
THE CONNECTION BETWEEN “POST-TRUTH” SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE QUALITY OF PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

Bogdan Cristian Onete¹, Denisa Elena Vlad² and Lelia Voinea³

^{1) 2) 3)} *The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania*

E-mail: bogdan.onete@com.ase.ro; E-mail: denisa_evl@yahoo.com;

E-mail: lelia.voinea@gmail.com

Abstract

The concept of quality has very ancient roots, being treated in literature both as a philosophical concept and as an economic concept, with a variety of points of view related to its nature. The explanatory dictionary of the Romanian language defines quality as “the totality of characteristics and essential aspects under which a thing is what it is, unlike the other things”(DEX, n.d.). Regardless of their opinion on quality, the concept is certainly very important and represents a concern for all people.

Social media, the present and the future of communication, can highly influence consumer’s behavior, thoughts, personal beliefs and emotions. We identified that both customers and providers adopt a post-truth behavior in everything they do, including the use of social media. People value and pay more for the way someone make them feel: people buy feelings and emotions.

Both the connection between social media and quality and also the “post-truth” characteristic of social media are very important, popular nowadays and very connected to our current reality.

Based on a focus group research, this paper was aimed to study the attitudes and behavior of the suppliers of goods or services in relation to the quality of the products and services they provide, to demonstrate they are driven by their personal belief and by their emotions and also to find out their opinion regarding social media and its usefulness in business.

Keywords: social media, post-truth, quality, business, emotions, subjectivity

JEL Classification: M10, O30

Introduction

We do want to raise money for us and our families in order to have a better life and to have respect from the others. We want attention, we go for shopping, go out with friends and family, we look for quality things, we want to spend quality time, we want to be informed and to be active on the Internet, to have access to everything that is new and to get in touch with the others all the time. We all need and we do all this because we are human beings

and we all function driven by emotions. We want respect, we want love, we want attention because this is how we feed our soul and mind.

Social media and consumer's behavior are also connected to our feelings. We buy things being led by our emotions. We want to buy quality things in order to feel better and to satisfy our needs. We are permanently connected to the Internet and to social media because we want to be informed, because we want to get in touch with the others, because we save time when shopping online and we find there everything we need.

Personal branding was created by media, social media brought it to the rank of art, but it comes from our feelings and its results feed our emotions: how we dress, our education, the job we have, the neighborhood we live in, the choice of our life partner, the choice of our car or of our friends, how we negotiate, how we talk, how we keep our promises, what we post on Facebook or Instagram. Everything we do and everything we are is connected to emotions. Influence and power means emotions. People value and pay more for the way someone make them feel. People buy feelings.

The word "post-truth" was chosen as "Word of the year" 2016 by the Oxford Dictionaries. They motivated this choice because, even if the word has been in existence for the past decade, they have seen "a spike in frequency" last year, "in the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States. It has also become associated with a particular noun, in the phrase *post-truth politics*". (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016).

The Oxford Dictionaries present "post-truth" as an adjective "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief: 'in this era of post-truth politics, it's easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire' or 'some commentators have observed that we are living in a post-truth age' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016).

Social media, the world's largest cocktail party, is by excellence post-truth. Consumer's behavior and his perception regarding the quality of the products or services are also post-truth because all are driven by their emotions. In order to demonstrate this, we conducted a qualitative research. It was chosen the discussion method focused on group (focus group).

Methodology

The focused discussion has been carried out to study the attitudes and behaviour of the suppliers of goods or services in relation to product quality or services they provide, to demonstrate they are driven by their personal belief and by their emotions and also to find out their opinion regarding social media and its usefulness in business.

In order to accomplish the requirements of this study and in order to obtain information about service providers or products on the quality and the social media, it was decided the establishment of a qualitative research, consisting of a focus group (Bucharest, 2017). The group of participants consists of 10 persons, service providers, with ages ranging between 28 and 55. All participants are high-graduated, live in Bucharest and use social media either for personal or professional purpose.

For the requirements of the focus group, it has been made a discussion guided by a moderator, who addressed to the participants 7 open questions relating to the way they perceive the quality and social media in general or in relation to the business. The focus group was conducted in February, 2017. Its duration was approximately 90 minutes.

Results and Discussions

The first question asked by moderator was "What does 'quality' mean to you?"

Many people connect quality to excellence or to a higher level, others see and understand quality as the lack of defects. In 1978, the American Society for Quality Control (ASQC) introduced a formal definition of quality: "The totality of characteristics of a product and service that ensures its ability to meet specific needs." Quality, in its various forms, is the basis for the study of the science of goods. (Onete, 2004).

Being quality oriented appears to be a business philosophy that provide competitive advantage by creating superior value for customers. The existence of such guidelines was analyzed in several interantional studies. For example, Gummesson (1991) considers quality an aspect wich integrates both production and marketing. Introducing the principle of total quality marketing, Kotler (1994) suggests that the concepts of quality and customer satisfaction are linked by trade. Grant, Shani and Krishan (1994) refer to quality management claiming that quality management is more than a unifying goal and a mechanism within the companies, representing a business philosophy.

Asked what it means to them, respondents were reported to their experience as suppliers of goods or services. For one of the respondents, quality means very good reviews and new customers from recommendations of existing ones. For this one, the quality also means a very high customer retention rate, whereas the cost of acquisition of new clients is much higher in comparison with existing customer retention. Another participant stressed that the quality of a product means all traits that distinguish it from the others. For another respondent, quality is a standard, a deviation compared to the normality, in a positive sense. Quality varies and has a major subjective component, since it is measured related to the consumer's expectations, beliefs and emotions (Drăgulănescu, Popescu, 2015).

According to the study conducted by Ernst & Young (2014), online consumers in Romania are influenced most by quality and product warranty / service with a percentage of 32%, but globally the most important factors in the decision to purchase online are the price and the delivery (rate of 29%). For the Romanian products' consumer price and delivery ranks second among the factors that have a role in the digital consumer behaviour (Mairescu, Dina, Pleșea, Felician, 2015).

Quality is the final customer's satisfaction in relation to the portfolio of products or services of a company. Therefore, it can be said that the word "quality" is equivalent to satisfaction. Last but not least, quality means good service that the client may not be able to refuse.

The second question asked respondents was "What do you think about social media?"

Jacka and Scott (2011) argued that "there is no single definition for social media." For many people, the well-known social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are the social media symbols. And this is because they have become extremely popular worldwide regardless of demographics, such as race, age, gender etc. and have hundreds of millions of users. Jacka and Scott (2011) considered social media to be "a set of technologies of web broadcast that allow democratization of content, offering not only to publishers but also to all users to provide content." (Cheung, Thadani, 2012). The Oxford Dictionary (2011) defines social media as "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking". Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) developed their own definition. So, in their opinion, "social media is a group of applications used on the Internet and based on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content." In 2013, Bolton said that social

media is defined in simple terms as "any online service through which users can create and share a variety of content."

To this question, one participant replied that he believed social media as an open gate to communication, to make them known by a certain type of clientele. It's an easy, cheap and efficient way. Social media has conquered the world. It changed lives and changed their way of communication. Generally, social media is a term that describes the multitude of digital platforms that allow interaction, networking and collaboration between those who use them. For users, social media means social networking, full freedom of expression, a source of information, the decision maker, entertainment, research, place of interaction based on interests, play space. For brands, social media is the most convenient, fast and new space for conversation, connected to relevant audiences, long relationships, community, sustainability, promotion, monitoring and feedback.

Social media has an increasingly higher role in promoting the image of a brand, services or products. Social media is the future of communication, a network through which you can interact and get feedback as soon as possible. A participant considers social media a mechanism with a major impact in promoting or fighting against a product or service. Another respondent argues that social media is a phenomenon that has transformed communication and interaction of individuals, but if not used properly, it can become harmful to them. It gives a quick access to information, it can be used to promote political ideas, opinions, or ideas for business, to disperse information and to connect people from different parts of the world. A participant to the discussion considers that social media is something with positive and negative parts and he believes that it can lead to a large dose of information, used for the opinion manipulation. For years, communication people have controlled public perception of the companies. Today, a 16-year-old child with a Facebook profile can ruin it by a simple post. Another respondent believes social media as a binder, but sometimes overly used. Advertisements and advertising abound, most of the times in excess, they become almost uncomfortable, and the user or the final user can become, in turn, immune to the messages.

Moreover, social media can very quickly punish the errors made by the user. For example, there have been many cases over the years in which employees of various companies responsible for the company's Facebook page gave answers to certain postings on Facebook, with whom they did not approve, using insulting words. The problem was that, by mistake, they posted from the company's Facebook account instead of posting from the private one, and the language used was not in accordance with the company's values, bringing serious damage to the integrity and reputation of the company.

In case a negative campaign is launched via social media, like in the example given above by our participant, the customer relations service of the company in question is obliged to react, or the effect could be devastating. Because the effect of such a campaign is amplified and sustained by the existence of such a great number of applications and sites that allow the messages to reach a great number of users, business organizations should elaborate a communication strategy to answer the accusation, which should be prompt and well planned. (Onete, Pamfilie, Dina, Vlad, 2014).

Also concerning the negative parts of the social media, a respondent recalled that, studying the effects of social media habits on the state of the users, researchers at the University of Medicine School Pittsburgh have discovered that, as much as young adults use social media, as much they are exposed to the states of depression. Facebook can feed anxiety and enhance feelings of inadequacy.

The next question was "What do you understand by social media? Just Facebook? or specialty blogs, forums etc? "

The simplest definition would say that social media refers to online interaction between internet users. Practically, every online platform that allows free exchange of ideas / views between users, is called social media. Moreover, nowadays any website allows post comments, so we can say that the Internet itself is Social Media (Negrea, 2014). Solomon and Tuten identified the main functions of the social media implementation in marketing (Guillet, Kucukusta, Liu, 2015). In 2013 they found four areas as the basis on which social media marketing should focus on: social community, social entertainment, publishing and social commerce.

All respondents agreed that social media was not only Facebook but much more. One of the respondents considered that social media include Facebook, Twitter, blogs, feeds from websites, Instagram, Pinterest, forums, Twitter and the totality of the sites or applications where you can interact with others.

In section 4, the respondents were asked if social media was useful in business and were asked to justify their answers. All replies were affirmative. Social media was a tool that could be easily accessed inexpensively and with high "outlet" category of customers "of the future", it was the argument of the first respondent. Social media provided a constant information support. One respondent stated that, through social media, target audience members of a supplier could get to know him better and could even interact directly with him, with its products or services. It was a way to make them feel part of the 'supplier'. Through specialist weblogs, users find information that defines the quality of products and services, but also information that can change the supply and demand of the market.

Question number 5 was: "Can social media influence the quality of a product/service? How do you see this?"

One of the respondents considers that social media can influence the quality of a product or service through feedback that a vendor may receive, but also through the articles to which he has access. With their help, a supplier may improve, correct or remodel services. Another respondent argues that the dissemination of information, both positive and negative, takes place with much greater speed and with high penetration, the so-called "wave effect"; in addition, feedback is direct and received in time.

As a way of mutual correlation, offering feedback from targeted customers, acting as a reflection, after a reference to some chosen parts, social media can improve the quality of products or services, said one of the participants. Social media can influence, for better or worse, the quality of a product through the given feedback and if it is used as an instrument to capture feedback.

The penultimate question was "How do you see the role of weblogs/forums?". To this, a respondent argues that they have an opinion-forming role and at the same time are very useful for the exchange of opinions and experiences. They reflect the best of the new generation "tastes" and, for those who are interested and willing to listen to, show the new trend. The respondent considers that of all social media, blogs and forums are considered the most endorsed: blogs because users usually have full confidence in that blogger, because that's why users are pursuing him, and specialized forums have the advantage of providing more opinions from people who tested that product or service.

For a guest, blogs and specialized forums represent ideas and thoughts set in silence to be broad "consumed" in a modern era, and for another, the blog represents some kind of personal online journal, and it may have any theme, and specialized forums, by the name's

nature, treat and discuss a topic. Both have an information role, but they don't replace a specialist. Working with a blogger can bring recognition to the brand, services or products, can provide leads to the company website, can increase the level of trust in a brand, can reinforce beliefs and impressions and certainly can strategically position the brand.

Blogs are an important channel for gathering feedback and promoting products. According to the study of Romanian audience blogging in 2015, over 77% of the readers of weblogs have changed or have reinforced their opinion at least once about a product, a service, or a company after reading some of the opinions of the bloggers, and 67% of readers have purchased products and services on the recommendation of the bloggers they read. Unlike blogs, specialized forums content cannot be controlled by the companies, the risk of misinformation or collecting serious dissatisfaction can be very high.

Question number 7 came to conclusion and requested participants to conclude whether "Social Media can improve the quality of a product/service?". Their response was unanimously affirmative. As feedback from suppliers is received directly and in a timely manner, they can take it into account, in order to improve the products or services offered.

Conclusions

Quality, "the totality of the essential traits and sides of which, by virtue, a thing is what it is, rather than one of the other things," a subjective term, it must satisfy all the expectations of the product. The final user determines what it means for him and he is the one who decides which product or service satisfies them better needs or desires. Quality is the final customer satisfaction in relation to the portfolio of products or services of a company. Therefore, it can be said that the word "quality" is equivalent to satisfaction and satisfaction is emotion. Quality involves traits of a product or service for which the customer is willing to pay. As we have said before, the customer is willing to pay for emotions.

Social media represents a new way of communicating, an easy and without costs, a way to promote products or services. It is a phenomenon. It changed lives and changed their mode of communication. In general, social media is a term that describes the multitude of digital platforms that allow interaction, networking and collaboration between those who use them. For users, social media means socializing, freedom of expression, a source of information, decision maker, entertainment, research, place of interaction based on interests, play space, therefore, feelings and emotions. For brands, social media is the most convenient, fast and new space for conversation, connection to relevant audiences, long relationships, community, sustainability, promotion, monitoring and feedback. Social media has an increasingly higher role in promoting the image of a brand, services or products. By being able to share information, message propagation speed is much higher than in other environments. Social media is the present and the future, social media is the link between people, between their emotions and behaviors.

Social media is not only Facebook but much more. Including Facebook, Twitter, blogs, including feeds from sites, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat and the totality of the sites or applications that can interact with others, all online communication channels, that allow the creation of community, facilitate interaction and content transfer.

Social media has a huge impact in the business world and is useful especially in business. It can be used to promote ideas, to start a business, for a brand or for advertising. Social media allows the collection of a large volume of information about users, which can be used to adjust the supply of products (shopping behavior, preferred brands, locations frequented, etc.). Moreover, the speed with which information travels in social media can

be a great boon to business. Information on the quality of products and services can be reached in a very short time to a great community of people.

Social media can influence the quality of a product or service through feedback that a vendor may receive, but also through the articles to which he has access. With their help, a supplier may improve, correct or remodel services. Dissemination of information, both positive and negative, with much greater speed and with high penetration, the so-called "wave effect" and the feedback received is directly and in a timely manner. Social signals (like, share) can influence the generation of traffic, increasing the confidence and awareness of the public towards a product or service. Social media can influence, for the better or for the worse, the quality of a product through the feedback and if it is used as an instrument for feedback. However, it is arguable the proportion in which social media affects the quality because it depends on the opening of the companies to integrating feedback collected on these channels.

Blogs and forums have an opinion-forming role and at the same time are very useful for the exchange of opinions and experiences. They reflect the best of the new generation "tastes" and, for those who are interested and willing to listen to, they show the new trend. Now it is the easiest way to get an opinion: blogs because users usually have full confidence in the blogger, because that's why they are pursuing, and the specialized forums have the advantage of providing more opinions from people who tested the product or service in question. Blogs and specialized forums represent ideas and thoughts located in silence to be broad "consumed" in a modern era. The blog represents a sort of online personal diary, which may have any theme, and the specialized forums, by the nature of their name, treats and discusses a topic. Both have an information role, but they don't replace a specialist.

Working with a blogger can bring recognition to the brand, services or products, it can provide leads to company's website, it can increase the level of trust in a brand, it can reinforce beliefs and impressions and certainly it can strategically position the brand.

On the other hand, social media is something positive, but also negative and can lead to a large dose of information, easy to use for the manipulation of opinion. Social media can very quickly punish the errors made by the user. It is a binder, but sometimes the excessive use and overuse may predispose some user depressive. From the perspective of the business it was notified a reluctance of customers regarding the content appeared in social media lately and the aggressive promotion of brands distance a portion of customers. Moreover, in social media, each consumer has a media group, so that a customer service problem can very easily become prime time news.

To sum up, social media, the present and the future of communication, can highly influence both quality of the product/service and the consumer's behavior, thoughts, personal beliefs and emotions. Using social media, consumers adopt a post-truth behavior in a post-truth world.

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