How Social Media Communities Impact Consumer Behavior

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Abstract

Social media, in particular, Facebook and Twitter, are comprised of communities typically of like-minded individuals. Through social media sites we can network with these communities and converse in ways that are sometimes difficult to do offline. But do these social media communities influence how one purchases online? Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism describes how offline communities influence one’s actions and helps to create our cultural norms and ideologies. Using Mead’s theory as a basis for the following study, this thesis attempted to determine if Facebook and Twitter communities influence consumers’ online purchasing behaviors. Employing a Likert-like scale of 1-3, a survey asked respondents to answer various questions about their use of social media networks and how the communities within these networks influence what they purchase online. From the study, it was found that Facebook communities have a significant influence on a consumer’s online purchasing behavior and Twitter communities had almost no influence. This study is particularly important for marketers who use social media channels to reach consumers.
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Introduction

Social media has increasingly become a constant in our lives. Many people reach out to friends or family through social media, sometimes on a daily basis. Through Facebook, people can view pictures and read status updates. Twitter allows others to read status updates that are limited to 140 characters. Each of these social media tools has its advantages and disadvantages but each opens up the doors to creating an online community with others that may not be possible offline. George Herbert Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism states that our interactions with individuals and communities shape our identities and influence our actions. Is it possible that his theory could apply to the ways in which a person’s social media community influences his or her purchase decisions? This paper will seek to find the answer. The following thesis will include an analysis of Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism, a literature review about communities in social media, the method used to collect data, an analysis of the data, and implications from the study.

Importance of the Study

As a professional marketer, I have always been fascinated with social media. At the very essence of human nature is a desire to be social. Social media has provided humans an outlet to create online communities making it easier to network with others, which satisfies some of our deepest social wants and needs. Additionally, social media has allowed users to increase the amount of people included in their personal communities, as social media is both viral, which is to say that information travels rapidly
between social media users, and transparent. Social media can be considered transparent as users of sites such as Facebook and Twitter post their thoughts, pictures, and locations to their followers, which often consist of people who are not close friends or family.

Social media tools have become superb channels for marketers to reach consumers. The article titled, “Expand your Brand Community Online” states that social media is important for marketers because it allows them to dialogue directly with consumers, which in turn engages consumers directly with company brands (Hanlon, Patrick, Hawkins, & Josh, 2008). Many companies, such as Audi and Dunkin’ Donuts have used social media very effectively to reach consumers. According to Wasserman (2011), out of all other brands on Facebook, Audi’s fans are the most engaged of all major corporate brands on Facebook.

That consumers can reach out to companies and their personal communities via social media has created a power shift between companies and consumers. Lee (2010) contends that social media has become vastly popular for “normal people” because it allows anyone to interact with content or deliver it (p. 112). This model of communication is vastly superior to the traditional format of one-way communication between major media and its intended audience (Lee, p. 112). A company that uses social media is more likely to create relationships with members of its target demographic rather than traditional media where conversations between the medium and the audience are unlikely. Now, social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter have made it easy for consumers to post product reviews and reach out to other like-minded individuals in their communities. As social media infiltrates our lives as consumers, before people
make purchases, they are increasingly reaching out to their social media communities for opinions (Drell, 2011).

**Goal**

Consumers often want others’ opinions about items before they make a commitment to purchase. For example, they may ask about the color of a shirt, or if they should purchase a large or small purse. Social media communities provide an outlet for consumers to seek opinions, but how often and at what point in the purchase process do consumers reach out to their online communities for advice? Do the opinions provided by social media communities actually impact consumers’ purchases? These are among the key questions I will seek to answer in this thesis, including the overarching question of whether social media communities impact consumers’ purchase behavior.

An exploration of Mead’s concept of the “self” reveals how it can help a company realize its brand identity and ensure the “self” portrayed on Facebook remains consistent with its understanding, and the public’s understanding of the brand. In Mead’s theory of symbolic interaction he suggested we create our “self” by figuratively peering through a looking glass to see ourselves as others do, which leads to the creation of an identity (Griffin, 2009, p. 63). As we interact with others, the “self” is constantly changing and adapting to further shape our identities, which, Mead contends, are ultimately based on how others view our “self” (Griffin, p. 63). Mead’s concept of the “self” is an apt metaphor for the process in which a Facebook profile is created and refined through communicative engagement with consumers in a digital marketplace. Using Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism, this thesis will attempt to identify how social media communities affect consumers’ online purchasing behavior.
To help answer the question of how people’s social media communities affect their online purchases, I will use numerous research methods to gather data relevant to my thesis topic.

For the collection of literary sources, I will use two primary sources. First is the online databases offered through the Foley Center Library at Gonzaga. There, I will discover and collect academic peer-reviewed journal articles about the history of social media, the psychology behind the creation of personal communities and how people interact with them, and current trends in consumer purchase behavior. Another resource I will use is the online magazine Advertising Age, a primary resource for marketing professionals that includes articles about trends in digital marketing. From Advertising Age, I will search for articles about new technologies that help consumers more efficiently reach out to their social network communities. ProQuest will be my main literature database source as it contains a wide variety of academic journals suited for a thesis. Advertising Age will be a complementary source while the databases Business Source Complete and Communication & Mass Media Complete will likely serve as complementary sources.

I will employ survey research to help collect data. I will create a survey instrument with a list of questions that pertain to people social media communities and how these communities affect their purchases. The survey will include a Likert-like scale of 1-3, and will allow for collection of data regarding people’s rankings of the influence their social media communities have over their purchases. Additionally, the survey will include situational questions, i.e., “If you were to buy a large purchase, would opinions from your Facebook friends impact your purchase?” Lastly, the survey also will gather
information that could have an impact on the thesis question, including respondents’ age, other demographic data, and item amounts purchased online vs. offline.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

The following thesis will be organized into the following chapters. The second chapter will be the literature review. This chapter will cover Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism and its relation to the creation of online communities. The literature review will also review the theory of hyper-symbolic interactionism as well as the benefits to online communities, how social media has transformed the power dynamic between companies and consumers, the differences in millennials’ and non-millennials’ use of the Internet, and gender differences in relation to Facebook.

The third chapter of this thesis will introduce the scope and the methodology used to gather data. The scope of the project will be limited to people who live in Western Washington, use social media, and purchase products online. The methodology will be a Likert-like survey distributed through the survey tool Surveymonkey.com. The fourth chapter will analyze the data gathered from the survey. Lastly, the fifth chapter will conclude the thesis. It will contain method limitations as well as future studies that should be considered.
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Symbolic interactionism theory was created by Mead to describe how humans form their identity and construct a reality of social norms through interactions with others. Although human interaction methods have changed over time, most recently with the digital age, Mead’s theory remains relevant in today’s world. Applying the theory of symbolic interactionism to online networks, it can be hypothesized that online communities shape individuals’ identity and reality, and provide a vast network with which to create relationships. This literature review will further explore Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism and its application to online communities within social networks. It will also explore how social network users create relationships that can influence their online purchasing decisions.

Overview of Symbolic Interactionism Theory

The theory of symbolic interactionism includes three core principles that describe how humans interact with each other through meaning, language, and thought to create our “self” (Griffin, 2009, p. 60). Mead believed that interactions are “central to the development of one’s social identity and functioning according to shared norms and values” (Tormey, 2007). Meaning is found in how a person constructs a social reality (Griffin, p. 60). The way one interacts with others, verbally or nonverbally, derives from the meaning one assigns to various interactions (Griffin, p. 60) For example, a person may see a protester on the street picketing very loudly. This person may view the protester as obnoxious and intrusive, whereas another person may view this person as progressive and inspirational. Each of these people has assigned a meaning to the
protestor, which in return constructs a reality. The protestor’s true meaning, however, cannot be concretely defined, for each person will assign a different meaning to the protestor and interact based on the meaning he or she has constructed.

The meanings one assigns to another is created through the use of language (Griffin, 2009, p. 60). When the first person sees the protestor, he or she uses language to assign a certain meaning to the protestor. Calling the protestor obnoxious assigns a negative meaning to the protestor through language. To Mead, “naming is the basis for human society” (Griffin, p. 61). Lastly, thought occurs when we refer to our inner dialogue to interpret symbols and their meaning (Griffin, p. 62). According to Mead, a person needs language to create this inner dialogue (Griffin, p. 62). Without symbolically interacting, one cannot think and create this inner dialogue, which in turn allows a person to assign meaning to others (Griffin, p. 62). When the three principles of meaning, language, and thought occur, the idea of a “self” begins to emerge (Griffin, p. 63).

Mead believed we had to look outwardly to truly understand our inner selves (Griffin, 2009, p. 63). This occurred when the concept of the looking glass self was used (Griffin, p. 63). When the looking glass self is applied, people construct their identity based on how others view them (Griffin, p. 63). One’s “self” is created through interactions with others involving the use of language (Griffin, p. 63). Thus with each new interaction, a person’s self can change, which is how we evolve and create our identities. When we interact on a one-to-one basis with another we create a self based on how another views us, but when people interact within an entire community, their self is created based on the expectations and responses of the community (Griffin, p. 65).
When interacting with a community, a person creates a “generalized other” based on what expectations and responses the community is perceived to have, Mead noted (Griffin, 2009, p. 65). This generalized other is our guide to behavior when interacting with community members (Griffin, p. 65). It helps a person assign meaning to actions, and to act based on the meaning one wants to assume within the community (Griffin, p. 65). As interactions become more frequent within communities, norms and boundaries are created (Lynch & McConatha, 2006, p. 89). To Mead, a community consists of, “individual actors who make their own choices. Yet they align their actions with what others are doing to form healthcare systems, legal systems, and economic systems” (Griffin, p. 65). Although Mead formed this theory long before the Internet was created, it also applies to online social network interactions. Using Mead’s concept of the looking-glass, one can see how a Facebook page is actually a creation of our “self.”

Symbolic interactionism theory plays an important role in the creation of Facebook profiles and how individuals identify themselves through engaging in online communication. “When Facebook users communicate ‘what’s on their mind’ or update their status, they are offering a representation of the ‘self,’ which is based on their social interactions with others” (Ellis, 2010, p. 39). According to Ellis, there is a three-step process in which a Facebook profile reflects one’s identity in light of Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism (p. 39). First, a Facebook user, through actions, allows other Facebook users to become aware of his or her intentions. These intentions are made clear in a person’s Facebook profile picture and profile name (Ellis, p. 39). Secondly, communication occurs, as the profile picture becomes the user’s “self.” This image is what they would like others to perceive to be their identity (Ellis, p. 39). For example, if a
veterinarian laboratory chose a picture of a smiling veterinarian and a happy dog, this lab
is portraying to the world via Facebook that the company is not only a veterinarian
laboratory with happy veterinarians, but one that caters to dogs, and in return, the dogs
will be happy. Lastly, in the three-step process the profile picture means something to
Facebook users who use it to decide what their identity will be (Ellis, p. 39). The user has
created a “self” through this profile picture as it brings about an identity utilizing the
symbolic act of communication (Ellis, p. 39).

**Hyper-symbolic Interactionism Theory**

Hyper-symbolic interactionism is a revised theory of symbolic interactionism for
online networks (Lynch & McConatha, 2006). Theorists like Mead who used symbolic
interactionism to describe socially constructed worlds did so before the invention of the
Internet. The classic application of symbolic interactionism theory needs to adapt and
evolve to fit today’s digital society (Lynch & McConatha, p. 88). Additionally,
advancements in sciences require symbolic interactionism theory to be re-analyzed
(Lynch and McConatha, p. 88). Advancements in such subjects as neuroscience and
psychology have allowed us to learn more about the human mind than Mead knew when
he created symbolic interactionism theory (p. 88).

The generalized other, as Mead explained, forms when one creates his or her
“self” based on a community’s expectations and responses (Griffin, 2009, p. 65). Thus,
the “self” one creates is constantly changing and evolving based on interactions with
others (Griffin, p. 65). One can assume that the creation of online communities, which
use different means of interaction, allows one’s “self” to evolve even more than Mead
ever thought one could (Lynch & McConatha, 2006, p. 89). Lynch and McConatha
propose that the creation of a generalized other still exists, but exists differently online vs. offline (p. 89). While the generalized other still helps one form a “self,” the generalized other in the digital space is different than the one Mead described (Lynch and McConatha, p. 89).

Lynch and McConatha (2006) claim that the generalized other humans perceive today is different than Mead’s because of technology (p. 90). Due to the decrease in varying methods of human interaction, such as phone calls and verbal communication, and an increase in similar digital interactions, we are creating our self based on a different generalized other than Mead described (Lynch & McConatha, p. 90). The generalized other that impacts one’s self in the digital age is based more on consumerism than the generalized other described in the classic theory of symbolic interactionism (Lynch & McConatha, 2006, p. 90).

Hyper-symbolic interaction is Lynch and McConatha’s (2006) solution to the immediacy of the Internet (p. 91). Hyper-symbolic interaction theory explains the creation of a new type of reality based on symbols found digitally. The theory “comprises the smallest symbols such as the l's and O's of computer language and the tiny pixels of digital imagery, as well as the complex contemporary imagery of advertisements and commercials produced daily” (Lynch & McConatha, p. 91). The larger symbols and imagery that these details create lead to new values and norms different than other non-digital communities (Lynch & McConatha, p. 91). This digital community is filled with marketers and advertisers, which in turn affect the reality humans’ construct, including the norms and values we abide by, as well as the meaning we give to symbols. We socialize very differently in digital reality than we do in real life (Lynch & McConatha, p.
Additionally, the increase in digital advertising causes us to perceive marketers and ads as reality (Lynch & McConatha, p. 92). Neuromarketing is a new term to describe marketing that has emerged from this shift in reality.

Neuromarketing involves the study of how consumers react to marketing messages and is based on the idea that we have three brains, the new brain, the middle brain, and the old brain (Lynch & McConatha, 2006, p. 93). There are claims that neuromarketing actually drives consumers to purchase more products through a process of discovering consumers’ needs and then integrating them within their reality (Lynch & McConatha, p. 94). Neuromarketing also taps into what is believed to be a human’s old brain, the decision-maker that makes choices based on what will help one survive (Lynch & McConatha, p. 94). A human’s reaction to the decisions made by the old brain creates a constructed reality of what we essentially need and should react to (Lynch & McConatha, p. 94). Recently, Delta Airlines used neuroscience marketing to create a budget airline called “song.” The word “song” had no meaning to the airlines, but they used neuroscience marketing to discover the word “song” produces a pleasant feeling for consumers (Lynch & McConatha, p. 94). Delta Airlines is tapping into meaning consumers associate with symbols. Do consumers realize this or is it so engrained within our newly digitally created realities?

Social Network Communities

The article “Consumer Behaviour in Social Networking Sites: Implications for Marketers” (2011) identifies how humans use social media and how marketers should approach users of social media (Diffley, Kearns, Bennett, & Kawalek, p. 47). Its authors assert there are two methods marketers can use to reach consumers via social media: push
and pull (Diffley, et al., p. 47). The pull method requires companies to create relationships with social media users, and then use this relationship to draw them to communicate with their brand online (Diffley, et al., p. 47). The push method involves companies pushing their marketing messages to Internet users without first creating relationships (Diffley, et al., p. 47). When a company uses the push method rather than the pull, they risk alienating consumers who then express their negative feelings to their social media communities (Diffley, et al., p. 47). Marketers have not yet found the optimum method to reach most consumers as social media is still a new concept to most (Diffley, et al., p. 48).

The two main reasons humans use social media are to communicate and to maintain relationships (Diffley, et al., 2011, p. 48). When humans use social media they have three major purposes: 1) to communicate frequently with others in their network, 2) to interact with those who they communicate with less frequently, and 3) to communicate with those with whom they have lost touch (Diffley, et al., p. 48). Within these communities, two terms describe how people interact. The first is social capital, which is built when a social network actively reaches out to others via social media to reinforce relationships (Diffley, et al., p. 48). Bridging social capital occurs when social media users reach out to other social media users with whom they have a weak relationship (Diffley, et al., p. 48). The social capital one creates in social networks leads to the creation of communities. As users create relationships through interaction, they are creating communities where members “share a sense of belonging, have a specific culture, a specific set of norms (‘netiquette’), affective ties that bind them together and a sense of shared history” (Cărtărescu, 2010, p. 82).
Online communities benefit people by offering stability, diversity, and possibility (Cărtărescu, 2010, p. 83-84). The notion that an online community is available on the Internet and therefore portable helps to create a sense of stability for users (Cărtărescu, p. 83). Also, online communities transcend time zones and geography that may prevent the creation of a diverse offline community (Cărtărescu, p. 83). The possibilities that online communities provide to create and maintain relationships are almost endless (Cărtărescu, p. 84). In offline communities it is easier for one to be ridiculed or rejected from communities they would like to be part of (Cărtărescu, p. 84). Online, these members have the possibility to find a breadth of communities that they would be accepted into (Cărtărescu, p. 84). The access social network users have to a wide array of communities provides them with opportunities to create their identity and their perception of reality based on interactions within these communities. Online communities also have enabled consumers to be more empowered, which has caused a monumental shift in the advertising world.

As social media becomes more involved in our lives, traditional advertising has become obsolete (Diffley, 2011, p. 49). Additionally, social media causes a shift in the power relationship between consumers and marketers (Diffley, p. 49). With the addition of social media sites, advertising has become more fragmented, making it harder for marketers to reach consumers with conventional approaches (Diffley, p. 49). Social media has allowed customers themselves to become broadcasters through social media, and they no longer simply listen to marketers but want to engage in conversations (Diffley, p. 49). With traditional marketing, companies held all the power and could control the messaging and responses. However, with social media consumers “are able to
participate and assess content, share it with other consumers, and share opinions, attitudes
and beliefs with one another in relation to that content, including company messages”
(Diffley, p. 49).

Diffley (2011) maintains that when marketers make strategic plans they need to
understand the power consumers hold. With the advent of the Internet, consumers have
been able to research where they purchase products (Diffley, p. 52). Additionally, if
consumers are unhappy with a product or company, they are able to reach and describe
the problem to their online networks, which can result in the company losing customers
(Diffley, p. 53). Marketers can harness the power of social media by creating a
relationship with consumers based on trust rather than one in which they push their
product onto the consumer (Diffley, p. 53). While consumers may sometimes not trust
marketers, they do trust each other and each other’s opinions through social media
sharing (Diffley, p. 54).

**Consumer Behavior in Social Networks**

According to Drell (2011), 20% of Facebook users have used the popular social
medium to research a product before buying, and 42% have written an online review
about a product. Further analysis of social media users’ online behavior shows two
distinct categories of online sharing: high sharers and low sharers (Drell). High sharers,
which comprised 20% of online consumers, were younger, loyal to brands, and had
numerous electronic devices (Drell). Low sharers, which accounted for 80% of online
consumers, were generally older, more concerned with quality than brand, and less likely
to be loyal to a brand (Drell). Data drawn from online interactions within social network
communities reveal that 31% of online purchasers were influenced by community members to purchase a product and 26% took no action (Drell).

Current research also has examined the behavior of millennials using social networks to influence purchasing decisions. Millennials are defined as consumers in their mid-teens to mid-30s (Greenleigh, 2012). According to Greenleigh, millennials “are hyper-social, constantly connected to social and endlessly curious about what others are doing, buying, and enjoying – strangers as well as friends.” Greenleigh found that millennials were 51% more likely to trust strangers when purchasing products, over family and friends (Greenleigh). Millennials are more likely to seek advice from online communities for purchases involving major electronics, cars, and hotels (Greenleigh). In fact, 84% of millennials turn to online communities before purchasing an item -- underscoring the massive behavioral shift the digital era has spawned in the way an entire generation interacts with others.

**Gender Differences in Social Media Use**

A study conducted by Thompson and Lougheed sought to find the difference in female and male use of social networking sites. Females, who typically use language as a means to grow relationships, may find more distress in using social media due to the lack of emotion and body language in online communication (Thompson & Lougheed, 2012, p. 90). The authors hypothesized that females would experience more anxiety with social media tools than their male counterparts (Thompson & Lougheed, p. 90). From a survey, Thompson and Lougheed found that 80% of undergraduates sampled said that Facebook was a daily activity (p. 95). Females tended to use social media more frequently than
males, with females using 62% of their Internet time on Facebook compared to 44% of males (Thompson & Lougheed, p. 95).

According to Thompson and Lougheed, women tend to experience more stress when using Facebook (2012, p. 95). Additionally, women experienced more stress than men when both were unable to access Facebook (Thompson & Lougheed, p. 95). The increase in anxiety for women may be due to the authors’ first notion that women need language and emotion more than men to communicate and feel more stress without these online social media tools (Thompson & Lougheed, p. 95). Females, more than males, seem to see Facebook as another community within which to build relationships. The study conducted by Thompson and Lougheed highlights females’ need to converse with others as they feel great anxiety when they cannot. Additionally, Thompson and Lougheed stated that women had a higher percentage of agreement with the statement “The photos others post on Facebook give me a negative self body image” (p. 95). Thus, it can be implied that women are more influenced than men by their Facebook communities.

Rationale

Social media has become an outlet for many people to build relationships, possibly sometimes deeper than they do in the traditional sense. Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism claimed humans, through interactions with others, created their identities (Griffin, 2006). When applied to social networks, Mead’s theory describes how people build their identities online through digital interactions. Numerous interactions within a given social media community inform members of the community what their norms and values should be, based on the ideals of the community (Griffin). Before
purchasing items online, consumers can look to their online communities for opinions on items they are considering purchasing. My thesis will 1) explore whether online communities influence members’ buying decisions, and – if they do – 2) the extent to which they impact members’ purchases.

Mead conceived his theory of symbolic interactionism long before the digital era. However, with the creation of digital communities, Lynch and McConatha (2006) suggested symbolic interactionism theory should be renamed hyper-symbolic interactionism theory. The authors assert that the new hyper-symbolic interactionism theory, first articulated by Lynch and McConatha in 2006, more accurately describes how our realities, constructed through human interaction, have been reconstructed through more digitalized and often more homogenous interactions (Lynch & McConatha).

Ubiquitous Internet advertisements and our interactions with them have created a sort of virtual reality not based on actual human interaction but instead primarily through interaction with marketers (Lynch & McConatha). Does this near-constant interaction with marketers and the creation of a new reality affect how we purchase items online? The hyper-symbolic interactionism theory deserves to be examined as it represents, in my opinion, nothing less than a complete paradigm shift in how increasingly more of us perceive reality.

While online marketing has caused a shift in how we perceive reality, social media has caused a significant shift in the power relationship between consumers and companies (Diffley et al., 2010). In traditional advertising there was little dialogue between consumers and customers, but social media has changed that (Diffley et al.). Now, consumers can write reviews and reach out to their communities for advice before
purchasing a product. How does this power shift affect consumer behavior? The literature review above helps identify how social media communities affect consumer behavior online. This information is extremely important for marketers, but also represents significant implications for consumers. As symbolic interactionism theory states, we create our identities based on interactions with others and learn norms from our communities. As our world becomes increasingly digital, how will this affect our realities and our identities? Identifying how consumers reach out to their online communities can help to hypothesize how social media will affect our realities and identities in the near future.

Research or Design Questions

From the literature review, many research and design questions have emerged, including how-millennials’ use of social media differs from other generations. In examining millennials’ use of social media, there is little doubt millennials use online communities much differently than other generations. I will attempt to articulate these differences in my study design. Additionally, I plan to research more about how online communities affect our identities and our online purchase behavior. Stemming from these questions, I would like to specifically focus my research on discovering the point in the purchase funnel where consumers reach out to their online communities. Is it during the research phase or right before they click purchase – or perhaps at another time? Lastly, based on Thompson and Lougheed’s (2012) study of gender differences related to anxiety through use of social media, I will explore these differences in my study. Will females be more apt to reach out to their Facebook friends or Twitter followers for opinions?
Breaking out respondents by gender may highlight some key differences in how social media influences their purchasing behavior online.

**Hypothesis**

Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism leads me to believe that social media communities will impact how consumers behave online. If as Mead states, communities influence our actions and shape our identities, then social media communities should have the same influence as offline communities (Griffin, 2009). Therefore, my hypothesis is that social media communities will have a significant influence on the products consumers purchase online.
SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope

My thesis will examine how social media networks affect consumer behavior. The social networks I will address are Facebook and Twitter, which appear to be the most popular. Facebook currently has around 800 million users and Twitter an estimated 500 million users. As my study focuses on the Internet, a global entity, narrowing the geographical location is mandatory. Again, participants for this study will include only individuals in Western Washington. While this is a small sample compared to all Internet users worldwide, increasing the sample size would be impossible to manage given time constraints of the project.

My sample will focus on Western Washington individuals because I am a resident of Washington and have easier access to individuals in this region. Also, with companies such as Microsoft and Amazon located in Western Washington, people in this region may be more Internet-savvy than individuals from other regions. Since I plan to gather data only from people who use social media and purchase items online, I would expect numerous people in Western Washington to have the necessary qualifications needed to participate in the study.

Methodology

In my study, I will use quantitative and qualitative analyses. The study will be distributed to my work colleagues, friends, family, and other Gonzaga students in Western Washington. I chose to distribute only to these demographics because these individuals are more accessible to me. Also, based on my interactions, these individuals tend to be very active within online networks and in purchasing products online. To
gather data, a survey will be distributed to the individuals listed above. This is the ideal approach to capture the data to help me understand how people communicate within online networks and how their online communities influence their decisions. To gather all the information I need, my survey will consist of both qualitative and quantitative questions.

The survey will be delivered using the online tool Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). To gather responses to my survey, I will send an email message to Seattle co-workers at my company as well as to the Gonzaga Master’s Program of Communication and Leadership Studies, directing only Western Washington residents to take the survey. Additionally, I will post the survey on my Facebook and will send it via email to friends and family. The first questions asked in the survey will profile the respondent. These questions will include, “What type of social media tool do you use most frequently?” and “Would you consider yourself an active user of social media?” In addition, I will ask the respondents demographic questions such as their gender and age. These questions will later be analyzed qualitatively. Next, the survey will ask questions that respondents will answer using a Likert-like rating scale of 1-3, which I will later analyze quantitatively. These questions will include, “On a scale of 1-3, how do your online communities influence your purchases?” and “On a scale of 1-3, would you be more likely to listen to a stranger’s review of a product over that of your friends or family?”

In terms of ethical concerns, the only issue I foresee is concern with personal information being compromised. To ensure this does not happen, I will not allow respondents to include any personal information such as names, phone numbers, or
addresses. I will also indicate the survey is completely voluntary, anonymous and that they may skip any questions they wish or stop taking the survey at any time.
THE STUDY

Introduction

For a week, I collected survey results through SurveyMonkey.com. After asking co-workers in Seattle, people on Facebook and Twitter, and others in the Gonzaga community to take the survey, I amassed 154 responses. The survey responses came from Western Washington residents who use social media, and purchase items online. Survey questions asked were specific to Facebook and/or Twitter to gain more insight into how the two social media tools affect consumer behavior online (Appendix A).

Data Analysis

Of the 154 total individuals who answered the survey, the majority of people were 30-39 years of age (34%), 64% were female, 57% used both Facebook and Twitter, 55% used Facebook daily and 53% never used Twitter. The majority of individuals had 200-299 Facebook friends (24%) and 52% of individuals had met all of their Facebook friends. In comparison, 40% had 1-99 Twitter followers and 40% had never met their followers in person. From these data it can be deduced that those who use Facebook typically “friend” others (meaning they are added as friends in their Facebook profiles) they also know offline while those who use Twitter tend to follow or be followed by strangers.

Of all Facebook and Twitter respondents, 60% responded they purchase items online and offline at the same rate. These respondents noted they typically purchased clothing and accessories online (70%). Additionally, 68% of respondents bought travel accommodations online, 50% bought housewares, 32% buy electronics, and 10% buy insurance online. When asked if they would be more likely to listen to a stranger’s online
review over that of a friend, 65% said they would be somewhat more likely while 30%
said they would not be likely.

To determine whether a person’s Facebook or Twitter community impacts their
likelihood of online purchases, I asked a series of questions in the survey regarding
Facebook and Twitter. From the results of these questions, I was able to gather enough
data to indicate that Facebook communities have a higher impact on how consumers
purchase products online than Twitter users. These results vary slightly from my
hypothesis, which posited both social media tools would influence consumer behavior.

Fifty-four percent of Facebook users said that they sometimes reach out to their Facebook
communities before purchasing a product. This is a large percentage of Facebook users
who view their Facebook communities as a trusted source for product opinions. Overall,
based on the survey results, the majority of Facebook users sampled in this study said they are open at times to the influence and opinions of their Facebook communities, while Twitter users say their communities rarely influence their purchase decisions. When asked how often they reach out to members in their social media communities for opinions about products before they purchase them, 47% of respondents said they never reach out to Facebook friends before purchasing an item. Ninety percent said that they never reach out to Twitter followers before purchasing an item.

Two sets of questions asked in the survey reveal the point in the purchase funnel in which people reach out to others on Facebook or Twitter. Fifty-two percent of individuals never gather opinions from Facebook friends at any point during the purchase funnel. However, 20% reach out to Facebook friends before researching products to buy, 26% while they are comparing products after the initial research phase, and 2% directly before purchasing a product.
Ninety-two percent of Twitter users never reach out to followers during the purchase process. Only 2% of Twitter users reach out to followers before researching products to buy, 5% before comparing products after the initial phase and 0% directly before making a purchase.

When asked how likely it was that Facebook friends would influence one’s online purchases, 48% said that it is not likely, while 51% said that it is sometimes likely. Only 1% said that it is always likely.
Twitter appears to have significantly less of an effect on one’s online purchasing behavior as 92% said that Twitter is not likely to affect their purchase decisions. Six percent of Twitter users said that other Twitter followers will sometimes influence their purchase decisions and 1% said that other Twitter followers almost always have an influence.
Fifty-seven percent of Facebook users said that they have later purchased an item they heard about on Facebook, while only 17% of Twitter users said the same. The majority of Facebook users (54%) believe that Facebook is sometimes useful when looking for opinions about what products to purchase while 41% said it is not useful. Twitter is even less useful according to respondents as 79% said Twitter was never useful when looking for opinions about what products to purchase and only 19% said it is sometimes useful.

When filtering the data to discern the difference in millennials (younger than 30 years of age) and non-millennials (30 years of age and older) it appeared that millennials were more open to influence from Facebook communities than non-millennials. The majority of non-millennial respondents used Facebook everyday but never used Twitter. **Sixty-four percent** of millennials used Facebook every day and 27% also used Twitter on a daily basis. Millennials were more likely than non-millennials to have both a Facebook and Twitter account (61% of millennials have both compared to 53% of non-millennial). Sixty-one percent of non-millennials purchase about the same amount of products online as they do offline and 73% of their purchases are for travel accommodations. In comparison, 57% of millennials purchase about the same amount of products online as they do offline and the majority of their purchases (77%) are for clothing and accessories.

Fifty-four percent of non-millennials say that they never reach out to Facebook friends for opinions before they purchase products online, while 51% of millennials said they sometimes reach out to Facebook friends for opinions. A large majority of both millennials and non-millennials said that they never reach out to Twitter followers for
opinions before purchasing a product. Millennials were more likely than non-millennials to reach out to Facebook friends before researching products to buy. Additionally, 24% of non-millennials stated that they reach out to Facebook friends to compare products after the initial research phase, and this was around the same amount for millennials (29%). Seventy-eight percent of millennials said they hear about products on Facebook that they later buy 51% of non-millennials said the same. Forty-eight percent of non-millennials believe that Facebook is not useful when looking for opinions about products to purchase online while only 35% of millennials believed that it is not useful. The majority of millennials (61%) believe that Facebook is sometimes useful when looking for opinions about what products to purchase. Both millennials and non-millennials agreed that Twitter is not useful when looking for opinions about what products to purchase.

The majority of male and female respondents who took the survey were 30-39 years of age. Sixty percent of males used both Facebook and Twitter while 36% only used Facebook. In comparison, 54% of women used both Facebook and Twitter while 43% used only Facebook. Forty-seven percent of males used Facebook daily while a large percentage (50%) never use Twitter. Women tend to use Facebook and Twitter more often. Sixty-two percent of women use Facebook daily while, like males, a large majority never use Twitter. When asked the question, “About how many of your "friends" on Facebook have you met in person?” Forty-four percent of men responded that they knew all of them, whereas 53% of females stated that they knew all of their Facebook friends offline.
Sixty-four percent of men said that they typically purchase the same amount of items in store and offline with 65% of purchases being travel accommodations. On the other hand, 59% of women typically purchase the same amount of items in store and offline with 73% of purchases being clothes and accessories. When asked how often they reach out to Facebook friends to provide opinions about products they may purchase online, 57% of men and 51% of women said they never do. Fifty percent of men also said that it is sometimes likely their Facebook friends will influence their purchases and 53% said that they often hear about products that they later purchase on Facebook. Whereas, only 47% of women said that it is sometimes likely their Facebook friends will influence their purchase decisions but 59% said that they hear about products on Facebook that they later purchase. Both genders saw Twitter followers as having only a small influence on their purchase decisions if any at all.

**Results of the Study**

Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism states humans are influenced by community members (Griffin, 2009, p. 65). Using Mead’s idea that communities impact our perception of what is a norm, I hypothesized that social media communities would impact consumer online behavior. My belief was, that if Mead believed that communities impact our perception of reality and what is normal, then by default social media communities should influence what one purchases online. One would purchase based on what the community believes to be the best purchase.

The survey results showed that Twitter communities tend to not significantly impact social media users’ online purchase behavior, but Facebook communities typically do and have the potential to become even more of influencers for consumers.
Facebook results seem to fall right in line with Mead’s idea of communities as influencers. While for Twitter, the survey results indicate that Twitter communities behave differently than offline communities and Facebook communities. As the majority of Twitter users stated that their followers are strangers, they may not feel the same type of intimacy and companionship as those who use Facebook feel. This is something Lynch and McConatha (2006) touch on when introducing the theory of hyper-symbolic interactionism. Lynch and McConatha believe that due to the marketing-based reality constructed on the Internet, we no longer have the same type of community interactions as we do offline (2006). If this is so, then it is plausible that one’s Twitter community has less of an influence, especially for those who are avid Twitter users.

For marketers, this study can be interpreted in two ways. First, it implies that marketers who focus on the sharing of products among social media communities to boost sales should rethink their strategy, especially if they use Twitter more than Facebook. Second, the results of the survey should inspire marketers to find a marketing method that will increase the influence online communities have on other social media users. My study showed that Facebook communities typically influence some users and have the potential to influence even more in the future. Many Facebook users surveyed seemed to value their Facebook friends’ opinions when it came to purchasing items online, and sometimes these opinions impacted their purchases. Marketers should use community influence on Facebook users as a way to increase sales and/or brand awareness.

Another takeaway for marketers is the difference between Facebook and Twitter. Most of the respondents use Facebook on a daily basis and Twitter was not used nearly as
much, if at all. Out of the two social media platforms, Facebook communities are more of a community than Twitter. More people on Facebook know their Facebook friends offline, while many Twitter users did not know most of their Twitter followers offline. When comparing all of the questions pertaining to Facebook and those pertaining to Twitter, it is apparent that those who use Facebook have more of a relationship with their friends than Twitter users do with their followers. For marketers, this information is beneficial when deciding what channel would be the best to focus their attention on.

Cărtărescu (2010) stated that online communities create places for members to “share a sense of belonging, have a specific culture, a specific set of norms (‘netiquette’), affective ties that bind them together and a sense of shared history” (p. 82). These elements appear to be lacking in Twitter as most respondents to the survey answered that their Twitter communities were typically comprised of strangers who did not impact their purchasing decisions. Based on Cărtărescu’s definition of an online community, and the lack of survey participants that use Twitter, it is questionable if Twitter constitutes a community, especially one that influences. Rather, it can be identified as a communication tool to reach out and converse with strangers but probably is not able to build relationships like Facebook does.

In my opinion, Facebook feels more like a community than Twitter. Answers from the survey support this notion, as many of the respondents stated that they knew Facebook friends offline, while Twitter followers are comprised mostly of strangers. Based on Mead’s concept of a community as an influencer, I assumed that people would reach out to their Facebook communities to help shape their opinions, more than they would on Twitter. What my survey discovered was a good portion of Facebook users felt
like Facebook was a good method of gathering opinions before purchasing a product, as 50% of survey respondents used Facebook communities this way. Respondents seemed to regard Facebook as a community full of influences, which could help shape not only the Facebook users’ identities, but their purchasing opinions.

Greenleigh (2010) found that 84% of millennials turn to online communities before purchasing an item. The survey results from my study found the opposite. On average, 50% of millennials who responded to my survey said that Facebook influenced their purchasing decisions. In particular, when asked how often they turn to Facebook communities before purchasing an item, only 51% of millennials said that they sometimes do and 47% said that they never do. Greenleigh also found that millennials were 51% more likely to trust strangers when purchasing products, over family and friends. Again, my study contradicts Greenleigh’s notion. Sixty-five percent of millennials said that they would sometimes listen to a stranger’s online review of products over their friends. While 29% said they would not be likely to and a small margin of 6% said they would always listen to a stranger’s online review.

According to Thompson and Lougheed (2012), women are on Facebook more often than men and due to this have increased anxiety. While my study did not measure the amount of anxiety one feels from social media, it did find that women tend to spend more time on Facebook than men much like Thompson and Lougheed stated. Forty-seven percent of males used Facebook daily while 62% of women use Facebook on a daily basis. What is surprising about the results when comparing men and women’s Facebook tendencies, is the smaller influence Facebook communities have on women than men. Although women said that they used Facebook more often than men on a daily basis, they
were less likely to be influenced by Facebook communities when purchasing a product online than their male counterparts. However, women tend to contradict this statement when they are later asked how often they purchase items after hearing about it on Facebook and 59% say that they sometimes do. In comparison, a smaller percentage of men say the same.
SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

While my study produced interesting results, I believe there is room for my improvement within my study that would have produced better results and more reliable data. One such issue that I would have changed was my desire to limit the location of participants in the survey. My study focused solely on Western Washington individuals with the belief that they would believe an adequate sample size to study. While my sample size provided reliable data and provocative insights, I am curious whether a larger sample size would have impacted the results I received. Would people in Eastern states view Facebook and Twitter differently than people in Western Washington? I think my sample size was drawn too narrowly to make a conclusive statement.

A second problem with my study is due to time constraints. I was only able to gather data using one method. With more time, I would have implemented an additional method. Another data source would have provided more insights on how social media communities impact consumer behavior online. While my survey, provided adequate enough data to analyze and make a prediction, a method, such as an in-person user research study, would have provided additional results to analyze.

Further Studies or Recommendations

For further evaluation of how social media impacts consumer behavior online, other studies should be explored. While my thesis only looked at the impact of social media communities on consumer behavior online, another avenue I would have liked to pursue would have been the impact of a company’s Facebook page on consumer behavior.
online. For instance, if an online consumer likes or interacts with the Nordstrom Facebook page, are they then more likely to purchase from Nordstrom online?

Additionally, another study that could provide interesting results would be how Facebook advertisements impact consumer behavior online. Many companies purchase these ads hoping that they will entice Facebook users to visit their company page, purchase their product, or recommend the product to others. While data are available on these advertisements to the companies that purchase them, such as number of clicks on ads, a study could help indicate if they actually influence Facebook users to perform the wanted action. The data only show numbers, but a study could help identify the psychology behind the numbers and why a person may click on one company’s Facebook ad over another.

**Conclusions**

Social media continues to play a role in many people’s lives. From finding information about friends to perusing a company’s Facebook page to gain insight into their products, many of us use social media constantly. While our purposes for using social media may vary, we all have created communities we interact with within our social networks. According to Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism, the way we interact with individuals shapes our identity. Thus, it can be thought that how we interact with others on social media also can shape our identity. Mead also described the importance of a community’s influence. My thesis seeks to understand if a social media user valued their social media communities’ influence when it came to purchasing products online. I hypothesized, based on Mead’s rationale, that if offline communities
impact our identities and actions, then social media communities should perform the same way.

To obtain this information I distributed a survey to respondents in Western Washington who use Facebook and Twitter as well as purchase items online. When analyzing the results, many interesting insights were noticed. The respondents of the survey interacted more with friends and family on Facebook than they did on Twitter. The majority of Twitter followers one had were strangers. Thus it can be deduced that Facebook is more like an offline community that Mead describes than Twitter. When it came to answering my overall thesis question of whether or not social media affected consumer online behavior the survey showed surprising results. It was found that Twitter had very little influence on consumers and more than likely they never reached out to Twitter followers at any point during the purchase process for opinions. Facebook friends, on the other hand, had more of an influence on Facebook users. Around 50% of Facebook users reach out to their Facebook communities before purchasing an item. Thus, results for Facebook align with Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism. In conclusion, the survey I distributed found that social media communities in general, do have an influence on what products social media users purchase online, with Twitter having a very minimal amount of influence and Facebook communities having a relatively high level of influence.
References


Ellis, K. (2010). Be who you want to be: The philosophy of Facebook and the


Appendix A
The Survey Questions
1. Which category below includes your age?
2. In what city or town do you live in?
3. What is your gender?
4. Do you have an account on Facebook or Twitter?
5. On average, how often do you use Facebook?
6. On average, how often do you use Twitter?
7. How many Facebook friends do you have?
8. About how many of your "friends" on Facebook have you met in person?
9. How many Twitter followers do you have?
10. About how many of your "followers" on Twitter have you met in person?
11. Do you typically purchase items online or in-store?
12. Which online retailers do you typically use?
13. What types of products do you typically buy online? (select all that apply)
14. On a scale of 1-3, would you be more likely to listen to a stranger’s online review of a product over your friends?
15. Do you reach out to Facebook friends for opinions about products you may purchase online?
16. Do you reach out to Twitter followers for opinions about products you may purchase online?
17. Would you purchase a product online without first getting an opinion from a Facebook friend?
18. Would you purchase a product online without first getting an opinion from a Twitter follower?
19. At what point in the online purchase process do you typically gather opinions from Facebook friends?
20. At what point in the online purchase process do you typically gather opinions from Twitter followers?
21. On a scale of 1-3, how likely is it that Facebook friends will influence your online purchase?
22. On a scale of 1-3, how likely is it that Twitter followers will influence your online purchase?
23. On a scale of 1-3, how often do you hear about products on Facebook that you later purchase?
24. On a scale of 1-3, how often do you hear about products on Twitter that you later purchase?
25. On a scale of 1-3, do you think Facebook is useful when looking for opinions about what products to purchase?
26. On a scale of 1-3, do you think Twitter is useful when looking for opinions about what products to purchase?