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JRMMR is a refereed journal, covering new developments in theory and practice of retail marketing strategies. It also covers marketing methods and tools enhancing retail organisational competitiveness. Retail marketing significantly contributes to the improvement in retail productivity and quality. Research is an integral component of retail management strategy and success. Developing suitable retail marketing strategies, techniques, tools and models for retail operation and research have become an essential function of marketing researchers and practitioners globally. Designing new marketing strategies, techniques and tools for research into retail management and operation is the main focus of JRMMR.

Retail organisations constantly look for innovative processes and methods to gain a competitive advantage. Unfortunately, the assets and ideas in organisations are not fully used to improve the value of retail operation. Developing a retail marketing process to take advantage of information technology and efficient customer service provision should be part of every retailer’s corporate objective. One of the main unrealised opportunities in retailing currently is fully leveraging research findings to transform retail management processes into continuing retail innovation. JRMMR will act as a platform to encourage research in retail marketing leading to retail innovation.

Domestic market saturation and retail internationalisation are forcing retail companies to rethink their operational dimensions and research activities; and in turn their overall competitiveness. In order to be successful in international markets, retailers and marketers should dedicate themselves to effective marketing innovation and research in a timely and collaborative manner. In this regard, retail companies have undergone changes in the past decades in terms of implementing new marketing research, strategies, methods and technologies. In order to provide satisfying customer service, advanced research management techniques supported by management commitment and good organisational infrastructure, will provide objective means of improving retail competitiveness. Thus marketing researchers and retail practitioners are compelled to look at various research issues from the perspective of retailers’ and customers’ needs.

The main purpose of JRMMR is to promote research and application of new retail marketing strategies, techniques and tools of retail operation and in turn retail competitiveness in modern global environment. JRMMR aims to assist professionals working in the field of retailing and marketing research, academic educators, industry consultants, and practitioners to contribute, to disseminate and to learn from each other’s work.

In terms of readership, JRMMR is a forum to help professionals, academics, researchers and practitioners, working in the field of marketing and research, to discuss the important ideas, concepts and disseminate information and to learn from each other’s work.

JRMMR publishes original papers, review papers, conceptual framework, analytical and simulation models, case studies, empirical research, technical notes, and book reviews. The views expressed in these papers are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the JRMMR.

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A preliminary investigation into the phenomenon of Social Networking Sites in Europe and its impact upon Generation Y
Alan Hirst, Marie Ashwin, David Bednall, Orhan İçöz and MaxMikael Björling

Abstract
A preliminary review of the literature, discussions with other colleagues around the world, and this pilot study amongst Generation Y students in four EU countries have enabled us to map the territory and develop a focus for the project which seeks to understand the new digital world that has been evolving in recent years, both in terms of its potential and threats to individuals and organisations. Recent calls by the EU for collaborative research projects have been focused upon “The new trends in consumers' behaviour in Europe and their social, cultural and economic underpinnings; Their social, cultural and societal implications, including the mutual impacts of consumers' behaviour on other collective issues in the short, medium and long terms; and the factors influencing consumers' choices.” The results of the pilot study saw users reporting both the positive and negative aspects of online activities using social networking sites. Of the students in the four countries which returned data for this pilot study 89% reported using Facebook, 59% MSN, and 10% MySpace. From a business perspective the McKinsey Reports of 2007 and 2008 discussed the development of online activities and the growing importance of SNSs. This study has helped to scope the domain and provide key indicators for future research.

Key Words
Social networks, social networks sites (SNS), technological disruption, communication tools, photo/video sharing, positive behaviour, negative behaviour.

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Introduction
Web 2.0 has enabled the use of new technologies such as Social Networking Sites, to organise and promote a range of causes (Sweeney 2008, Jones 2008). Well-known examples, such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace are thought to promise and threaten radical change in many areas important to the EU. Recent EU policy has recognised the importance of “... Web 2.0 applications such as blogs, podcasts, wiki, or video sharing,
[which] enable users easily to create and share text, videos or pictures, and to play a more active and collaborative role in content creation and knowledge dissemination.” (EC 2008a, p.19).

This research project investigates how these rapidly-developing, ‘disruptive technologies’ (Danneels, 2004) affect the EU, and in particular the Generation Y users. A pilot study was undertaken in the autumn of 2008 to identify key issues. Generation Y participants from the United Kingdom, France, Turkey and Sweden were involved. The team began by defining Social Networking Sites (SNSs), and then went on to consider how they are used. The following definition of a Social Networking Site has been adopted:

“... web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”.

Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and MSN are well-known SNSs in Europe and further afield. The most popular site, FaceBook was launched in February 2004, a mere five years ago. It was developed as Thefacebook.com for students on the Harvard campus by one of their own, Mark Zuckerberg. Facebook, as it is now known, is regarded as one of the most trusted websites in the world. The http://developers.facebook.com site stated in July 2009 that over 950,000 developers were using the Facebook Platform to build applications. These were targeting the over 250 million active global users in new and innovative ways.

Characterisation of Social Networking Activities
There are several similarities between the features on the Social Networking Sites. Firstly, an individual has his or her own site or home page which links to all the material available to them. A personal profile can include a photograph or image (avatar) to represent themselves and other details such as date of birth, favourite pastimes, food preferences, etc. Users can also post their photographs; give details of their recent activities and use the messaging options. Users have the right to decide who can join their network, although social pressure (a push factor) has been identified by some if they are asked to become a friend or colleague and they do not want to accept. Through user-controlled profiles, SNSs allow individuals to express their identity as they would like others to see them (Liu 2008). By having a broad and supportive network of friends, individuals may grow in self esteem. On the negative side, SNSs are frequently used for undesirable or even illegal activities that affect the self-esteem of individuals – bullying, stalking, identity theft and malicious advice (Feinberg and Robey 2008, Howie 2008, Hrabluk 2008, Harvey 2008, Ibrahim 2008). Even where the incidence of extreme behaviours like sexual solicitation may be low (Ybarra and Mitchell 2007), the damage done to particular individuals, countries and commercial interests could be devastating. It is anticipated that there is to be some natural limits on the number and size of networks that people use (Hill and Dunbar 2003).

Campaigns have been launched and supported, such as the “million people against the new interface in Facebook.” On a musical note YouTube has footage of some of the estimated 13,597 fans of the late Michael Jackson in Mexico as they danced to remember him on what would have been his 51st birthday, August 29, 2009. On the same day Le
Figaro reported that Flashmobs were organised at three Parisian sites where participants danced to 'Beat It' at 14.00 hrs.

**Literature and Theoretical Review**

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are producing new social phenomena affecting many areas of the individual's life. It is now possible to stay in touch with friends and family from the remotest areas of the globe with instantaneous written and voice communications (Tapscott, 2008). Tracking down old school friends and acquaintances from the past has become an everyday event for many. Even President Obama used Twitter during the 2008 election campaign (Dickerson 2008). SNSs have enabled people to stay in touch and have facilitated work and study workgroups. Indeed many universities have exploited this use in their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) by developing discussion forums and Second Life domains.

The speed and scope of such communication is commonplace to Generation Y (those people born between 1980 and 1995), the ‘digital natives’ (Prensky 2001) who have never known a world without computers. Their social groups are no longer bounded by geographical and personal contact zones.

Once people start using a new technology like SNSs, the range of applications is likely to grow and grow, just as it has for the mobile phone. Some of these will be highly positive for business (McKinsey 2007) and other groups, others highly negative. Europe needs to know where these rapid social developments are heading.

**Motives for joining SNS sites**

The literature suggests a variety of motives for joining a SNS, which the research took into account. Primarily those with high gregarious needs (Lucas et al. 2008) were expected to be longer term and more frequent users of these sites. Beyond this, the individual’s circumstances – change of jobs, travel and interests – are likely to affect participation. For example, when people move into a job, start a course of study or backpack around Europe, they are likely to meet people who they like. SNSs allow them to keep in touch. Where this has involved group activities, such as a study tour, prolonged contact is even more likely. Finally, those who describe themselves as socially isolated may be expected to join and participate. The act of joining is likely to be motivated either by an invitation to join (a *push* factor) or by people hearing about social networks and deliberately seeking them out (a *pull* factor).

It might be expected that the two genders have somewhat different approaches to social networking, with females placing more emphasis on maintaining social relationships and males placing more emphasis on instrumental (outcome oriented) uses such as making dates (Thelwall 2008).

**Branding**

In the area of branding, SNSs can be used to pass on accepted wisdom, both positive and destructive. SNSs have the capacity to pass on word-of-mouth information about companies, products and brands (Bonhard and Sasse 2006). ‘Word of mouth’ communication takes on a whole new meaning in this environment, for individuals and organisations alike. Two key elements exist, the instant nature of the communication, and its unpredictable reach. The use of SNSs enables a message to be shared, not only by
those who have been given authorised access, but also by their one-step-removed contacts, and then theirs, and so on. In this way the control over the communication is lost almost immediately.

In general, members of SNSs are likely to exchange information about their purchases, especially those they have enjoyed or those where they felt they had been ripped off. Particular interest groups (e.g. Mellins 2008) may also be lovers of products or brands and use SNSs to exchange word-of-mouth information with other members. Such exchanges of information are likely to have a profound effect on what brands Generation Y buys and what they aspire to buying once they have jobs and careers.

Of particular importance are brands to do with mobility, especially mobile phones like those provided by Nokia and Sony-Ericsson or communication providers like O2 or T-Mobile. Other interests are likely to include European clothing brands such as Sean John and Akademiks, or even Mecca music and entertainment venues. In terms of personal mobility, Generation Y might aspire to high status European brands like Audi, Porsche or Ferrari. For organisations moving into the virtual communication world, many as yet unknown challenges will need to be faced. Positive communication can increase the reputation and sales of European brands. Negative communication in the form of false rumours, hate groups and other misinformation can damage them greatly. Other negative social use of brands may come through the theft of intellectual property such as software, games and multimedia.

**Research Questions**

Three research questions were asked in order to (i) identify the reasons why users join SMS sites (ii) identify contemporary behaviours of generation Y users of SNSs; and (iii) record examples of positive and negative experiences

**Data Collection**

This pilot study was conducted in universities in the European Union countries of UK, France and Sweden, and in one associated country, Turkey. A convenience sample of Generation Y students was used, as they are known to use social networks. These students where chosen because they are Internet literate and are likely to represent the target population. The aim of this preliminary investigation was to seek clarification from active users about their behaviours, as well as asking them to identify both their positive views and their concerns about such activities. To this end the study used largely open-ended questions to map the territory and explore topics of interest. A semi-structured questionnaire was used, enabling responses which covered as wide range of experiences as possible, in a manageable format.

**Sample**

This convenience sample of individuals was drawn from Generation Y students studying on programmes within the four institutions: all had visited one or more of the social network sites within the past six months. They were asked to complete a questionnaire that covered a range of areas.

The testing and retesting of the items amongst small groups of individuals, together with several drafts of open-ended questions ensured the focus of this preliminary investigation was to determine the respondents’ usages of social network sites. The
survey instrument, a semi-structured questionnaire, was designed to measure attitudes towards using social network sites. It asked respondents what prompted them to join such sites, as well as soliciting their comments about their social network experiences. Specific questions were asked about where they access social networks sites and what their main activities were. They were also asked for their input on whether they make recommendations to friends, via these sites, for specific purposes; with the open-ended questions they were able to provide details about these actions. A section dedicated to experiences whilst using SNSs enabled them to provide data on whether they or any of their friends had had a negative experience whilst using such sites. Data was also collected to determine the demographic profile of the convenience sample.

**Data Analysis**

The data was reduced using a six-stage process, from the transcription, through reduction to the interpretation of the qualitative data obtained. The framework used (Ashwin and Hirst, 2007) outlines the stages used to manage qualitative data from recording to detextualisation. Stage one of the framework involves the development of an appropriate instrument for the data collection linked to the research objectives and drawing upon the literature to identify appropriate variables. The second stage takes this further using the variables to develop a coding frame. The third stage is transcription of the data onto a template which enables the recording and location of relevant data during the process of analysis. The fourth stage covers the first level of data reduction, to identify key elements which are then used to develop a coding framework to manage the data. Stage five is the interpretation and synthesis of the data using relevant themes drawn from the literature.

**Results**

Stage six takes the results from the previous stage and, through comparison with other respondents, develops more detail of the issues including, for example, the identification of similarities and differences between them. Of the 800 students surveyed, 200 in each institution, 315 responses were received from four countries. This represents a response rate of 31.50 percent. Of these returns 76 were unusable, due to omissions or errors in completion, resulting in 239 useable questionnaires for data analysis (23.90 percent). We received 48 usable responses from France of which 39 had a positive view on the use of social network sites and nine reported a negative view of the SNS. 19 agreed to be contacted in the future for follow up research. UK produced 43 usable responses of which 26 where positive and 17 negative attitude towards SNS. 24 of the UK respondents agreed to be contacted for future research. Sweden produced 114 responses of which 76 were usable and one third (38) had to be discarded. Of the usable responses 62 reported a positive attitude towards SNS and 19 a negative attitude.

Out of these 34 respondents agreed to be contacted in the future. Turkey returned 72 completed questionnaires. Of these 63 said they were satisfied with their SNS and nine reported that they were not satisfied with 28 agreeing to be contacted again for future research. With 190 positive responses from the four countries it was interesting to find that of the 54 negative responses, some had come from some respondents who also made positive comments.
Table 1: Reasons for using SNSs and activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Useable response</th>
<th>Positive attitude (%)</th>
<th>Negative attitude (%)</th>
<th>Contact agreed (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweeden</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was clear from responses that social activities were high on the agenda for many of the SNS users. The sites were used to keep in touch, talk to friends and family although several respondents revealed they did nothing in particular or gossiped. Reasons for joining varied, revealing either ‘push’ or ‘pull’ factors were high on the agenda. Some users had responded to invitations from friends, either willingly or because they did not want to offend by saying no. Several gave examples of the pressure felt, stating that they did not want to feel ‘left out.’ They identified the need to belong to the same network that was used by ‘all their friends.’ Interestingly curiosity and the desire to find out what it was all about was another reason given. One French student felt that “everyone else has a site.”

Many identified SNSs as the way to maintain friendships, as it was “easy to keep in contact with friends whilst abroad”, or “socialise with friends all over the world.” This was apparently a strong motivator for students of different nationalities who had been travelling or studying abroad. One dedicated fan took great pride in the fact that he could find out “information about the soccer team I support” and keep up to date on the latest transfer details, etc. The sense of a site facilitating enjoyable activities was identified as a strong motivator for many respondents. They saw the networks they were building as something very personal. The benefits of having one central place to go to interact with people were also mentioned.

**Positive feedback**

Sites were also used to plan many activities, especially special events and parties. Facebook even provides tools to plan them. The focus on their social lives was high, examples included arranging birthday parties, booking concert tickets and even promoting a music event. “I support some artists and keep my friends informed of events and arrange invitations for them.” Music and films were shared, as well as opinions about the latest releases. Other discussed products “we share and discuss computer problems”, “I use Fashionspot.com to discuss clothes and fashion trends.”

Other uses of the networks included “to look for competitions,” “taking part in online quizzes,” “showing my pictures,” “to send links of video clips.” Others used the planning facilities on a daily basis for more general things such as scheduling meetings and study sessions. Many said they “discussed projects” and find “the latest documents” during online interactions. Travel figured highly in the results, whether for “organising travel arrangements,” or to “organise and buy flight tickets” for holidays or simply weekends. “It’s easier than email to make an appointment with a friend”, “it's more interactive than email.”
Negative feedback
Negative experiences covered a range of things, from personal attacks to the impact upon academic or professional life and even career progression. Significantly, 30 per cent (30%) of respondents, both male and female, reported negative experiences of one form or another. These were either personal stories of events whilst using a social network site, or stories from friends and family. Numerous examples of issues concerning security and privacy were given to the research team. Some respondents were concerned about the security of the contents of their computers, both on and off-line. Others related stories about security of a more personal nature. One example given by a student in France was that they had their “password hacked and malicious virus put on my PC.” Another respondent reported that their password had been hacked into on the university server.

Not knowing the person on the other end of the connection was worrying to some respondents. From the student who reported “meeting annoying people” to the more serious and worrying “meeting people with wrong (hidden) identity”, “people pretending to be someone else to obtain information” there were a significant number of reports of such events. Examples of “people you do not know send you message that you do not want”, “people contacting you without your permission” were evidence of this. In one case a student found that an “ex partner was on the same network” and found out details of their current life.

Other privacy issues included unwanted “ugly photos” being circulated, “the wrong photos uploaded,” “images I did not want to be published were published.” Respondents revealed the difficulties they encountered when trying to get the SNSs concerned to remove the offending elements from the site. Being harassed by “unwanted friends” and receiving “unwanted contact” from certain individuals linked security with the issue of privacy. Three students reported having been stalked on the Internet, some by friends with whom relations has ceased prior to this new Internet connection.

Discussion
Generation Y’s use of social network sites was developed on the basis of the findings of this research. It was found that respondents of both genders are members of more than one social network. Facebook was the first site mentioned by the majority of respondents, followed by MySpace and then MSN. A significant number of respondents from all countries reported that they had migrated en-masse from Microsoft Social Network (MSN) to FaceBook and MySpace in 2007. Neither the differing national cultures, nor the prevalent technologies in their countries were found to be barriers to this change in behaviour.

The ability to connect with each other in the same or different countries (Baker, 2008; CouchSurfing, 2008) was identified in this study also as an important benefit of the SNSs. Whilst 14 percent of respondents said they participated because of ‘peer pressure’, 28 percent reported that they had joined a SNS in order to contact friends, whilst almost one third (31%) joined simply to ‘keep in touch.’ Further analysis revealed differences in behaviour linked to age and gender. Younger users tended to use the sites for social activities, whilst older users also used the sites for gathering information. Male respondents revealed more instrumental orientations, whilst female respondents emphasised the use of SNSs for developing and maintaining social relationships.
Implications for SNSs
The understanding of electronic word-of-mouth is still evolving, as in the identification of key differences from ordinary word-of-mouth, given its written, visual and published form. According to Bonhard and Sasse (2006) SNSs have the capacity to pass on word-of-mouth information about companies, products, and brands. This has been illustrated in this study with evidence of discussions of films and music, and respondents actively passing on their views to contacts. This visibility of opinion may encourage in-group and other exaggerated behaviours. Some understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying participation in social networks is therefore necessary. It has been identified in this preliminary study that gender differences exist, both in the behavioural and affective domain. Issues of trust and commitment in and with others are also likely to be important.

The ability to distinguish the credibility of user-created content is considered to be of great importance by the researchers, whether relating to individuals or brands. The posting of negative comments on SNSs can have a detrimental effect on personal relationships and individual well-being. Organisations too can have difficulties when their thoroughly prepared and professionally reviewed content is not the only information available to the SNS user. In these contexts word-of-mouth has wide-ranging implications.

Limitations
It is acknowledged that the results of this study are subject to individual differences as a self-completion data collection method was used. The patterns observed may only be limited to the study sample (Generation Y who frequently uses social network sites). While the selection of student members of Generation Y from our home institutions was convenient, the approach may limit the generalisability of the research findings. In addition to these limitations, this pilot study has also been subject to other common limitations including an incomplete sampling frame and non-response error.

Future Research Directions
A larger-scale research project is being designed to extend and expand the scope of this preliminary study. Social networking site attributes and the relationships between social network convenience values (process) need to be explored further. This pilot study set out to scope the domain by examining the attitudes of Generation Y towards SNSs. One possibility is to explore how attitudes to social networking site attributes may differ, or not, when SNSs are used for different purposes. With privacy and security high on the agenda for the respondents of this study, future research will meet the need to better understand the nature of the social networking process and experience.

First reported in 2007, and repeated in 2008, McKinsey confirmed that social networking sites are now an integral element of business activity. Further research in this area will help develop an understanding of electronic word-of-mouth and its implications for business, in terms of the adoption of social networking as a communication tool. It will also identify the impact upon brands of the communications of individuals within their social networks, that the organisations are unable to control. Tools need to be developed to measure the quality of the interactions on SNSs, in order to investigate
Generation Y's experiences, and the various factors that determine their future use of these sites. Based on the qualitative findings of this study, a multi-dimensional scale could be developed to include salient factors such as value, service, security, fun, convenience, and others. Future research may examine alternative strategies to improve experiences on social networking sites.

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