Why we ignore social networking advertising

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to focus on college students, users of online social networks, as main sources of information that helps advertisers understand the ways in which advertisements are perceived online.

Design/methodology/approach – Results were reached through qualitative research. Personal in-depth interviews, utilizing Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), were conducted among 20 college students. Interviews consisted of using screenshots of advertisements in online social networks to uncover respondents' reactions.

Findings – It was generally concluded that the users of online social networks do not dislike advertisements, but they simply do not notice them. Other content found in online social networks mitigates the attractiveness of the advertisements. Hence, the respondents reported that the brand recognition in online social networks was found to be much lower than the one created through other media channels.

Practical implications – Advertising in online social networks is a major unexplored advertising area. Interactivity on the internet shifts the ways in which users perceive advertising, and whether they perceive it at all. The paper discusses content that catches users' attention and its relation to advertisements.

Originality/value – Through literature review it has been revealed that no similar research exists. The findings of this research will aid advertisers in recognizing the possibility of advertising to the online social networks' population, taking into consideration different needs, and preferences of such users.

Keywords United States of America, Internet, Advertising, Social networks, Consumer behaviour, Students, Online social networks, Online advertising, Online community, Advertising research, Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Advertising on social networks is one of the newest forms of internet advertising and it has gained attention from the popular press (Hart, 2008). The term social networks existed before the creation of the internet, but it became popularized with the development of software programs such as FaceBook, MySpace and LinkedIn (Yang *et al.*, 2006). Recently, social networks consist of individuals who are connected to each other through socially meaningful relationships, such as work, friendship or information exchange, and denote face-to-face communication (Yang *et al.*, 2006; Garton *et al.*, 1997). Lenhart and Madden (2007) describe online social networks

as locations where users can create their personal profiles and connect with other people in order to create personal networks.

Microsoft Digital Advertising Solutions (2007) states that social networks are simple, easy, and a very addictive way for people to get together to share interests on the internet. Moreover, online networks allow individuals to express their creativity and individuality while at the same time these individuals are a part of a community (Microsoft Digital Advertising Solutions, 2007; Staab, 2005). Staab (2005) continues by saying that online social networks influence users in their everyday lives. With the usage of online social networks, Reid and Gray (2007) claim that strangers can become close friends. Or, families spread out across the globe can reunite and co-workers who never met each other can work together as a team.

Heer and Boyd (2005) and Lenhart and Madden (2007) describe the emergence of online social networks as a new phenomenon that literally amassed millions of users. The first online social networks were called Usenet newsgroups and appeared in 1979 (Reid and Gray, 2007). Usenets resembled today's bulletin boards and represented the initial internet community. The late 1990s are the time when online social networks started their boom; Sixdegrees.com was the first one to appear in 1997 (Reid and Gray, 2007; Mitrano, 2006). The first online social network in the form that it has today, was Friendster.com, which appeared in 2003 (Heer and Boyd, 2005; Reid and Gray, 2007). Recently, Reid and Gray (2007) claim that social networking sites attract one out of every 20 internet visitors. According to Shields (2007), more than 70 percent of Americans today use some kind of online social networking sites, particularly in primetime hours.

Reid and Gray (2007) and Klaasen (2007a, b) identify the following online social networks as the ones that currently hold the top popular positions with the highest number of unique visitors and registered users (as of June 2007): MySpace (57 million), FaceBook (14.4 million), and Bebo (1.7 million). The large numbers of unique visitors, attract advertisers to social networking sites. Social networks are commonly free services available to the whole population or certain groups. The limitations for participation are sometimes set, however, almost never restricted by monetary sign-up fee. Online social networks are able to offer free service largely due to advertising in their virtual space. Internet advertising is growing at a rapid pace and is expected to surpass a number of $29 billion in 2010. Owing to such large growth potential, advertising imposes itself as one of the most important building blocks of any online social network. In other words, online social networks' web sites have ad space for advertisers to place their ads. When put together, growth of advertising and popularity of online social networks create great opportunities for the targeted advertising and niche marketing.

Advertising in online social networks

Gruber (2006) asks how advertising in online social networks can lead to success when advertisements need to compete against user-generated content, which is usually somewhat more appealing and attractive to the audience than advertising. On the other hand, Rosenbush (2006) says advertising rates in online social networks are relatively low hence advertisers hurried into social networks to grab their share of advertising space. Consequently, these sites are slowly changing from a push medium to a pull medium when it comes to advertising (Gruber, 2006). In other words, advertisements are pushed to users when they go to social networking sites instead of the user pulling information from websites.

In another sense, users accept advertisements on these sites as a content they need to participate into keep the service free. This is a broadcast media model where the media content is paid for by advertising revenues. According to Gruber (2006), consumers agree to be exposed to advertisements in a free service more easily than they would agree on paying for the service of social networking. The question that remains unanswered though is whether consumers notice the advertisements they agreed to put up with and whether those advertisements have any influence on the purchasing decisions and brand recognition among consumers.

Shields (2007) explains the results of a study conducted by Fox Interactive Media claiming that 70 percent of return on investment (ROI) comes after users are exposed to advertisements in online social networks. In addition, Goldsmith and Lafferty (2002) developed a cross-tabulation of advertising media with reaction to the ad. According to their research, 48.9 percent of participants liked the advertisements delivered through the internet, compared to 73 percent and 41.8 percent for TV and radio, respectively. These numbers confirm that the internet, as an advertising medium, is enjoying a rise in popularity, hence delivering greater revenues to the advertising companies. According to eMarketer.com, the online advertising spending projection for 2007 was $15.5 billion.

When it comes to understanding the relationship between the types of advertisements found in online social networks and the development of brand recognition among users, not many studies have been done. According to research conducted by Li (2007), 50 percent of adult online social network users tell their friends about products advertised. Even though that does not necessarily include the brand recognition development, it certainly points to the fact that the advertisements in online social networks are noticed and interesting enough for users to share them with friends. This piece of information takes on a much greater significance considering the finding of Forrester Research reported in Microsoft Digital Advertising Solutions (2007). According to Forrester, 80 percent of consumers trust advice from friends online specifically when advertising and brands are in question. However, it is still uncertain how to attract the leaders to look at the ad and recommend it to friends.

In order to better understand the perceptions of advertising in online social networks, one must turn to web advertising and its basic principles. Goldsmith and Lafferty (2002) contend that the attractiveness of the web site where the ad is located is an important factor. According to their study conducted with 122 college students, positive and attractive web sites evoke a positive and enhanced feeling, which leads to remembering the brand. However, the authors continue to say that although an attractive web site layout will evoke positive feelings and attitudes, the web site is not as strong an influence as television. Additionally, Gordon and De Lima-Turner (1997) did an interesting study regarding advertising on the internet. The findings of the study, which included 111 internet users, revealed that the majority of the respondents use the internet as an entertainment vehicle and consequently prefer the advertisements to be entertaining. Moreover, the study found that users prefer advertisements to be tailored specifically to them otherwise they ignore them. This study can also be related to brand recognition because users will recognize the brands targeted specifically towards them and the ads of interest to them (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2006).

Many other questions regarding advertising in online social networks remain unanswered such as how to reach the right target population and understand the consumers' opinion of advertisements placed in online social networks. The popularity

of online social networks and their recognition as a potential advertising medium have grown so fast that research studies have not been able to follow industry use. There has simply been no time for development of such studies. The lack of research studies and scholarly data on perceptions of advertising in online social networks stimulated the beginning of this study.

Theoretical perspective: attitude-toward-the-ad

It is almost impossible to talk about opinions and views of advertising in online social networks, and brand recognition without considering users attitudes. One of the most important ways of understanding users and their perceptions and acceptance of advertising messages is a study of attitude. Attitudes are most of the time consistent and stable and integrate three parts: affect or positive and negative feelings, cognitions or knowledge, and behavioral intentions (Vanden Bergh and Katz, 1999). Many researchers throughout the history of studying advertising have used attitude-toward-the-ad (A_{ad}) as a measurement of reaction to a commercial message (Chen and Wells, 1999; James and Kover, 1992; Lutz, 1985; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989; Mehta, 2000).

In simple words, A_{ad} measures positive or negative consumer feelings towards the advertising, products or services (MacKenzie *et al.*, 1986). One of the most used prepositions of the attitude-toward-the-ad theory is that A_{ad} has a strong impact on attitude-toward-the-brand (A_b) which in turn has a positive effect on purchase intention (PI) (Bruner and Kumar, 2000). In this case, A_{ad} serves as a causal mediator, which affects the outcome of other variables such as A_b or PI (MacKenzie *et al.*, 1986). However, it is not as simple to explain the consumers' positive or negative attitudes towards advertising, since those depend on many different variables such as parental and peer communication, media, gender and race.

MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) use a structural model of cognitive and affective antecedents of A_{ad} (Table I). In this model, the authors explain the complicated process of various variables that have an influence on a creation of A_{ad} among consumers. Even though many of the variables are easily affected by advertisers, such as advertiser credibility, ad claim discrepancy, and similar, others are internal variables, which advertisers have a little or no affect over. Those variables include individual differences, perceptions of advertising, and mood (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). Testing of this model can do much for understanding the way A_{ad} is created and formed.

Attitude-toward-the-ad theory is irreplaceable in understanding the variables behind consumers' opinions and choices. However, in today's digital age, there is a difference in attitude formation through TV and web. First and foremost, it is crucial to stress that advertisements on the internet are not the only focus of the consumer because pages are filled with so much content. While watching TV the consumer focuses only on the advertisement, and there is nothing on the television distracting him/her from it. On the internet, however, the advertisement is almost never the only content on the web site, therefore needs to "fight" for attention with the other content (Bruner and Kumar, 2000). Hence, more variables are included in the advertising hierarchy of effects online then in the traditional advertising environment.

Bruner II and Kumar (2000) have done a study to uncover different variables affecting attitude-toward-the-ad on the internet and have presented them in the antecedents of web advertising hierarchy-of-Effects model. The model suggests that the more the web site is liked by the consumer, the more positive attitude-toward-the-ad is.

Participant	< 50 friends on Facebook	No. of log-ins per week	No. of social networks user participates in	Hours/day spent using online social networks
1	Y	10	2	1-3
2	Y	>10	2	>4
3	Y	4-6	2	<1
4	Y	>10	1	<1
5	Y	>10	1	1-3
6	Y	>10	2	<1
7	Y	1-3	1	<1
8	Y	>10	1	<1
9	Y	>10	2	1-3
10	Y	4-6	1	<1
11	Y	>10	2	<1
12	Y	1-3	3	<1
13	Y	>10	1	<1
14	Y	4-6	1	<1
15	Y	>10	1	<1
16	Y	>10	1	<1
17	Y	>10	2	<1
18	Y	>10	1	<1
19	Y	>10	1	<1
20	Y	>10	1	1-3

Table I.
Participant
characteristics

Furthermore, the more complex the web site is, the more it is considered interesting by the consumer. This is in conflict with the previous study, which resulted in a conclusion that more complex web sites have a negative effect on the A_{ad}. This new model actually focuses on attitude-toward-the-web site (A_{ws}), but with the findings it presents it can easily be extended to A_{ad}.

Attitude-toward-the-ad theory is very important for this study because it helps explain how the other content on online social networks' web sites influence the ad message among consumers. It is yet to be decided whether the additional content hinders or enhances the advertising message on a web site.

Research questions and hypothesis

The problem being investigated in this study is comprised in the relationship between the advertising in online social networks and users' perceptions of the same. The study is trying to investigate the effectiveness of advertisements found in online social networks on the brand recognition development among online social networks' users. The research looks into the types of advertising that can be used to capture users' attention without being intrusive or disruptive. Furthermore, the most appealing characteristics of the advertisements as reported by users are being researched. Several major variables have been identified in the study through four research questions and one hypothesis:

RQ1. In what ways does the content found in online social network sites inhibit online social network users from noticing advertisements on the same sites as reported by college students?

RQ2. Which characteristics of advertisements in online social networks are stated as appealing by college students?

H1. Social network users report in a self-disclosing survey that the exposure to advertisements in online social networks helps in building their brand recognition.

RQ3. What is the relationship between characteristics of advertisements in online social networks and college students' positive or negative opinions of those advertisements?

RQ4. What is the relationship between personalized advertisements in online social networks and online social networks users' willingness to be exposed to advertisements in online social networks?

The above-mentioned research questions and a hypothesis contain several important variables which focus on the main problem of the study. The *RQ1* seeks to examine the relationship between the content found in the online social networks and the popularity of advertisements. The assumption is that the content found in online social web sites has an effect on the appeal of the advertisements. It is yet to be discovered whether that effect is positive or negative, and that is exactly what these question seeks to examine.

The *RQ2* refers to the characteristics of advertisements that are found to be appealing. An answer to this research question will increase the possibility of improving the advertisements with the purpose of making them more attractive and noticeable. The scholarly reason behind this question lies in the fact that there is no sufficient research done in the area of advertising in online social networks and this question will open up the possibilities for future studies.

The research hypothesis considers the relationship between the advertisements in online social networks and their effect on the growth of users' brand recognition. Most of the time advertisers are trying to build the brand recognition among their consumers since brand recognition has a greater likelihood of leading to a purchase decision. Moreover, brand recognition helps in keeping the consumers from buying different products. The hypothesis seeks to find out whether advertisements in online social networks have any affect whatsoever on brand recognition awareness and whether these advertisements can be considered useful for creation of brand recognition awareness.

The subsequent research question investigates the relationship between the characteristics of advertisements and their effect on positive or negative opinions of consumers on the advertisements. Advertisements online come in different forms and types and some kinds of advertisements might be more successful in attracting the users and developing positive opinions of the products and services. Other kinds might do just the opposite. It is a purpose of this question to find out which types of advertisements fall under the first category, and which under the second.

Method: Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique (ZMET)

Attitude-toward-the-ad theory inspired the creation of questions for the method of the research. Personal in-depth interviews were chosen as a method of research because they offer the researcher the greatest freedom in improvising and elaborating the respondents' answers using sub-questions. Furthermore, the second part of the interviews was based on the ZMET. ZMET is based on the premise that the big part of human communication is nonverbal and it is visual. According to research done in this particular field, the sensory images are an important media of communication ("What is ZMET?", n.d.):

The ZMET interview employs several steps to surface and further define consumers' key thoughts and feelings. Each step in ZMET provides a different opportunity for identifying and understanding metaphors, thereby gaining a deep understanding about consumers. The use of multiple steps also increases the likelihood of uncovering an important idea that might be missed by more narrowly focused techniques. At the same time, each step provides validation of ideas from other steps, a process known as convergent validity. That is, redundancy adds confidence about the validity and importance of the ideas being expressed ("What is ZMET?", n.d.).

In addition, the researcher was able to focus on the nonverbal communication of each participant, making judgments on the emotions shown images evoked in participants by looking at their face and body movements. Such important part of communication lacks in non-face-to-face interviews, making it more difficult to get a comprehensive picture of participants' impressions. In other words, using the ZMET method in personal in-depth interviews, researcher was able to uncover the participants' spoken and allusive thoughts and feelings alike, making this technique reliable especially when it comes to interpretation because it leave little room for researcher's subjectivity or false interpretation. Owing to the above-mentioned reasons, the researcher decided on personal in-depth interviews as a proper method of surveying people.

Online social networks offer a vast number of services for many different kinds of people and almost all of the online social networks allow advertisers to use the space on their web sites. Hence, it would be very hard and inefficient to research every single social network available online; and reach many different users which would be willing to participate in personal in-depth interviews. Owing to the named reasons, the researcher decided to focus solely on Rochester Institute of Technology's (RIT) students as the researcher attends graduate school at the same institute. For further selection of students who will be asked to participate in personal in-depth interviews, researcher decided to focus only on RIT's students who use FaceBook. FaceBook has been chosen among other online social networks due to its reputation as a college student community and due to a fact that 19,159 students (16 October 2007) are currently members of RIT's FaceBook. Furthermore, FaceBook has become an advertising medium.

About 57 invitations were sent out to RIT FaceBook community in a randomly fashion, which generated a response rate of 28.07 percent. The total number of research population was 20. The random sampling of the RIT FaceBook community was done using random number generator software. There were specific characteristics an RIT FaceBook user had to meet in order to be counted into the sample population. The user had to have more than 50 friends at RIT FaceBook community and was supposed to log in the RIT FaceBook account at least once a week. The preliminary elimination was done when the invitation was accepted. The researcher responded with a thank you letter asking whether the participant logged in the RIT FaceBook account at least once a week (Table I).

Results from this sample cannot be generalized and applied to the general public or any other specific population. However, the results showing substantial negative opinions on advertising or very low brand recognition despite the advertising effort in online social networks would be very important. These results would enable advertisers to understand their potential mistakes and develop a different method for advertising in online social networks. They would furthermore realize the variables that enhance the brand recognition among consumers which could possibly lead to purchase.

Personal in-depth interviews

Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, and had 14 preset questions. Most of the interviews consisted of several probation questions after participants' responses. The researcher recorded the interview with the permission of the participant and each participant was asked to sign a consent form. The interviews guaranteed confidentiality for each participant where the answers or names of participants would not be displayed or associated in any possible way. The recordings of the interviews were destroyed after the interviews have been transcribed. The participants were informed that the results of the study would be published in the statistical form where no participant would be identified or mentioned separately. Each interview began with a small introduction in the research study topic – advertising and online social networks. Afterwards, researcher acquainted participants with the flow of the interview and question types. The first part of the interview was general questions about participants' opinions and views of advertising in general and advertising in online social networks. The majority of the questions required only yes or no answers, or choosing among multiple choice answers. The second part of the interview required participants to look at the variety of online social networks' screenshots which displayed advertisements. Using the ZMET, the researcher probed into participants' opinions and feelings in regards to different characteristics of advertisements.

The screenshots used for the last question referring to ZMET included the following online social networks: MySpace, Bebo, Orkut, FaceBook, Xanga, Facebox, Cyworld, LinkedIn, Friendster, and Hi5. These particular online social networks were decided on based on the number of users they each have. According to their web sites, these were the online social networks with the largest number of users in May 2007. Each screenshot contained one advertisement, except for Hi5 which contained two advertisements. It was up to the users to decide which advertisement they would like to talk about. Each user did not review every screenshot; instead, the screenshots were divided into three sets, and then randomly assigned to the participants using a random number generator software (Table II). This was done due to the number of screenshots and the limit of the interviews to one hour. The researcher estimated, according to pretest, that one participant can only review three to four screenshots in detail in one hour. The screenshots were divided into sets randomly using a random number

Screenshots	Participant
Set 1	
Bebo	1; 2; 5; 11; 14; 16; 17; 20
Friendster	
Facebox	
Hi5	
Set 2	
Cyworld	4; 6; 7; 9; 12; 18
Facebook	
LinkedIn	
Set3	
Myspace	3; 8; 10; 13; 15; 19
Orkut	
Xanga	

Table II.
Screenshot sets assigned to participants

generator software and the sets were following: Set 1 – Bebo, Facebox, Friendster, Hi5; Set 2 – Cyworld, FaceBook, LinkedIn; Set 3 – MySpace, Orkut, Xanga.

The research variables are the ones pertaining to the initially established research questions. The variables studied in this research are: the content found in online social networks, amount of advertisements noticed by users, characteristics of the advertisements, amount of exposure to advertisements, brand recognition development, positive or negative opinions on advertising, amount of personalized advertisements, and willingness of users to be exposed to advertisements. All of these variables were covered by the research questions and hypothesis.

Variables being measured by research can be found in the following questions posed to study participants. "Do advertisements in online social networks catch your attention among other content?" relates to the variables of content found in online social networks and amount of noticed advertisements. The results obtained helped in answering the *RQ1*, stated earlier, and will pose a base for further questions on brand recognition. The following questions relate to the hypothesis stated in the introduction: "Have you ever visited a product web site after being exposed to an ad in an online social networking site?"; "Have you ever purchased a product advertised in an online social networking site?"; "Can you list advertisements you remember seeing on FaceBook?"; "In your daily activities do you recognize brands as the ones that are advertised in online social networks?"; and "Is it easier for you to remember brands advertised through other media channels such as TV and radio as opposed to the ones advertised in online social networks?"

These questions refer to several different variables studied, but they are all concerned with the brand recognition and brand development among consumers. By asking these questions, the researcher gained a priceless insight in the way consumers recognize the brands; remember them after leaving the web site; and decide on a purchase. These results combined with the results gained from questions referring to characteristics of advertisements that consumers consider positive, helped the researcher make a judgment on the reasons for success or failure of advertising techniques in online social networks.

Parts of the results have been analyzed using the simple statistical analysis; however, the rest of the results had to be content analyzed. For that purpose, a content codebook was created. The coding of the data was done by the researcher due to the fact that the amount of data was not excessive. In order to determine the validity of the interview guide questions, a pretest was done on two RIT FaceBook users. After the interview has been done, respondents were asked to provide the researcher with the comments on the instrument. In general, respondents found questions to be fairly easy and understandable. The question "Do you think advertisements on FaceBook are targeted towards you?" was found to be confusing so it was rephrased into "Do you think advertisements on FaceBook are tailored to your interests?" which obtained more positive feedback. A question, which was asking about respondents' view of advertisements on television, was eliminated from the instrument because it did not measure any of the variables, stated in the research questions.

Results

Transcribed in-depth interviews resulted in a vast amount of data that needed to be analyzed. Two different techniques for analysis had to be employed due to different

question types. Questions one through 13 required simple statistical analysis resulting in pie charts depicting the data obtained. All of the respondents participated in at least one online social network as that was one of the requirements for participation in the study. When measuring the number of social networks per person the results were reached that 60 percent of the respondents participate only in one online social network; 35 percent of the respondents participate in two online social networks, while 5 percent participate in three. When asked about their frequency of online visits, 75 percent of participants replied they go online more than ten times per week. About 10 percent of them visit the internet one to three times per week, while 15 percent do that four to six times per week.

The majority, 80 percent of respondents, spend less than an hour per day using online social networks. The rest 20 percent are divided among the respondents who spend one to three hours per day using online social networks (15 percent), and the ones who spend more than four hours using online social networks (5 percent). When asked how they feel about advertising in general, the participants provided 28 answers cumulative which were then grouped into four categories. Out of 28 answers, ten were rating the advertising positively, ten were doing that negatively, and eight of the answers were neutral to the advertising. "The advantage of advertising in general is the availability of info, learning about products any time of the day [...]" stated one respondent positively about advertising. Another respondent added:

> We are bombarded with ads on a daily basis, and there's no escaping them. But I would say that is a good thing because people are more informed and afloat with the information.

On the other hand, negative comments about advertising were as common as positive. For example, the respondent stated, "I don't like the manipulation involved. People are being induced to buy things they don't need or to buy just because it's cheap."

However, only 20 percent of respondents noticed the advertisements in the online social networks, while 40 percent of them either didn't notice then at all, or noticed the ads occasionally. 60 percent of the respondents never visited a product web site after being exposed to the advertisement in online social networks, while 70 percent of them never clicked on an advertisement in online social networks. A respondent said:

> I don't trust it because I just feel they are going to take all of your money when you go to buy something from them. So I don't normally pay attention to ads in social networks.

Of the respondents, 80 percent never purchased a product advertised in online social networks, while only 5 percent did purchase products. One of the respondents who purchased a product through online social network says she did so in reaction to multiple reasons. There was not one reason that would induce her to buy:

> They were offering a good price for a first trial, and they give you a 30 day guarantee, so I guess the price. A lot of celebrities were in an ad, and they were talking about it and I was like: oh really? Celebrities use this thing? And besides, it is doctor approved so it made me think that it doesn't hurt to try it.

Equal percentages of respondents, 26 percent, believe that advertisements in FaceBook are and are not tailored to their interests. About 80 percent of respondents do not recognize brands advertised in online social networks, in their daily endeavors. About 70 percent of respondents believe it is easier for them to remember brands advertised through other media channels, such as TV, radio, and magazines, as opposed to social

networks ("[. . .] the ones on radio and TV impose themselves more, almost become the only thing you focus on. They enter your sub consciousness on a different level. When on FaceBook, I'm on a different mission – catching up with friends . . . "). Only 10 percent of the respondents believed social networks a were better in promoting the brands.

When rating advertisements found in screenshots, respondents generally focused on six major categories: color, logo, content, picture, overall design and attractiveness of the advertisement among other content. Across the board, respondents rated attractiveness among other content as the most positive feature of all the advertisements (30 votes), followed by the overall design (28 votes) and color (25 votes) the votes were collected based on the respondents' comments on the screenshots. Each respondent had to view three to four screenshots, making the total number of possible answers 66. Characteristics of the advertisements that are most valued by the respondents and most positively rated are divided into four categories which account for 79 percent of all positive ratings given by respondents. The four categories are attractiveness among other content, overall design, content, and color. When asked whether they would click on an advertisement shown to them participants responded in both directions: MySpace advertisement generated the highest number of positive answers, while Xanga, FaceBook, and Hi5 generated the highest number of negative answers.

The method used for reaching the results has several limitations. The sample studied is too small for the results to be applied to a greater population, or a specific group of people. However, the results will provide with the implications for future studies that will be conducted in the field. The researcher could easily bias the coding method, which required researcher to group the answers into categories, due to the fact that the participants' answers were not very clear. The coding very much depended on the researcher's subjective opinion of the answers.

Conclusion

The study was done among 20 college students, regular users of online social networks, to uncover the perceptions of advertising among them. The research done involved in-depth interviews. The results answered all of the research questions and rejected the hypothesis stated. It was generally concluded that the users of online social networks do not dislike advertisements, but they simply do not notice them. Other content found in online social networks mitigates the attractiveness of the advertisements. Hence, the respondents reported that the brand recognition in online social networks was found to be much lower than the one created through other media channels.

Some general conclusions can be drawn from the study regarding the researched sample. The majority of the respondents almost never notice the advertisements on the social network web sites because they focus on other content, such as friends profiles, pictures, and similar. The respondents mostly do not have very negative opinions of advertisements, and many of the advertisements catch their attention at least for a split second due to color, tagline, design, and similar; however, the respondents choose to phase them out in favor of more interesting content on the web site.

Online social networks are a growing communication tool which, like any other web site, has an advertising space in it. However, it is up to the advertisers to recognize the possibility of advertising to the online social networks' population, taking into consideration different needs and preferences of such users. Moreover, the proper kinds of advertisements should be created to fit into the model of appealing characteristics

respondents reported. Owing to a growing field of research in this area, future studies will expand on this research and offer more detailed information, if not instructions for the advertisers. Some of the particular fields the study, using the same methodology, could expand to are the fields of more personalized and user-generated content, such as Twitter, blogs, podcasts, and similar. Social media examined here followed in a path of a more traditional path of advertising. When it comes to more personalized and user-generated content-based social media, it would be interesting to create a similar study using the same methodology, as the advertisement on such web sites are far more personalized hence have the potential of intriguing the users to a greater extent.

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