of discussions	2	12	216	145	57	12	9

According to the graphical representation of the data from table no. 1, can be observed a sudden growth in the number of discussions (216) corresponding to the moment when the news appeared in the traditional media (February 2010), followed by a constant decrease during the next 3 months down to the level associated to the period before the appearance of the news (figure no. 1).

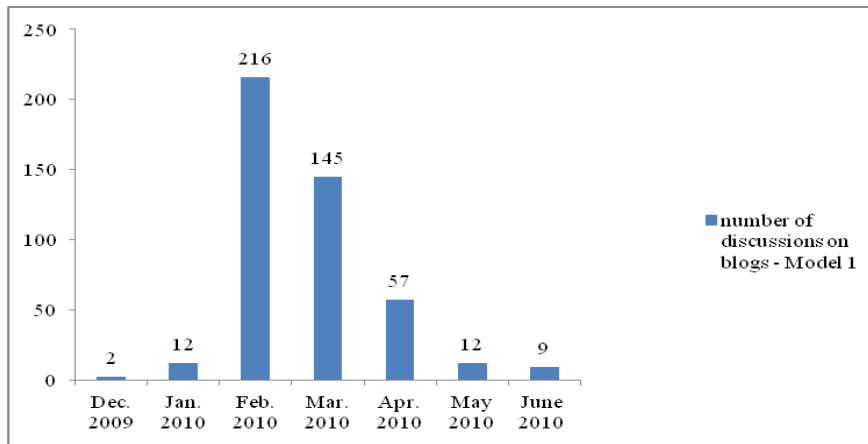


Figure no. 1: The evolution of the number of discussions posted on Romanian blogs for model 1

Table no. 2: The evolution of the number of discussions posted on Romanian blogs for model 2 (the relationship eggs-labeled egg-battery raised chickens)

Month	Dec. 2009	Jan. 2010	Feb. 2010	Mar. 2010	Apr. 2010	May 2010	June 2010
Number of discussions	41	40	665	424	287	124	125

According to the graphical representation of data presented in table no. 2, can be observed that, in February 2010 - the month when the news appeared in the traditional media – a sharp increase in the number of discussions posted on blogs was registered, respectively 665, compared to January 2010 when a number of 40 discussions was registered. Also, in this case, can be observed that a sudden decrease was registered in March 2010 (424 discussions), followed by a slight decrease during the next 2 months (figure no. 2).

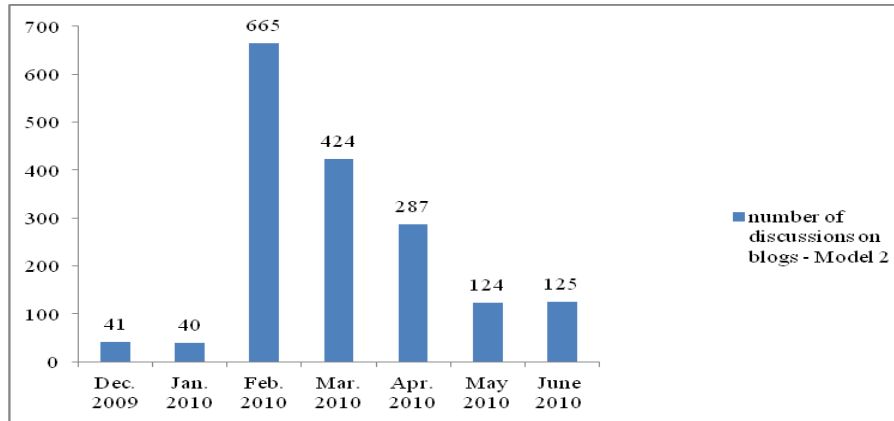


Figure no. 2: The evolution of the number of discussions posted on Romanian blogs for model 2

4. The evolution of discussions on forums

Table no. 3, table no. 4, and their associated figures show the evolution of the number of discussions posted on Romanian forums, related to model 1 and model 2.

Table no. 3: The evolution of the number of discussions posted on Romanian forums for model 1 (the relationship between specialist's message and egg labeling)

Month	Dec. 2009	Jan. 2010	Feb. 2010	Mar. 2010	Apr. 2010	May 2010	June 2010
Number of discussions	25	52	237	183	114	92	69

Figure no. 3 presents a growth in the number of discussions related to the relation between the specialist's message and egg labeling. The increased interest in this subject was only maintained during February 2010 (237 discussions, compared to January 2010, when only 10 discussions were registered) when the news appeared on TV. Also, between March and June, a slight decrease in the interest regarding this subject is registered, compared to the level associated to the period before the appearance of the news in the traditional media.

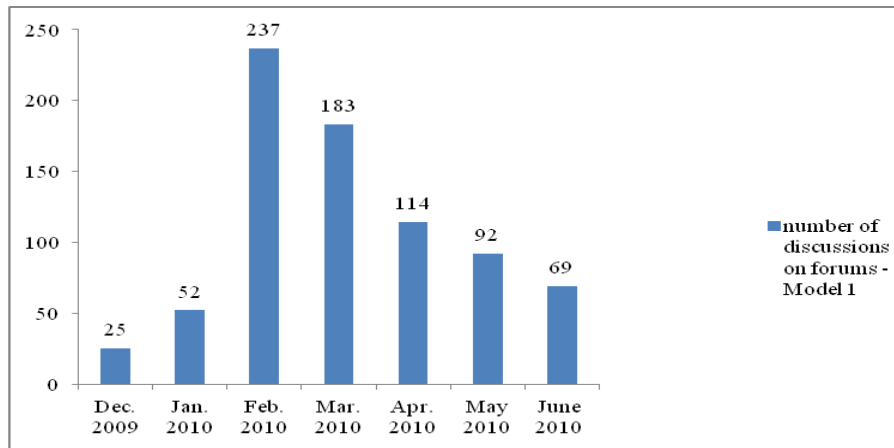


Figure no. 3: The evolution of the number of discussions posted on Romanian forums for model 1

Table no. 4: The evolution of the number of discussions posted on Romanian forums for model 2 (the relationship eggs-labeled egg-battery raised chickens)

Month	Dec. 2009	Jan. 2010	Feb. 2010	Mar. 2010	Apr. 2010	May 2010	June 2010
Number of discussions	652	1164	845	1388	1095	883	684

Figure no. 4 illustrates an evolution in the number of discussions completely different from the one in figure no. 3. There is not a clear trend in the evolution of the discussions. An interest in this topic is registered even before the news' appearance in the traditional media (in January 2010, 1164 discussions were registered). After the appearance of the news, a decrease in the number of discussions was registered in February (845 discussions) followed by a strong increase in March (1388 discussions), and only in June the number of discussions on this subject was less than the one in February (respectively, 684 discussions in June, compared to 845 in February). This situation can be explained by the fact that the dynamics of the discussions on forum is different than the one on blogs.

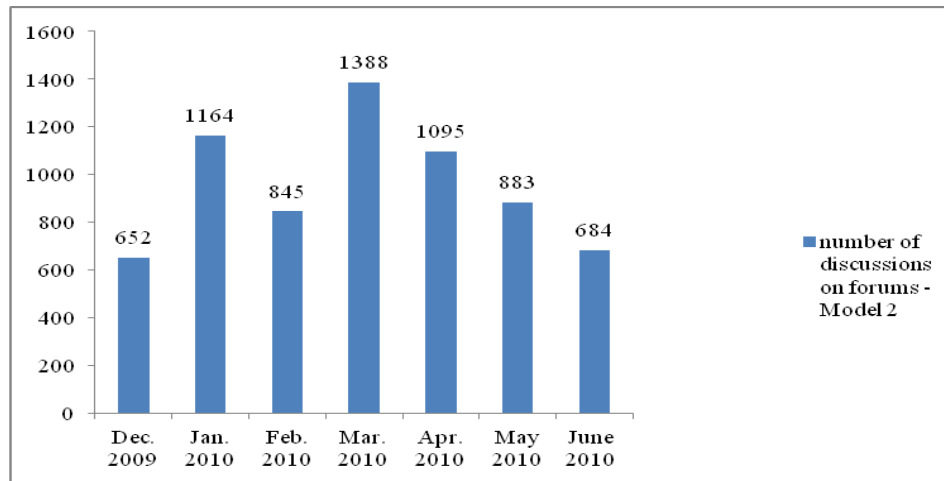


Figure no. 4: The evolution of the number of discussions posted on Romanian forums for model 2

Conclusions

Social media is a communication tool; it aims to transform monologue into dialogue, to provide free access to any kind of information, and to transform the internet users from ordinary readers into content creators. Social media facilitates the interaction in the online world, in order to create new relationships for personal or business goals. Thus, through social media, the loyalty and participation of people can be achieved, opinions can be easily asked for, market research can be carried out, and easier communication at global level can be achieved.

The common aspect to all the attempts of defining social media is represented by the mix of technology and social interaction in order to create value. This interaction and the presentation of information depend on the variety of perspective and the establishment of a sense of belonging to a particular community, with sharing impressions and personal experience of participants.

The research revealed that the news emerged in traditional media have a certain impact in the social media - even if this is not very important - which leads to the idea that social media cannot be yet used as an effective tool for education. This could be a consequence of the fact that the internet is primarily used as an entertaining environment and an option for spending leisure time, than as a source for obtaining substantial information necessary for transforming the individual into an aware and educated consumer, respectively a "new consumer".

In Romania as well as in the rest of the world, it is obvious that the Internet has become an essential tool for informing and educating consumers. The emergence of the "new consumer" is a consequence of development of Internet and of the increase of access to online content, the "new consumers" being a category of people that gather their necessary information from the Internet. All these facts lead to the conclusion that Internet represents an educational resource.

The Internet - along with traditional media - becomes an important resource for learning and education. Although the possibilities for educating the consumers through the Internet, as well as the increase in number of the new consumers, are almost unlimited, their interest is poorly reflected in social media. This is a consequence of the fact that the internet is primarily used as an entertaining environment and in order to achieve a transformation of individuals into educated consumers, a lot of time is required. However, in the future, this goal may be achieved both in Romania, and worldwide.

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