

## ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING ON MARKETING AND RETAILING

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### ABSTRACT

The use of online social networks by college students has grown exponentially since the turn of the century. Students routinely post personal information, photographs and video footage on their personal pages of MySpace, Facebook and other sites as part of the social network experience. Marketers and retailers use this information to target potential consumers. However, do college students post false or inaccurate information about themselves on these websites? Are advertisers, marketers and retailers missing the target by relying on false information? This study investigates the attitudes and perceptions of college students regarding the truthfulness of information posted on online social networks, draws conclusions about those attitudes as they relate to marketing educators and makes recommendations regarding the future impact on the marketing and retail industry.

Our research found that 89.9% of respondents answered yes to the question "Do you believe that people falsify their persona on social networks?" When asked if the respondent knew of another person who has change their persona on a social network website, 55.3% responded "yes", 28.6% answered "no" and 16.1% indicated that they were not sure. Do marketers and retailers use online social networks to market products? It appears that students think they do, with 95.4% of respondents answering "yes" when asked if they believed that retailers use websites like Facebook and MySpace to advertise to customers. Is the current type of marketing effective, according to the student respondents? Apparently not, with 94.1% of respondents indicating that there is too much advertising on social network sites and 81% of all participants contending that web advertising does not get their attention and is unappealing. Are marketers and retailers missing the target when they incorporate user provided information in decisions regarding marketing and retailing? This study suggests it does.

Marketers, retailers and marketing educators should be concerned about creating advertising and marketing campaigns based on online social network user-provided data. The literature indicates that participants in online social networks are concerned about providing valid information based on privacy considerations and/or because they want to be free to change identities at will. This practice can have a negative impact on the effectiveness of marketing strategies.

Marketers and retailers would be wise to consider the type of persona conveyed by an online social network user, especially when targeting potential consumers based on social network profiles.

However, this study, with its faculty viewpoint, brings findings such as *trust* and *mutual disclosure* into a business education context. Faculty most frequently listed Approach and Personality factors. While Approach can be taught, personality may be more difficult to change. Additionally, given the low frequency for mentions of *homophily* and its importance as identified in previous research, it would be prudent for faculty to focus on this.

Many of the perceived outcomes identified in this research mirror those found in past research. New outcomes were also uncovered and include *fun*, *increased faculty attention*, and *lasting relationships*.

Future research can focus on developing a model and testing whether the perceived antecedents and outcomes are valid across a larger and more diverse sample. If the perceived antecedents and outcomes are supported, the benefits create a strong case for faculty to increase their rapport with students.

**References Available on Request**