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Intercultural Peers' Effect on Social Identity of Social Media Users: A Critical Study of Consumer Socialization Theory*

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Abstract: This research investigates the effect of social media peers on the social identity of consumers. The critical perspective of this research is based on the consumer socialization theory research framework. This framework consists of three levels—the global, national and local peers—and their impact on two constructs, namely the global and local social identity. Adopting the ethnographic approach and a complementary phase of interviews, this study explores the influence of social media peers on consumers' identity and consumption patterns. The findings show that the influence of “consumer socialization of peers” on the social identity of consumers is overestimated. Rather, the main influence comes from peers in the real world. The influence of this real world peer on consumption patterns is much higher than social media peers. Though social media is used for communication of real world peers aimed at consumption.

Key words: social identity; critical studies; ethnography; social media; ethnomethodology; consumer socialization theory; online consumer behavior

JEL codes: M300, Z130

1. Introduction

The dramatic development of social media has shaped the interaction of people through different platforms and it is expected that social media will continue to revolutionize personal and organizational communications as well as interactions worldwide (Ngai et al., 2015, p. 770). Martínez-López et al. (2011) suggested that the increasing use of the Internet globally could approximate and generate shared values and beliefs between consumers of different cultures and places of origin. According to Levitt (1983), technology increases the inevitable homogenization of consumer needs and wants of different countries and regions. De Valck et al. (2009) argued that people prefer to obtain different types of information (i.e., informational, relational, and recreational) from various social networks. Hence social ties have a significant impact on consumer decision processes.

Peers have a critical effect on consumer behavior (Okazaki, 2009; Wang et al., 2012). Wang et al. (2012) conducted a research on the impact of social media communication on the purchase decision model. They emphasized on the importance of consumer socialization in social media. Their results and its implications, created an incentive for this research. The aim is to understand the level of generalization of their results and also

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to have a critical perspective on consumer socialization.

2. Theoretical Framework

Consumer Socialization: Scot Ward (1974) suggests that when consumers communicate, they have an effect on each-other's cognition, affection and behavioral attitudes. He calls this process as consumer socializations, because consumers receive consumption related skills and behavioral attitudes. His theory is based on two sets of theoretical perspectives, namely, Social learning and cognitive development. Peer communication is an important influencing agency in social learning process of consumer socialization (Wang et al., 2012). De Gregorio and Sung (2010) places emphasis on peer communication as the strongest predictor by showing that attitude and behavior of adult consumers is influenced by their circle of friends and acquaintances.

Moschis and Churchill (1978) further explained three processes of social learning. These processes include modeling an agent's desirable behavior; creating a reinforcement process of that behavior or attitude via rewards or punishment; and social interaction in the social context. Lueg and Finney (2007) are also contributors to this concept. They explain that the learning process involves the simultaneous occurrence of the three processes. Wang et al. (2012) also confirms that social media peers do have the potential for motivating the focal consumer towards a certain consumption behavior.

Consumer Identity: In a consumer culture people no longer consume for merely functional satisfaction, but consumption becomes meaning-based, and brands are often used as symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of identity (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). White and Dahl (2007, p. 526) based on Social identity theory and social categorization theory propose that identity comprises both personal identity (i.e., derived from an individual sense of self) and social identity (i.e., related to groups to which one belongs or is affiliated). Again social learning theory helps, as it emphasizes on important socialization agents of consumers' social identity. These agents are external and environmental sources of learning where peers transmit norms, attitudes, behaviors and motivation (Köhler et al., 2011). People who communicate in social media are important agents in consumer socialization (Zhang & Daugherty, 2009) and do have an influence on the consumption decisions (Lueg et al., 2006). Taylor et al. (2011) also confirms great dependency of consumers' attitudes towards advertising to socialization factors such as peers. Lueg and Finney (2007) further explained that peers can convert social media users into internet shoppers.

Global and Local Social identity: Alden et al. (2006) propose the word of "global cultural ethnogenesis" for a phenomenon whose identities of collectives exposed to multicultural frameworks evolve into a multicultural entity, not associated with any particular country, thereby transcending individuals' national cultures. Westjohn et al. (2009) explains that cosmopolitanism is a person's openness to other cultures and the degree of psychological and emotional investment in the global community. They explained cosmopolitanism and global-local identification as global self-identity. And hence propose that global self-identity impacts on technology usage. Martínez-López et al. (2011) argue that internet users' self-identity should be less characterized by local and ethnocentric feelings, particularly related to national-oriented individuals.

Periodic interactions among individuals of different cultures will bring an approximation of those cultures via the mutual transfer of values while each one keeps certain characteristic cultural traits is likely (Martínez-López et al., 2011). Pieterse (2007) suggested that global multiculturalism is one of the main characteristics of the globalization phenomenon today and Epstein (2009) calls it as the emergence of a new trans-national global culture.

Traditionally, consumers were groups of individuals with a similar set of values and consumption preferences. The global consumer culture, on the other hand, is seen as hybridized and more difficult to refer to a particular dominating national culture as multicultural and polysemic (Sandikci et al., 2006). National cultures explain diversity in general behaviors, and it is a subset — in consumption patterns — among individuals from different countries (Hermans & Kempen, 1998). Ourahmoune (2016) points to the dynamics of change through time and shows the identity changes during the time; and it can happen in the interaction of global and local cultures.

Considering above mentioned literature and in regard with Wang et al. (2012) findings, the research question is “how is global and local identities of consumers influenced by social media peers from different cultures?”. Figure 1 depicts the consumer socialization framework. The global, national and local peers are expected to influence the global, national and local identity of consumers.

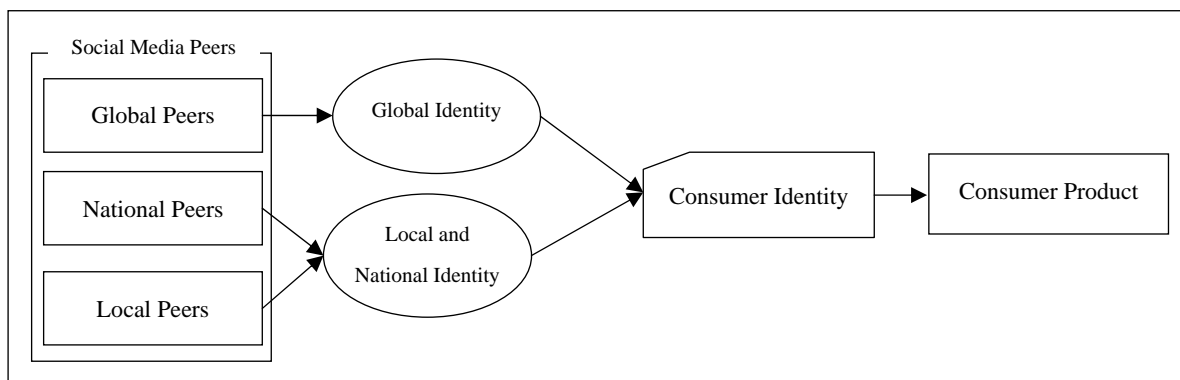


Figure 1 Research Framework

3. Methodology

As this research aims towards the in-depth study of the behaviors, interactions and attitudes of social media users, thus an ethnographic approach was adopted. Ethnography comes from cultures (ethno) and description (graphy) and is the study of social interactions, behaviors, and perceptions that occur within groups, teams, organizations, and communities (Reeves et al., 2008, p. 512). The researcher is at a research site for a long time, and sees what people are doing as well as what they say they are doing, an ethnographer obtains a deep understanding of the people and the broader context within which they work. Ethnographic research is thus well suited to providing information systems researchers with rich insights into the human, social, and organizational aspects of information systems (Myers, 1999). Based on Hammersley and Atkinson, the ethnographic researcher participates, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned (1995, p. 2). There is not one single ethnographic method, rather it comprises a number of different data collection methods. This includes unstructured interviews, observations and other documentary methods. The ethnographic tradition tends to reject formal data collection protocols, preferring to adopt whatever is considered suitable and useful (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p.70).

Postill and Pink (2012) argue that doing research about social media entails going beyond interviewing activists. Considering their suggestion, the approach of this research has been ethno-methodological. In this approach, researchers go thoroughly into environment and observe naturally occurring activities, such as human

actions as it arises and as it is done by whoever is party to it (Crabtree et al., 2012, p. 23). Current research follows the holistic school of ethnography. Holistic schools say that empathy with social groups observed is needed and an anthropologist should go native and live like the subject of study (Myers, 1999, p. 8). The researchers go native with subjects of study in social media. Distinctive ethnography and powerful theory are complementary not antithetical (Wilson & Chaddha, 2009) and "the best strategy to strengthen the former is to bolster the latter" (Wacquant, 2002, p. 1524). As this research is a critical study of consumer socialization theory, ethnography was adopted as the research method.

The researcher used Facebook and also acted as a user in order to approach the sample and to study them as another user. Steps: (1) To introduce the sample to the users, the user joined the groups and participated in discussions under controversial posts. (2) The researcher introduced himself to users with high degree of participation on the topic. The researcher further connected to them by sending a friend request or following their activities. (3) The researcher studied other group members, the posts they have shared, the post they have authored and the people they are following. (4) The researcher developed a map of their connections, friends, groups and activities. (5) After interpreting the sample, he prepared a set of questions for an interview to complement his observations. (6) The data was interpreted, summarized, classified and coded.

In selecting the sample, a search was made for controversial groups. One technological group about smartphones was selected. Users with different perspectives on operating systems such as Android, IOS and windowsphone had a debate and also received advices on how and what to purchase. The study was conducted on 13 users of this group. For the interview stage, the researcher sent a request for all of them craving their indulgence for a 5 minute instant messaging with the researcher. 11 of them did accept the invitation. The interview was conducted using instant messenger. The answers were in text format, they processed and coded.

4. Results and Contribution

Critical thinking entails four intersecting processes of (1) identifying the assumptions that frame our thinking and determine our actions, (2) checking out the degree to which these assumptions are accurate and valid, (3) looking at our ideas and decisions (intellectual, organizational, and personal) from several different perspectives, and (4) on the basis of all this, taking informed actions (Brookfield, 2015). For this study, researcher followed this pathway and after identifying the assumptions of consumer socialization, he checked their accuracy and validity from different perspectives generated from his observation and also from the codes generated via interviews.

It has found that consumer socialization theory might be based on an overestimation of social media peers' influence on consumers' identity and decisions. The main influence comes from the real world peers. They influence consumption patterns much higher than social media peers; though social media may be used for communication of real world peers toward consumption. International peer do influence on the social identity of users, but the identity is constructed from various factors, where family, friends and the environment have a much stronger effect. In both levels of identity, global identity is influenced mostly by social media peers. Though not merely by global and international peers, but by local and national peers. This finding is supported by some literature too. According to Lampe et al. (2006), most people use social media to interact with individuals they already know, therefore limiting their engagements with strangers. Okazaki (2009) argued that Socialization through virtual communities occurs among both people who know one another and strangers.

Local peers show a high level of interactivity. From observation, most comments, likes and mutual groups

exist with local peers. Membership in groups with local subjects have been identified in all of studied sample. The contents of such groups are not merely local content, but also global contents. In the complementary interviews, users confirmed that they were informed of most global contents from local groups and it is not exclusive of intercultural encounters. An important code that repeated frequently, is that global content mostly distributed by local and national peers. It means; despite having international friends, the global identity is influenced by global contents that are disseminated by local peers. One of the reasons is that international peers disseminate their own local contents, or with their own language, or contents related to their interests which may not be relevant and interesting for given user.

Intercultural peer showed weak influence. Even in technology debates, such as those concerning smartphones, which is global in essence, topics such as signaling in local and national areas, services, languages and local apps were the main topics. For this reason, even in such global topics, such as smart phones in an international group, still local and national peers influence user's mindset more than global peers.

The level of interaction and frequency of information exchange was an important variable in the level of influence. Social media has provided the possibility for an easy and instant contact with intercultural users, but in continue, volume of information exchange and also the level of interest to the subjects and topics is not as much as local and national connections.

Social media users are influenced by certain limitations in their environment. Infrastructure is one of significant influencing factors on consumer socialization. For example, when it comes to AT&T and operator locked Sim-Cards, the Iranian consumers feel isolated in the conversation. And as they lack access to the operator coupled with their need to use various types of Sim-Cards in their handheld devices, they ignore many of the technical issues. In some cases, they leave the global group to join the local one which provides more applicable information.

Also, research has shown that most of international social media peers interact about social and cultural issues, rather than technology. Using the Diffusion of Innovation terms, in a large market such as smartphone market, few "consumers" are lead users who seek for innovations in global groups. Many others are adopters and they act on consuming behaviors following some of their cultural and social peers. This paper proposes that socialization theory should be considered in regard with regards to specific consumers in the specific markets. Thus applicability of the theory in technology markets with high volume of consumers, should be reconsidered. The theory says global peers can affect social media user to act consuming behaviors by modeling and reinforcing them. What the findings show is that the global peers have an effect on the global social identity of social media users. And interestingly, global content via local and national peers also effects of global social identity of social media users. But the effect of global identity on consuming behavior is not as much as these behaviors are influenced by local identity.

There are also some other findings that are out of scope of this research, but can be used for future researches. Some of those findings are that (1) the dynamism of peers and their influence on social-self of the user. New friends and peers emerge and replace or blur previous ones and social identity is changing under this influence. (2) The social identity of consumers under the influence of globalization is becoming more global and it creates a distance from local identity. However, again, in social media the specific local groups which are based on ethnic or geographical location, conserve their local identity too.

In conclusion, this research contributes with the critical perspective on the application of consumer socialization theory in social media. The findings have opened the door to conduct a more thorough research in

order to understand how globalization affects consumption patterns of social media user. The findings also lead one to think further on how globalization affects the convergence of local cultures in international encounters.

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