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Social Media Usage Behaviour

Prof. Dr. Axel Schlich

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Social Media Usage Behaviour of Students in Finland and Germany  
and its Marketing Implications

von

Prof. Dr. Axel Schlich

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## **SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE BEHAVIOUR**

The insight that it is the medium that affects a society and not the content which is delivered over that medium, is not new by far, thus “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1967). In contemporary industrial societies, the share of user-generated information consumed everyday over the internet may not have surprised visionaries like Marshall McLuhan.

Nevertheless, now that young adults in particular, including the young-at-hearts, tend to avoid professionally-edited information and prefer blogs, videos, and other forms of user-generated content instead, it should be time to pause for a moment.

The purpose of writing this article is to analyse how students use social media, to what extent social media usage affects their behaviour, and whether there are any differences between students in Finland and Germany in this respect. Based on this analysis of social media usage behaviour, the article contributes to the current discussion about social media marketing.

Not surprisingly, the data analysis led to the conclusion that social media have become an integral part of the everyday life of young adults. However, the data revealed that heavy social media users attach little importance to word-of-mouth, hardly ever complain about products or services to their peers, and tend to dislike social media advertising.

Does the aforementioned constitute reason enough for marketers to no longer believe in social media marketing? Probably not, because structural changes in the media landscape inevitably have an impact on marketing as well. The media are the channels through which messages move from sender to receiver and the difference nowadays is that the sender of marketing communications is not necessarily the marketer any more but the consumer himself. On the other hand, not all that glitters in the new social media world is gold and the proverbial wheel has already been invented.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

There is hardly any discussion among marketing experts nowadays that does not include social media. Accordingly, it is hard to find any marketing textbook that does not cover this field, despite the lack of a widely accepted social media marketing theory.

The term social media refers to internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010), such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or blogs.

Self-appointed social media experts are continuously coming up with examples of successful campaigns providing enormous reach and contact quality. Regardless of political views, one of the most cited examples fuelling the current enthusiasm about social media is still Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign (Halligan & Shah 2010). Americans were able to connect with Obama via his blog, Facebook page, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and other social networks and web sites. In contrast, Hillary Clinton's campaign management relied on traditional instruments, that is, email, telemarketing, direct mail, TV, and radio advertising.

Another case often referred to is the lesson United Airlines learned about social media in 2009. It started with United's baggage-handling crew damaging the guitar of a hitherto unknown local musician named Dave Carroll, who, after fruitless negotiations with the airline for compensation, composed a song entitled "United Breaks Guitars." The video was uploaded in YouTube and became very popular within a very short time, making Dave Carroll as empowered as any one guy can get (Bernoff & Schadler 2010). At the same time, United Airlines experienced a PR disaster that could have been avoided.

"Give the orang-utan a break" was the title of Greenpeace's 2010 rainforest campaign against Nestlé. The Swiss food giant was accused of using palm oil for the production of its chocolate-coated wafer KitKat. At first, Nestlé reacted with censorship and a legally effective copyright infringement claim. Within only one week, Nestlé had to step down and apologize due to a wave of negative posts in social networks, billboard postings, fan pages flooded with incriminating comments, and millions of clicks on a video (Hermes 2010).

Considering what has been experienced with social media so far, it has become increasingly popular to speak of a paradigm shift in marketing. Some writers are even stating that the marketer's job has changed from creating and pushing messages to one that requires listening, engaging, and reacting to customer needs (Qualman 2009).

Others are referring to the vast amount of personal information people post on social media sites with the consequence that digital footprints are becoming increasingly bigger. In fact, anyone's social media profile can be linked to their web-browsing habits and even physical locations (Bach 2011).



Does the term marketing really have to be rewritten or are we currently experiencing a hype phase about social media? Have the rules of marketing changed or is it just a new tool that marketers have at their disposal? This paper aims to provide answers to these questions by analysing the social media usage behaviour of students in Helsinki and Koblenz.

## **2 RESEARCH METHOD**

The research method consisted of both a qualitative and a quantitative element. Firstly, qualitative data were collected in interviews with social media experts. Secondly, a standardized questionnaire was administered to student populations in Finland and Germany.

### **2.1 Qualitative telephone interview**

In-depth interviews were conducted in order to explore the understanding of social media marketing among marketing professionals. Each research participant was asked to tell his/her story about the area under investigation during telephone interviews of 20-25 minutes in length.

Throughout the whole interview, questions were kept general in nature and non-directive in manner (McCracken, 1988); they were phrased to encourage the respondents to reflect upon their recent work experiences with regard to social media. The analysis of the collected qualitative data can be described as an iterative process. Initially, the narratives and themes of each transcript had to be identified, and then, in a second step, categorized into aggregates of like information (Thompson 1993).

### **2.2 Standardized online questionnaire**

The sampled populations were students in Finland and Germany, the sampling technique applied was cluster-sampling. When “natural” groupings are evident, cluster-sampling is considered to lead to sufficiently representative conclusions about the total population (Noelle-Neumann 2000). In this case, students at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Helsinki, and University of Applied Sciences, Koblenz, were considered to be the “natural” groupings out of which two samples were selected. All students at both institutions were provided with an online questionnaire. Overall, 736 students responded, 375 in Koblenz and 361 in Helsinki.

The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions, measuring both social media usage in general and the attitude towards marketing communication via social media. In order to minimize the number and extent of biased answers, fundamental principles of questionnaire design were taken into account, such as sequence, wording, layout, and length (Wolfe 2000).

As the questionnaires were distributed and sent back online, and interviews were not conducted face-to-face, respondents may not have felt tempted to answer in a socially desired manner, but honestly and straight-forwardly. On the other hand, it can never

be excluded that every research participant answers seriously or understands the question as intended (Häder 2010).

In many cases, the respondents were asked to specify their level of agreement or disagreement on a symmetric agree/disagree scale. The rating scales consisted of five ordered response levels, ranging from strongly negative to strongly positive positions, including a neutral answering category (Likert 1932). The responses on Likert scales were treated as interval-level data. Besides frequency distributions and cross tabulations, the statistical methods predominantly applied were regression and correlation analysis. Parameters of location and dispersion completed the data analysis.

### **3 SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE BEHAVIOUR OF STUDENTS IN FINLAND AND GERMANY**

In 1983, a census in Germany had to be postponed to 1987 because of public concern about an inquiry into citizens' private life by the government. For many German intellectuals, George Orwell's novel *Nineteen-Eighty Four* about public mind control in a society under dictatorship had arrived. In England, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, similar protest waves had also occurred in the past decades (Weeks 2008). Times have certainly changed. The census of 1983 in Germany required comparatively less private data from German citizens than many social media users readily give out nowadays without any pressure of the authorities.

With the increasing smart phone density, the usage intensity of social media got a decisive boost. According to our research, every second student uses a smart phone to access social media (Finland: 50.0%; Germany: 47.2%).

#### **3.1 Social media usage intensity**

Without a doubt, Facebook currently ranks high on the scale of popularity. In Finland, the number of Facebook "heavy-users" is higher than in Germany, amounting to 84.8%. The corresponding figure for Germany is 53.6%. While only 3.7% of the respondents do not use Facebook "at all," the share of non-users in Germany is 26.7% (Figure 1).

The share of female students in Finland who are on Facebook a "few times a day" accounts for 87.2% (Germany: 53.3%) of all users, compared to a 75.9% share of male heavy-users (Germany: 54.9%).

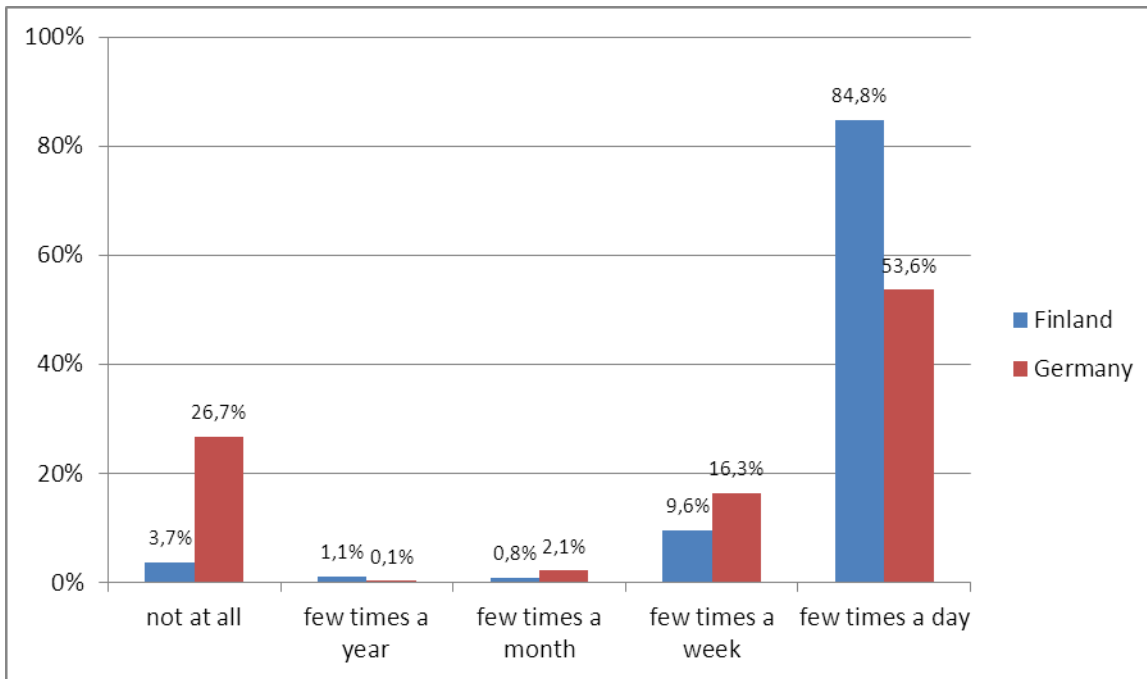


Figure 1: Facebook usage intensity

How intensively students use social media is not related to their field of study. The intensity of social media usage does not differ across faculties. However, exceptions could be found among students enrolled in information technology in Finland and social work in Germany, who proved to be less excited about Facebook, compared to their fellow students at other faculties.

Facebook users seem to emphasise having a large network of contacts. More than half of the research participants (Finland: 57.0%; Germany: 55.1%) claim to have more than 200 “friends” on Facebook.

YouTube comes second in popularity. In Finland, 23.3% of the sampled students click on a YouTube video a “few times a day,” in Germany 12.8% responded as doing so. Visits on YouTube a “few times a week” were reported by 42.4% of German and 55.3% of Finnish students.

With regard to blogs, we measured a different attitude in both countries. In Germany, students seem to be quite reluctant to visit blogs; three out of four (76.3%) never do so “at all.” In contrast, only 24.6% of the Finnish students never visit a blog.

In comparison to Germany, the usage intensity of blogs is quite high in Finland, where almost one third of the population visits a blog at least a “few times a week.” The share of students in Finland who click on a blogging site accounts for 14.5% (Germany: 2.4%).

Another finding of our research is that participants in both countries do not show much interest in Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn. In Germany, students seemed to be even more reluctant to use these social networks than in Finland, particularly LinkedIn is not very popular and 96.5% of the students in Germany do not use it “at all” compared to 82.2% LinkedIn non-users in Finland.

Most of the research participants are not “Twitterati” as 74.7% of the respondents in Finland and 88.0% in Germany never use it. All in all, the average popularity score of Twitter on a scale from 1 to 5 is a bit higher in Finland. On this scale it also becomes obvious that in general social media, and particularly blogs, are more popular among students in Finland than in Germany (Figure 2).

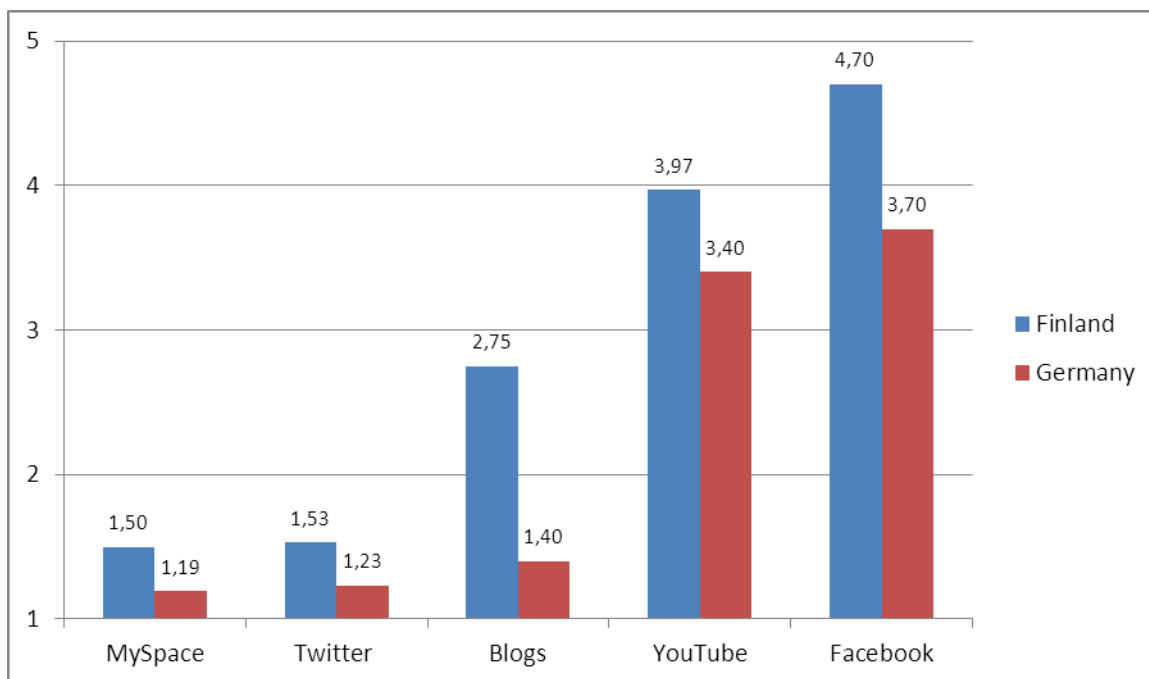


Figure 2: Average popularity score of social media on a rating scale from 1 – 5

### 3.2 Motivation to use social media

What are the reasons to use social media? A satisfying answer may require thorough behavioural studies including qualitative interview techniques, observations as well as the application of experimental research designs. Here, the focus is on the empirical investigation of the social media phenomenon, that is, the analysis of quantitative data.

Respondents had to select one or more answers from nine categories altogether in order to describe their motivation to use social media. “Keeping contact with friends” was the category most frequently chosen by students in Finland, 67.5% state that this is “very important” to them (Germany: 27.8%). “Entertainment” is another key motivation for social media use, whereas “work-related reasons” or “getting opinions” seem to be less relevant.

What mainly motivates German students to use social media is “keeping contact with family” and “entertainment.” The weighted average score on a scale from 1 – 5 expresses the value attached to different categories of motivation in both countries (Figure 3).

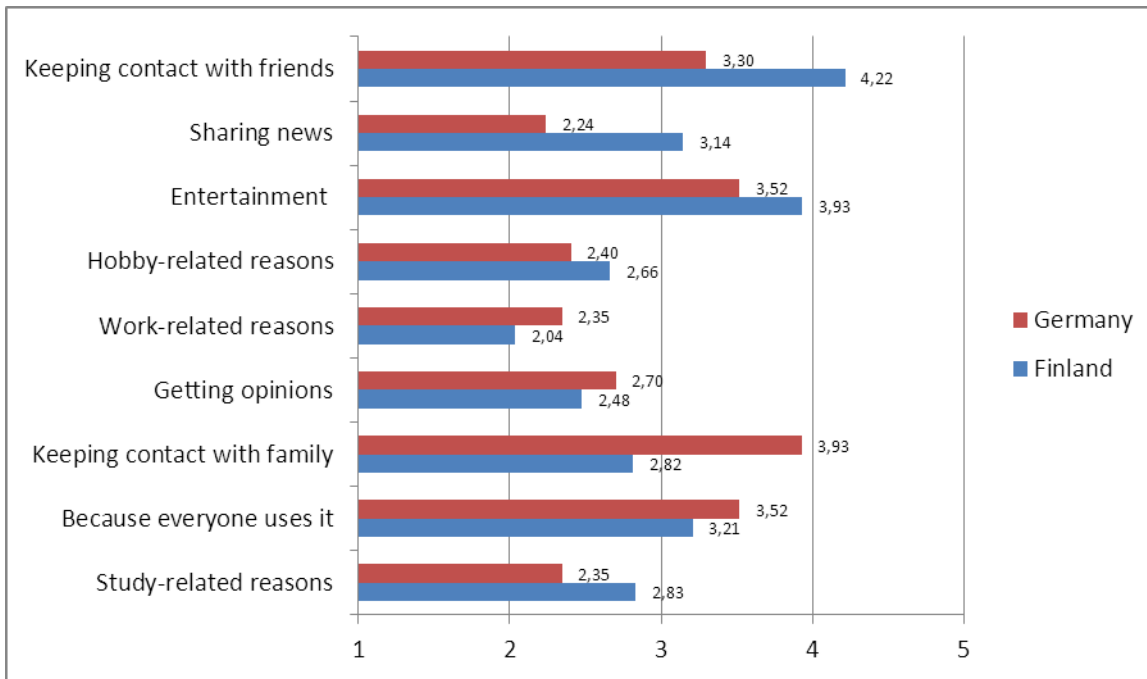


Figure 3: Motivation to use social media – weighted average score

### 3.3 Peer group influence

A peer group consists of people who share similar interests and backgrounds. In our contemporary society, peer groups have become an increasingly important context in which people spend their time. Peer groups are a phenomenon that is said to be due to modernization in conjunction with increasing segregation and lack of orientation (Steinberg 1996).

The influence exerted by a peer group to encourage a person to change attitudes, values and behaviour in order to conform to group norms is referred to as peer pressure. In general, the closer the relationship between group members, the more important approval or disapproval of individual behaviour becomes by peers (Morgan & Grube 1991). First of all, it has to be stated that peer pressure motivates people to join a social network like Facebook, but it cannot be considered as a major reason to do so (Figure 3).

On the other hand, it is a fact that word-of-mouth about products and companies affects consumer behaviour, in which the impact of negative feedback is slightly more relevant to peers than a positive one. In comparison to their fellow students in Finland, word-of-mouth seems to be less important for German students (Figure 4).

However, it is the majority in both countries who “agrees” but not “strongly agrees” that word-of-mouth affects their consumer behaviour. In fact, the 20.9% percentage rate of respondents who “strongly disagree” about the impact of positive word-of-mouth (negative: 15.4%) seems to be quite high in Germany (Figure 5).

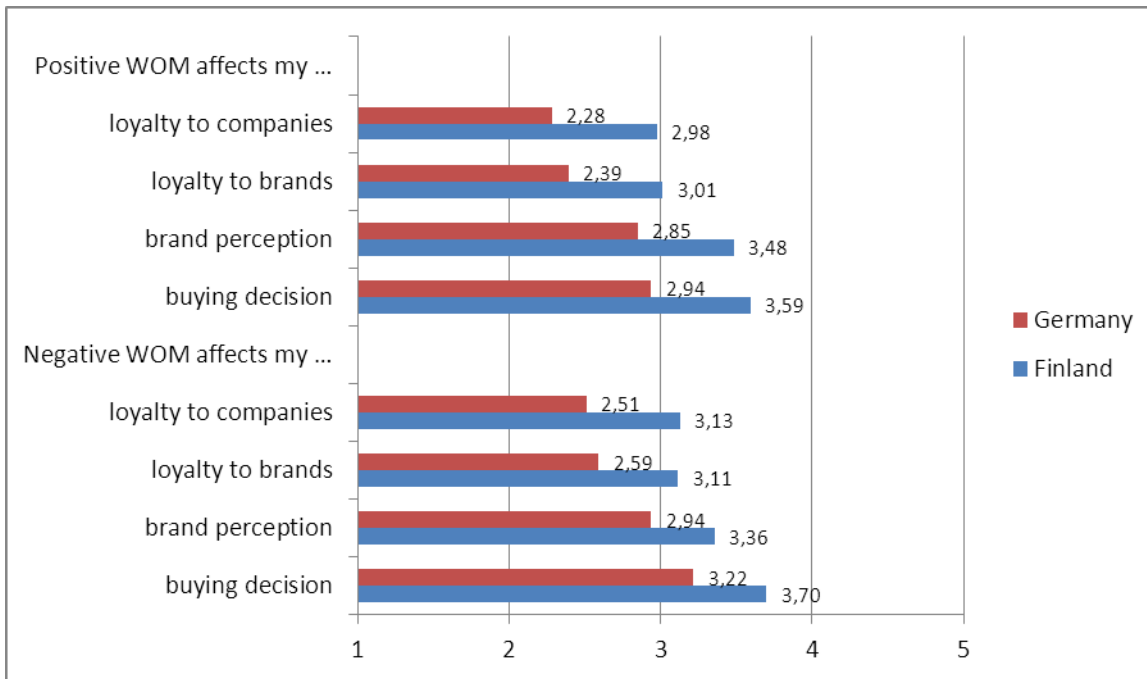


Figure 4: The impact of word-of-mouth on consumer behaviour – weighted average score

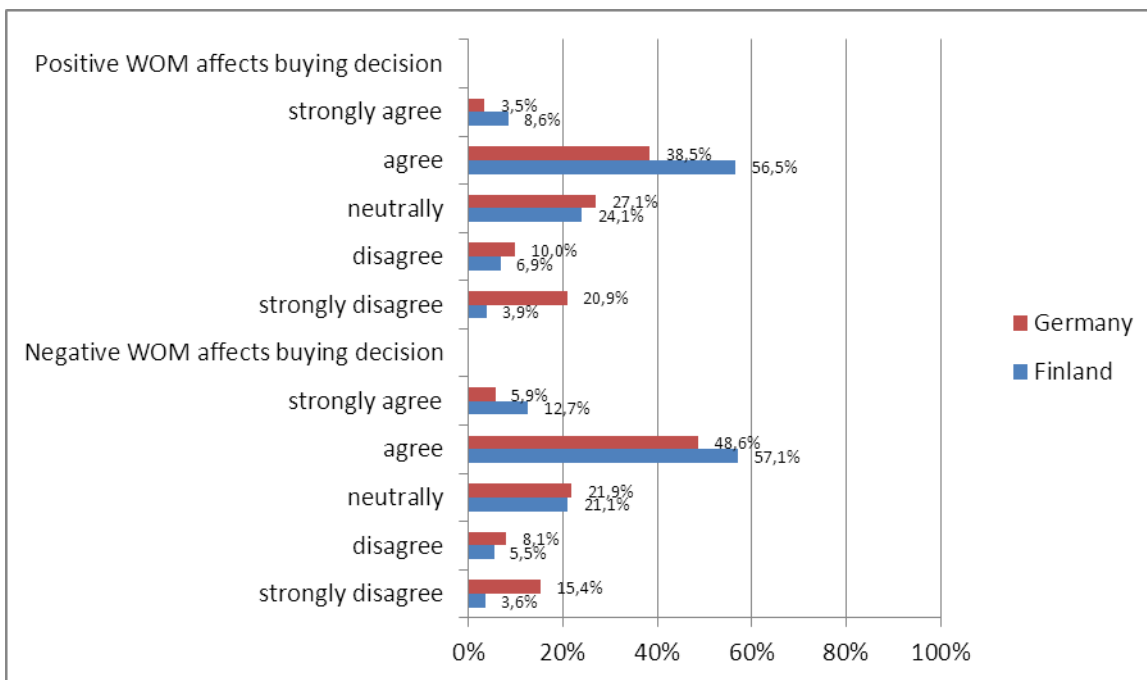


Figure 5: The impact of word-of-mouth on consumer behaviour

Further analysis brought to light that especially heavy users of social media do not seem to be very sensitive to word-of-mouth. The correlation coefficient between usage intensity and receptiveness to word-of-mouth with regard to “brand loyalty” assumes values between 0 and 0.2 (Figure 6). Similarly, the correlation coefficient between usage intensity and variables like “loyalty to companies,” “brand perception” and “consumer behaviour” is below 0.2.

What does this mean? The conclusion could be that we are already witnessing a wear-out effect here, comparable to what has happened to traditional forms of advertising

over the years. The more social media become commonplace, the lower the influence of word-of-mouth will be within peer groups. Thus, creating awareness with product or service-related posts in social media will become as challenging as it already is with ads on TV or in print media.

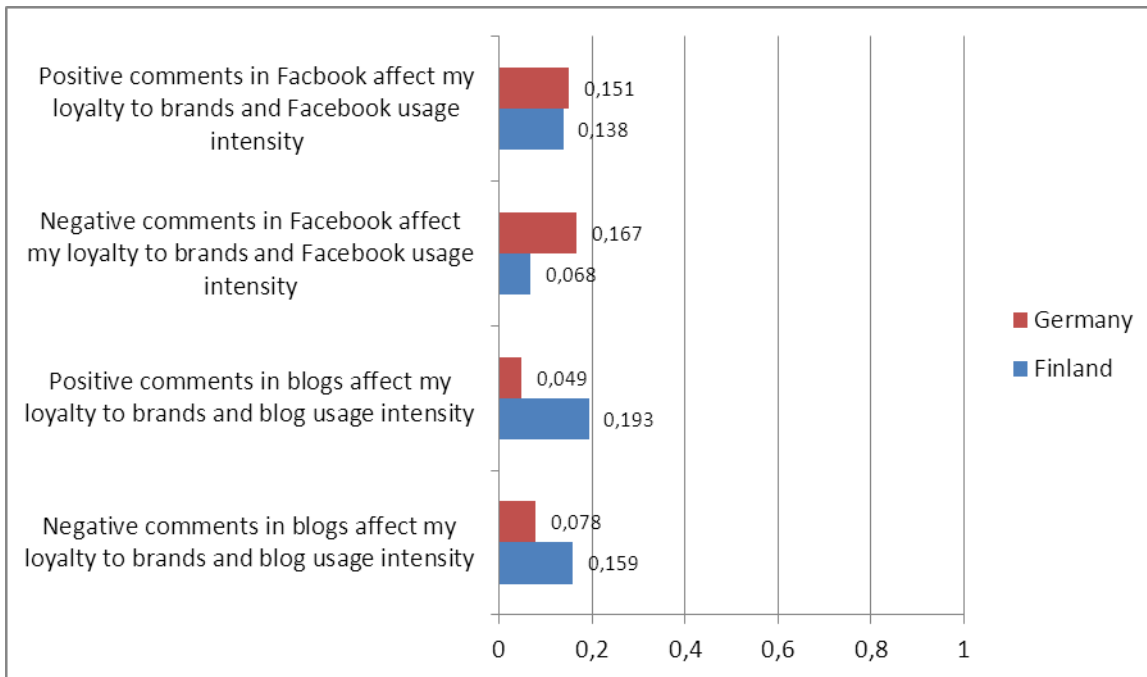


Figure 6: Correlation between influence of word-of-mouth and usage intensity

A closer look at those participants who responded as having a high motivation to share information with their peers leads to the same conclusion. Even users who have a strong motivation to share news do not pay much attention to word-of-mouth about products or services or intend to share experiences with their peers in this respect (Figure 7).

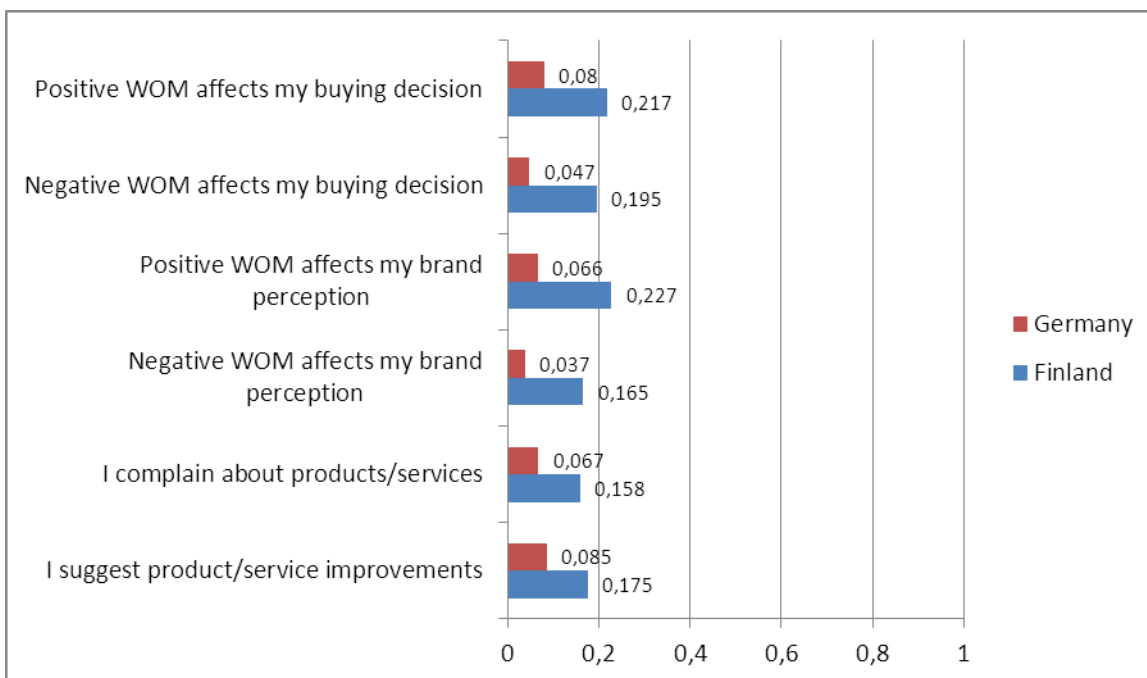


Figure 7: Relevance of word-of-mouth and motivation to share news

Overall, according to our research, students in Finland and Germany pay attention to word-of-mouth, but not if it refers to products or services. However, the more frequently people are on social networking sites, the more resistant they seem to become toward both positive and negative feedback on products and services. The resistance to word-of-mouth positively correlates with social media usage intensity.

This outcome cannot be reason enough to negate the word-of-mouth phenomenon because responses only mirror the picture that research participants had of themselves. Nonetheless, even if social media users are not conscious of the influence exerted by their peers, it can be assumed that there is a critical distance towards product or service-related posts.

### **3.4 Attitude towards advertising on social media sites**

Even though Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn and other social media site operators are increasingly providing new advertising tools, many marketers are still not convinced of the advantages of social media advertising. According to our research, the scepticism among experts, particularly towards ads and banners placed on social media sites, is justified.

No less than 79.3% of the respondents “strongly disagree” with pop-up windows of any kind (Germany: 80.9%), which is to say that four out of five claim to have a negative attitude towards pop-ups. Explicitly positive about pop-ups are only 3.0% in Finland and 1.4% in Germany, the remaining participants have neither a positive nor a negative opinion about this form of advertising.

Banners are disliked as well, particularly in Germany where 60.3% of the respondents perceive them in a very negative way (“strongly disagree”). In comparison to Germany, the number of respondents in Finland who state to “strongly disagree” with banners is lower, but still accounts for 40.7% of the population.

In contrast, videos and text ads placed on social media sites are better liked. Altogether, 45.9% of the respondents in Germany are positive about videos (Finland: 50.4%). The attitude towards text ads was positive for 54.9% of the German sample and 43.2% in Finland, as they either “agree” or “strongly agree” with this form of social media advertising (Figure 8).



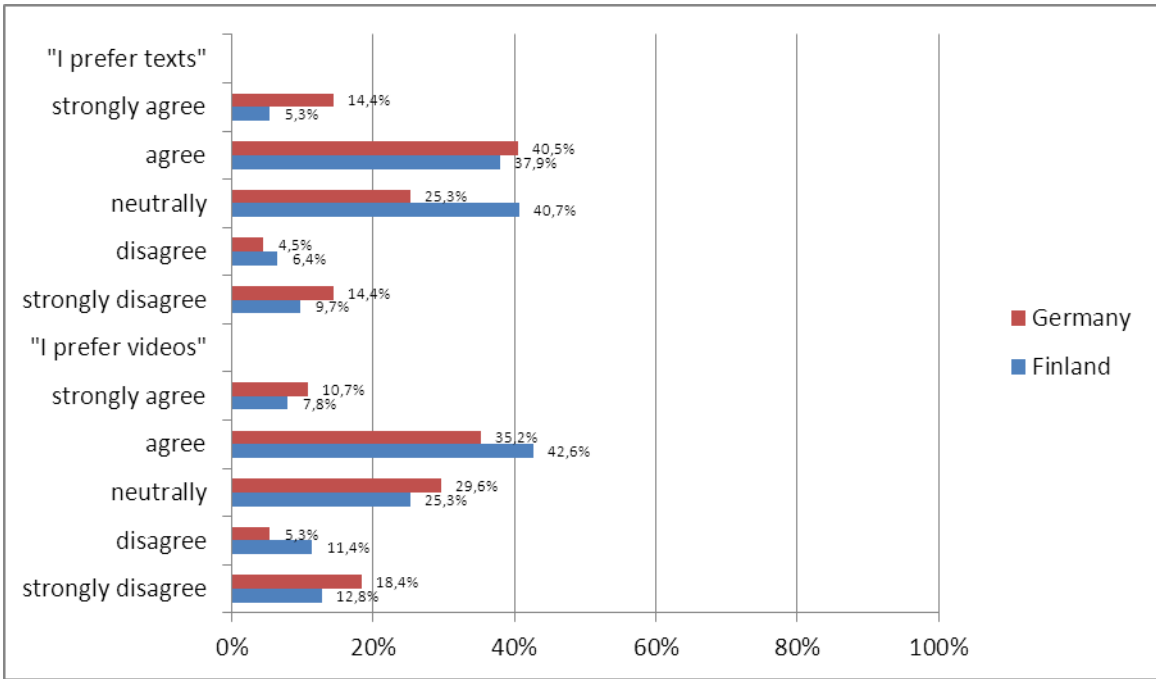


Figure 8: Acceptance of social media advertising

Social media usage intensity does not match with a positive attitude towards social media advertising. To the contrary, especially heavy users seem to be put off by ads (Figure 9).

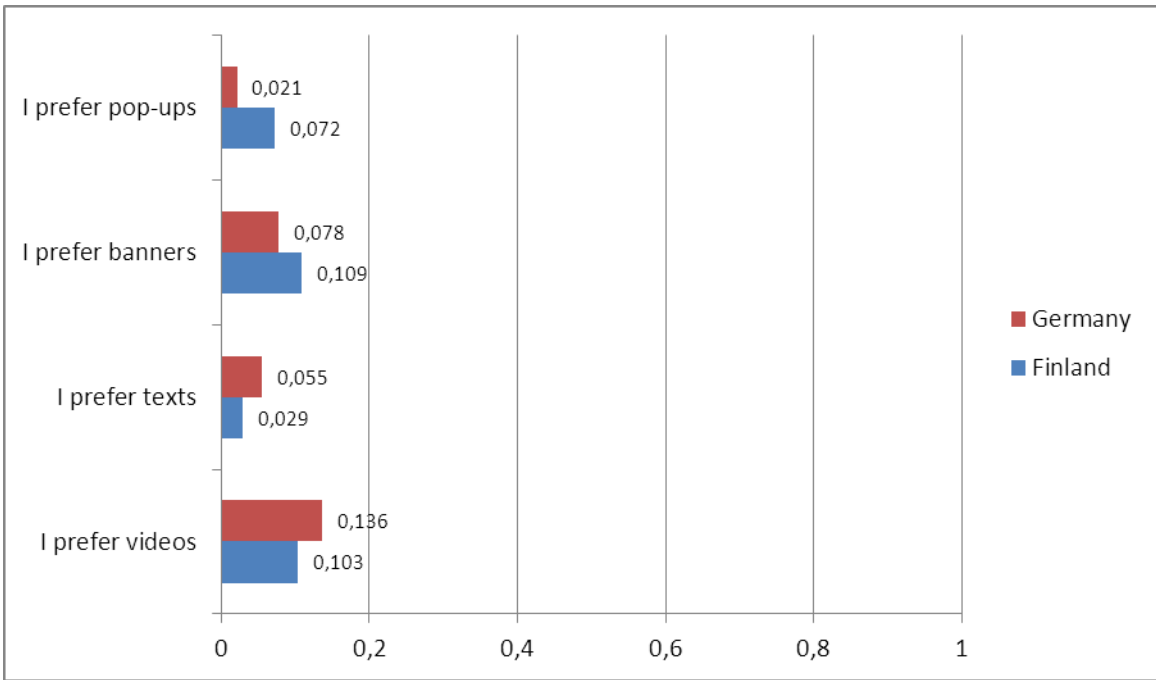


Figure 9: Correlation between usage intensity and attitude towards advertising

Correspondingly, research participants are not ready to admit that their buying behaviour is positively influenced by any form of social media advertising. Far from it, respondents of both populations claim to be negatively affected in their buying decision, especially when they have been in contact with banners and pop-up windows on social media sites (Figure 10).

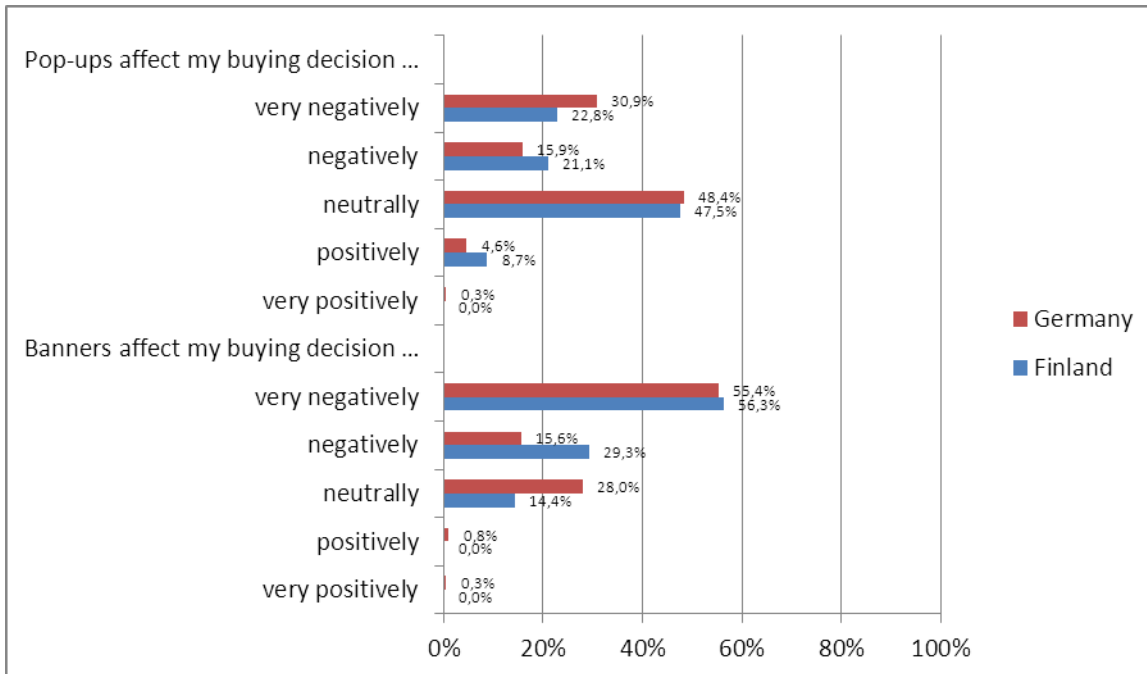


Figure 10: Influence of pop-ups and banners on buying decision

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the awareness of being influenced by social media advertising was measured here. Thus, the measures applied do not express the conversion rate or any other ratio of advertising effectiveness.

Instead, the figures simply mirror the popularity of ads on social media sites, nothing more nothing less. Furthermore, as a matter of fact, the popularity of social media advertising is not very high in either country.

## **4 SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING – PARADIGM SHIFT OR HYPE?**

In recent years, marketing as a discipline has been developing as a result of on-going changes in the marketing environment. The internal debate among marketing scholars has brought forward a significant number of so-called new concepts and models. Not all of them have proved to be sustaining, while others have become widely-recognized (Homburg et al. 2009).

Currently, we notice that marketing is “going inbound.” Instead of trying to reach as many potential customers via nicely designed ads, direct mailings, or cold calls, all of which is labelled outbound marketing, inbound strategies focus on getting found by customers (Halligan & Shah 2010).

The advocates of inbound marketing suggest instruments such as search engine marketing, content, blogs, or social networks in order to pull customers towards a business and its products. In contrast to outbound marketing, which is said to be interrupting and quite often disturbing, inbound marketers obtain the permission of potential customers first before advancing to the next step (Godin 1999).

Have the rules of marketing changed or just the tools? A satisfying answer to that question remains to be given and social media will continue to be a favourite topic for a chat by the fireside among marketing professionals.

According to our point of view, social media marketing is an instrument which can serve to successfully complete five major marketing objectives:

- integrating lead users,
- branding,
- gathering customer insights,
- customer servicing, and
- being a good citizen.

### **4.1 Social media marketing prospects**

#### **4.1.1 Integrating lead users – word-of-mouth**

As early as the 1940s, in his two-step flow of communication model, the American sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld highlighted that opinion leaders have more influence on customers’ attitudes and behaviour than the media (Lazarsfeld 1944).

Over the years, Lazarsfeld’s model was developed further, for instance, by the theory of overlapping opinion leadership (Montgomery & Silk 1971), according to which people can be recognized as opinion leaders in many fields, not only for one subject. Additionally, general assumptions about the personality of opinion leaders were subject to research (Noelle-Neumann 1983).

In the age of the Internet and user-generated content, Lazarsfeld's two-step flow of communication model has regained popularity as it serves as a theoretical foundation to highlight the importance of online word-of-mouth (Schlich 2003).

Gladwell (2000), for instance, identified three groups of people who help to spread trends. Those users belonging to the first cluster are called *connectors*; people who know a wide variety of other folks and nowadays have a large number of followers on Twitter or Facebook friends. In the second cluster we find the *mavens* who are considered to be experts in a certain field. Mavens are active bloggers and respond to content posted online. A maven is similar to what Lazarsfeld used to call an opinion leader. The third cluster is composed of *salesmen*, who have a commercial interest in spreading trends.

Why are personal recommendations of mavens considered to be so important? Mavens are known to their peers not only for being subject-specific experts, but also for their integrity and honesty. In general, they are users as well and their recommendations are perceived as less goal-oriented and thus more credible compared to advertising messages transported via mass media (Bernoff & Schadler 2010).

As a consequence, marketers try to win lead users as brand ambassadors. For instance, Lego invites adults to share their passion with other Lego enthusiasts. The idea is not new, but it particularly matches to social media and the previously outlined "user-generated content" phenomenon.

Authenticity is a prerequisite. As soon as peers lose confidence in mavens, they will no longer accept them as opinion leaders. Thus, manipulating recommendations in social media will backfire. For instance, the CEO of an US grocery chain got busted for pretending to be a customer and praising the company in forums (Kabani 2010).

Beyond a doubt, marketing communications in the age of social media has become a hybrid element. Traditional sender-receiver models have been declared invalid. Instead, customers directly talk to one another in social media and what they say about products and services is beyond the marketer's control (Faulds & Mangold 2009).

But how seriously do users take word-of-mouth posted online anymore? Are we already seeing a wear-out effect like other forms of marketing communications have been through? Our field research revealed that respondents neither had much interest speaking about products or services in their online communities nor did they pay much attention to posts from their peers in this respect. Accordingly, we concluded that social media users prefer non-commercial topics in their networks.

This finding may not apply when users are actively looking for information about a product or a product category. In this case, word-of-mouth remains to be the most trusted form of information, and marketers are challenged to successfully manage consumer-to-consumer communication.

The important role that word-of-mouth nowadays plays in social media marketing may also be underlined by the fact that a non-profit organization "dedicated to

advancing the discipline of credible word-of-mouth marketing” has been founded. According to the word-of-mouth marketing association, word-of-mouth occurs naturally (organic), but may also be stimulated by marketers making use of viral spread and opinion leaders. The latter is called amplified word-of-mouth and can be stimulated by giving people something to talk about, creating communities and connecting people, or engaging in transparent communication (WOMMA 2011).

#### **4.1.2 Branding**

Brand value is regarded as an important indicator of corporate performance. Interbrand, a branding consultancy, annually publishes a ranking of global brands based on their estimated brand value. Among others, a strong social media presence is one of the components of immaterial brand strengths the consultants use in order to measure the value of a brand. In Interbrand’s 2010 ranking, for instance, brands like Coca Cola, McDonald’s or Starbuck’s have been explicitly praised for their social media endeavours.

As part of its “Happiness Campaign,” Coca Cola produced a video showing a campus vending machine delivering unexpected doses of happiness. On Coke’s YouTube Channel users are invited to upload their happiness dance videos. In Coke’s Studio everybody can share the experience of a live recording with upcoming and renowned musicians of various genres. Coca Cola’s happiness machine video has been viewed nearly four million times on YouTube; the brand has almost 34 million fans on Facebook and 353,197 followers on Twitter as of August 2011.

“Voice of McDonald’s” is a singing contest for the company’s restaurant employees and managers, who are asked to showcase their talent or lack of it in a video. On Starbucks’ blog, “Mystarbucksidea.com,” visitors are requested to give feedback and suggestions.

Based on our data analysis, we concluded that the majority of social media users are interested in brands. Even though only 2.5% “strongly agree” with the statement “I keep up to date on brands,” 41.4% of the respondents in Finland “agree.” Admittedly, whatever the reason may be, some of the research participants in both countries do not share the same point of view, in Germany, more than half of the social media users are not interested in brand-related information on social media (Figure 11).

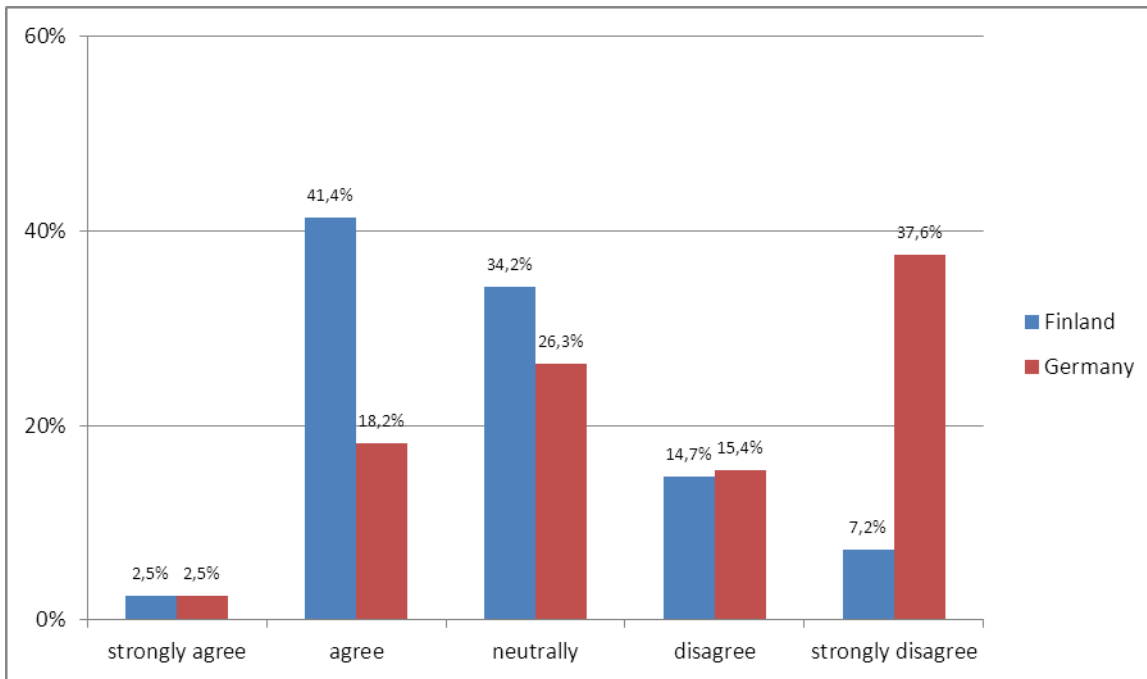


Figure 11: Interest of social media users in brands

However, social media in combination with smart phones have given consumers the ability to participate in branding at any time and location. This feature enables brand owners to permanently monitor how their brand is perceived and how users comment on campaigns. The same applies to competitors' brands.

*User generated branding* is the term that has entered marketing discourse to describe this new phenomenon. It defines the non-sponsored voluntary creation and public distribution of brand related content by non-marketers via social media (Burmam & Arnhold 2008).

#### 4.1.3 Customer insights

What is the secret behind successful marketing campaigns? A satisfying answer remains to be given as there is no recipe that guarantees high market shares. What marketers tend to believe is that excellent product or service ideas are market-driven rather than developed in laboratories. For this reason, they have an intrinsic motivation to understand what makes their customers tick.

In a business to business context, the sales force is the interface to the customer and in charge of collecting relevant information directly from the customer. In comparison, marketers in the consumer goods industry need to grasp the brand-related attitudes, motivations, and emotions of an anonymous mass of consumers. The analysis of consumer behaviour in all its complexity is a challenge and the accuracy of the information provided depends on many factors, last but not least the researcher him-/herself and the methods applied.

Scholars believe in unprecedented opportunities for data analytics emerging from the tremendous amount of user-generated content accumulated in social media. Accordingly, many social networks typically contain a huge amount of rich content and

linkage data, which can be leveraged for analysis (Aggarwal 2011). Data mining could be the solution. The term describes the process of a computer-assisted analysis of large quantities of data in order to extract a small set of precious nuggets, in other words, to filter out previously unknown and interesting patterns from a great deal of raw material (Han, Kamber & Pei 2012).

Over the last decades, countless studies on customer satisfaction have been conducted. One of the findings was that most dissatisfied customers do not complain directly to the company, but to other people, who are nowadays their peers in social networks. Consequently, only the tip of the iceberg (i.e., unhappy customers) is visible to the company, while the majority remains below the surface of the water and thus goes unnoticed. Presently, according to the advocates of data mining, a Pandora's Box is open. On social media sites marketers have access to valuable feedback about products and services that should not be ignored (Pekala 2011).

In their social network, users post on a voluntary basis, and thus their comments are considered to be more authentic and less biased compared to face-to-face responses and telephone interviews or statements given on a rating scale. Furthermore, with data mining the problem of low response rates, which market researchers normally have to deal with, does not seem to be relevant anymore. On the other hand, the challenges of data mining are obvious as the data are "large, noisy, and dynamic" (Barbier & Huan 2011, p. 328).

What does this mean? First of all, the volume of the data available in social media is a challenge because of storage and efficiency constraints. Thus, analysts have to be ready to permanently deal with millions of discussions.

Secondly, just reporting what people say in social networks is not enough, it is necessary to understand what they really mean (Cameron 2011). Common data mining techniques employ classification and clustering algorithms. In order to categorize data into distinct classes, the algorithm must be able to deal with text and determine which elements in the data set are similar to each other (Barbier & Huan 2011). Accordingly, software solutions need a great deal of semantic intelligence, as the buzzword in social media is quite often peculiar and not always in accord with the rules of grammar.

The third challenge for market researchers concerned with data mining is the enormous speed at which news spreads in social media. Consequently, opinions may change quickly and not every post will prove to be lasting. In contrast, a closer investigation into conversations taking place in social media may lead to the conclusion that a lot of them are pointless babble.

However, based on our data, we concluded that users in the sampled populations are not too eager to share product- or service-related comments in their social networks. Especially in Germany, where altogether 59.2% "disagreed," the reluctance became obvious. In Finland, the situation is different, where every second user "agrees" to share this kind of experience with peers, only 27.6% refuse to post about products or services consumed (Figure 12).

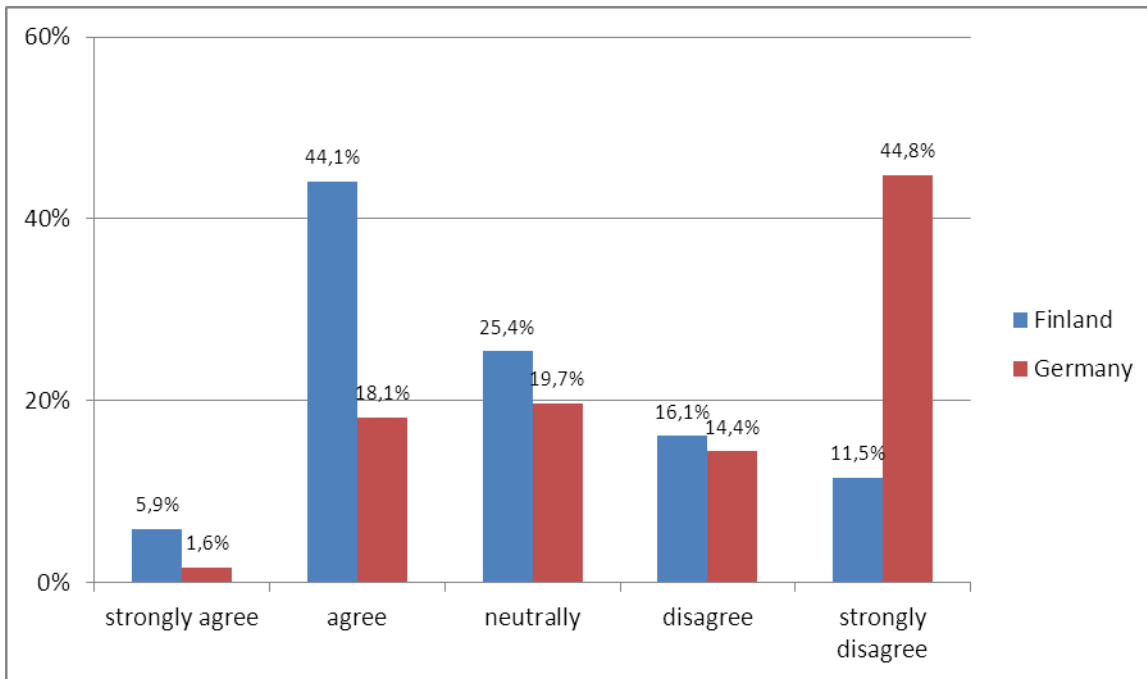


Figure 12: Readiness to share experiences about products and services with peers

The readiness to give feedback may be higher if companies explicitly invite users to voice their opinions in blogs. The Starbucks' example has already been mentioned. Also Dell's Idea Storm is praised to be a frequently used forum for the company's stakeholders to comment on issues they are concerned with such as customer service or new product ideas. Encouraged by positive blog posts of lead users, Dell successfully implemented the Ubuntu Linux software earlier than originally planned.

According to Igor Ansoff, the management of an organization should act strategically ahead of time. This step requires the implementation of a strategic early warning system also capable of detecting the weak signals that announce strategic discontinuities and surprises (Ansoff 1975). However, whether data mining and blogs can function as a reliable strategic early warning system remains to be seen.

#### 4.1.4 Customer service

The supplier's activities before, during and after the purchase in order to enhance the level of customer satisfaction are referred to as customer service. The term customer service has to be distinguished from service, which means the intangible equivalent of an economic good. Service quality is a measure of how well customer service has been delivered.

When judging service quality, customers compare perceptions with expectations. In their GAP model of service quality, Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1991) illustrated that a lack of information about what customers expect is one of the key factors contributing to a gap between expectations and perceptions. Accordingly, listening to customers is the initial step towards superior customer service.

As pointed out above, by means of data mining techniques, market researchers are able to follow up conversations between customers and prospects. A blog can be



another tool in order to close a possibly existing gap. Hence, via social media companies are able to obtain a clearer picture of their customers' needs and what kind of service they expect. Whether the data gathered can be used to improve service quality mainly depends on the successful implementation and the technical performance of the tools, and last but not least, how the information is dealt with.

Christian Grönroos also refers to customers' expectations in his Perceived Service Quality model. In order to narrow the perception gap, he suggests managing customer expectations and experiences, in other words, affecting them in the company's favour. In practice, this means on one hand to improve technical and process quality, which are the major determinants of customer experience, and on the other hand, to influence the factors that contribute to expectations. The latter are marketing communications, image, word-of-mouth, and consumer needs and learning (Grönroos 1984).

Social media marketing offers new ways to get in touch and engage with the customer. Accordingly, marketers increasingly believe in the chances to affect a perception gap in the sense proposed by Grönroos. For instance, if it is true that social media have become the new comment card, companies now have the chance to take action and respond immediately to complaints, even when customers do not directly complain to them but address their message to peers in social networks. Furthermore, technical support, product-related information or promotional campaigns provided on fan pages can contribute to leveraging service quality according to marketing experts.

All in all, it has to be stated that social media marketing can significantly contribute to leveraging the perceived level of service quality. However, as the figures show, at least the users are not yet aware of it.

Until now, not more than 47% of the students in Finland have positively experienced customer service via social media. In Germany, only 7.2 % of the respondents regard social media as a platform for customer service. Almost half of the sampled population in Germany even "strongly disagrees" in this respect. In fact, once more the results obtained were different in the two sampled populations (Figure 13).

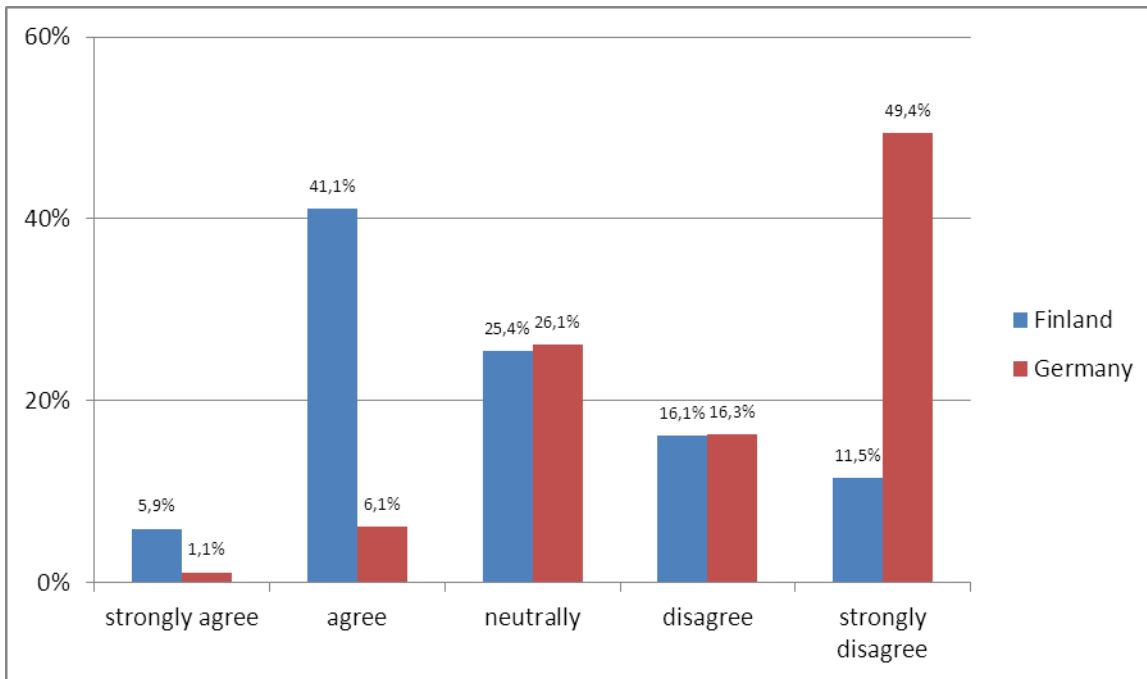


Figure 13: Customer service via social media

#### 4.1.5 Corporate social responsibility

The newer concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) dates back to the 1950s and the discussion about its relevance has been continuing ever since, even though in cyclical fluctuations. Proponents of the concept are convinced that “being a good citizen” pays off for a company in the long run (Carroll 1991). In contrast, critics argue that the only business of a business is to do business or that CSR is mainly window-dressing.

In the social media age, we believe that a new facet of “corporate citizenship” has become apparent. “It takes 20 years to build a reputation but only five minutes to ruin it.” Warren Buffett has been quoted countless times with this statement. Perhaps he did not think about social media when he said it, but it seems to be, here and now, truer than ever. Nestlé and United Airlines can tell a thing or two about it, as already mentioned in the beginning.

The way in which United’s baggage claim agents refused to pay the \$1,200 cost of repair, namely by citing a policy about the time frame in which claims need to be filed, was not in compliance with any CSR policy. The result was Dave Carroll taking the matter into his own hands.

In the end, the company was forced to become “a better citizen.” Policies were changed and baggage claims handled with more discretion. Furthermore, Dave Carroll’s video has been used for training purposes, and, last but not least, United has begun monitoring social media regularly in order to respond to complaints before people broadcast their anger more publicly (Bernoff & Schadler 2010).

A similar incident happened to Nestlé. After the KitKat PR-disaster, the company had no other choice but to apologize and announce that it would refrain from using

products that cause rainforest destruction in the future. Moreover, Nestlé had to reconsider their social media policy in general. The company had to recognize that having fans and followers in social media is not enough. It is also necessary to pay attention and respond to their comments.

As Nestlé's and United's case show, social media can function as a self-regulating mechanism, whereby an organization monitors its compliance with ethical and legal standards. The interaction with stakeholders via social media contributes to transparency and openness and thus assists in the implementation of the stakeholder principle.

## **4.2 Objections and concerns**

In his speech to the House of Commons on August 11, 2011, British Prime Minister David Cameron called for government to have the power to both monitor social media and restrict access to those believed to be up to no good.

According to a recently published study, many executives in Germany neither consider themselves to be savvy in digital communications nor do they see the opportunities of social media marketing. Only 24 out of 182 board members of the 30 Dax-listed major German companies are using social media at all (Handelsblatt).

Many critics argue that the current enthusiasm about social media is at the expense of realism. Most common are the following objections and concerns in order to justify the scepticism:

- doubts about efficiency,
- data theft and misuse,
- wear and tear.

### **4.2.1 Efficiency considerations**

Efficiency measures are used to illustrate to which extent an effort contributes to an intended purpose. In quantitative terms, efficiency can be expressed by the ratio of output to input. Thus, measuring the efficiency of marketing communications has to be related to the objectives and goals set.

The efficiency of instruments such as sponsoring, TV advertising, or direct mailings has been frequently questioned. Nevertheless, these tools are still popular. In Germany, marketers are investing around 30 billion Euros for advertising (ZAW). Traditional advertising metrics focus on reach and recall measurement.

As marketers become more comfortable with integrating social media into their campaigns, there is a need for proving the efficiency of social media activities. What has come across in the meantime is that social media marketing requires thorough planning and a strategy. It takes continuous efforts and cannot be done on-the-fly.

Thus, social media marketing consumes resources, and uncertainty among marketers about cost savings compared to traditional outbound advertising is quite common. A quick Google search for “ROI social media marketing” verifies the high interest in this topic – 42.5 million hits as of August 31, 2011.

The solution may be to refrain from traditional metrics. Instead, marketers are recommended to judge their social media activities in terms of customer response. The investment customers make in social media indicates the extent to which marketing objectives have been achieved. For example, brand awareness and engagement can be derived from the number of followers on Twitter or Facebook, the frequency of appearances in timeline, the number of posts on walls or the number of user-generated items (Hoffmann & Fodor 2010).

However, the uncertainty about the efficiency of social media marketing remains. Even though it seems to be reasonable to call for new metrics, the return on investment is still a key issue for any business. The objectives with marketing communications have not changed; it is still about affecting emotions, motivations, and attitudes in the firm’s favour and finally about persuading a potential buyer's purchasing decision.

As already pointed out, it is the way communication flows, and thus, the roles of the participating actors that make the difference. Against this background, marketers may not have any choice but to be present in social media. Nevertheless, the efforts made have to be economically justifiable.

#### **4.2.2 Data privacy fears**

In order to stay in touch and share content with family members, friends and like-minded people around the world and for infotainment reasons, social media users are prepared to expose both their private and professional life. In former times, it would have been rather uncommon if somebody had entrusted personal data to several hundred peer-group members at a time. Nowadays, in the social media world people are obviously willing to make this convenience-for-privacy deal.

Admittedly, social networking sites are providing their users with measures to protect the type and content of personal data. For instance, privacy settings on Facebook include the ability to block certain individuals from seeing the user’s profile, the ability to choose “friends,” and the ability to limit who has access to pictures and videos. Furthermore, Facebook states to be in compliance with international *Safe Harbour* privacy principles as stipulated, for instance, in the EU Directive 95/46/EC on the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data.

Younger generations may not even be able to comprehend what the older generations are concerned about. However, who would still be nonchalant, if he or she were tagged in a photo or a video unwillingly? How would it be taken if a private moment with a friend was captured in a picture and exposed to unauthorized views all around the globe? Facebook’s privacy policy covers concerns of data abuse, as the company

reserves the right to disclose member information or share photos with companies, lawyers, courts, government entities, etc.

All good and well, but any data posted can be copied, saved, and distributed easily by a third party. This means that the audience is unlimited both in terms of its size and makeup (Leenes & v. d. Berg 2011). By the time Facebook gets around to removing a photo, many people may have already had the chance to view, share, or distribute it. Correspondingly, Facebook explicitly points out that they cannot:

- control the actions of other users with whom information is shared,
- guarantee that only authorized persons will view the information, or
- ensure that the information shared on Facebook will not become publicly available.
- Furthermore, Facebook recommends using common sense security practices, but thereby declines all responsibility for a possible data abuse (Facebook 2011).

Hence, data abuse by a third party represents an element of risk that remains. Another question is how the network operator him-/herself uses the personal information provided by users. What many social media enthusiasts tend to ignore is that the network operator owns *de facto* any uploaded IP content. For example, users are granting Facebook a worldwide license to use their pictures, videos and texts posted on or in connection with Facebook. Even though this IP license ends when users delete the content, Facebook does not exclude the possibility that the removed content still persists in backup copies (Facebook 2011).

Taking things to a more general level, one could argue that the entire appeal of a social network is to collect and broadcast personal information including details on the respective location of users. All the personal information obtained can be used for commercial purposes by the network provider – for which the user has given his/her consent.

#### **4.2.3 Wear-out effect**

The advertising wear-out effect empirically evidences that any commercial or campaign declines in effectiveness at some level of exposure (Blair & Rabuck 1998). Beyond the saturation point the likelihood that an individual or a group of individuals will fail to respond increases despite continuous repetition of the stimulus (Stewart & Kamins 2002). Even a negative effect in response to additional exposures to the advertising message is possible from then on (Pechmann & Steward 1988).

A discipline that has been frequently referred to in order to explain advertising wear-out is psychology. With the term *reactance*, psychologists describe an aversive affective reaction in response to threats to perceived behavioural freedoms. Reactance frequently occurs when individuals feel obliged to adopt a particular opinion or engage in a specific behaviour (Brehm 1966, Brehm & Brehm 1981).

In accordance with the social psychological reactance theory, the attitude towards advertising will change to the worse as soon as it is regarded as a promotional pressure and thus a threat to individual freedom (Clee & Wicklund 1980). For example, reactance becomes obvious when people switch channels the moment that a TV or radio commercial starts or register to Robinson lists in order not to receive direct mailings (Kroeber-Riel 1993).

The attitude towards social media advertising has been rather negative in the sampled populations, as previously pointed out. Accordingly, we believe that a considerable share of users is in a motivational state of reactance with regard to ads on social networking sites. Nevertheless, ads can be successful as long as advertisers respect the permission principle.

The same applies to word-of-mouth. On the one hand, about half of the research participants (approx. 60% in Finland) admitted to be receptive to word-of-mouth. This finding means that every second social media user is ready to pay attention to what opinion leaders in social networks have to say. On the other hand, the other half is not interested in word-of-mouth with regard to products and services. In particular, heavy social media users hardly have any motivation to share their views about products and services. Perhaps they have never had any motivation, but it seems to be more likely that they are already fed up with word-of-mouth. If the latter were true, it would mean that even the Facebook *like-it!* button is subject to the wear-out effect.

## 5 SUMMARY

The *Facebook generation* has become used to consuming online, not only products and services, but also social contacts, entertainment, and information. In the age of smartphones and tablet PCs, people are online whenever and wherever they wish. In doing so, they leave behind a digital footprint, which stimulates the imagination of marketers.

We took a deeper look at the social media usage behaviour of students in Finland and Germany in order to contribute to the present discourse about social media marketing. Overall, it was noticed that the popularity of social media in both countries is high; for youth, the usage often translates into maintaining social contacts.

In as far as marketing and social media are concerned; we believe that the social media age brings about unprecedented opportunities for targeting customers with the right product, at the right time and at the right place. However, this only applies under the assumption that the addressee of marketing communications has given his/her permission.

More specifically, we arrived at the following findings on the social media behaviour of students in Finland and Germany: Every second student in Germany currently is on Facebook a few times a day, in Finland even more than 80%. Half of the students have more than 200 friends on Facebook. Regardless of field of study, Facebook is the most frequently used social network among students in Finland and Germany. In contrast, Twitter is not popular at all in both countries. In sum, the main motivation to use social media is keeping contact to friends and family members and entertainment.

With regard to blogs, Finnish students have a more positive attitude towards them; in Germany three out of four students never use blogs at all.

On the one hand, social media users claim to be affected particularly by *negative* word-of-mouth in their buying behaviour; in Germany every second and in Finland no less than 70% of the students. On the other hand, we found out that the receptiveness to word-of-mouth decreases the more people use social media. In fact, heavy users seem to be quite resistant to it. All in all, word-of-mouth, both positive and negative, seems to have more importance for students in Finland compared to their fellow students in Germany.

In both populations we measured a negative attitude towards ads on social networking sites. Independent of nationality, four out of five users strongly disagree with pop-up windows. In contrast, videos and text ads are liked better. Once again, social media usage intensity negatively correlates with the degree of advertising acceptance. Admittedly, conversion rates may convey a different impression as experience has shown.

Therefore, what are the implications for marketing? We do not share the point of view that marketing as a discipline has undergone a paradigm shift. The rules of marketing have not changed due to social media, but due to the increasing competitive intensity. Creating and pushing messages used to be successful as long as companies could act like in monopoly-like fashion. Thus, it is cutthroat competition that challenges

marketers to listen and respond to customers' needs and not Facebook and the like. Moreover, it is true that due to a changed media landscape customers need to be addressed differently. Altogether, we understand social media marketing as a tool not a discipline.

Based on our research, we see the following implications for marketing in detail: Our first finding is that social media users have to be considered as senders of marketing communications. Word-of-mouth definitely happens in social media; companies might take notice of it or not. As the latter is not recommendable, marketers should try to identify opinion leaders in order to integrate them into the communication flow and affect word-of-mouth in the firm's favour.

Secondly it has to be stated that a strong social media presence affects the consumers' perception on brands in a positive way. First and foremost, social media marketing should be entertaining and setting the right tone with regard to the target audience.

Furthermore, we concluded that top priority has to be attached to continuously monitoring conversations and content uploaded in blogs and social networks. Tracking of communication will lead to new perspectives and insights that allow management to strategically act in an anticipatory manner. At the same time, data mining contributes to narrowing the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions which will lead to a higher perceived level of service quality.

Ultimately, social media can have a regulating effect on corporate behaviour as the evidence shows. If stakeholders feel that an organisation is not in compliance with ethical and legal standards, social media will be the platform to voice their opinions. The result may be a wave of negative posts and a loss of face. Thus, listening to and dealing constructively with negative feedback has become more important than ever. A few unknowns in the social media equation remain. In our opinion, there is still a lot of ignorance about the new media and its capabilities, especially among elder executives. Thus, many people are still in an experimental phase with social media marketing and far away from a strategy. Furthermore, we must not overlook the fact that data privacy concerns may become more relevant as they obviously are today. In addition, according to our point of view, marketers have to be prepared for increasing reactance to both social media advertising as well as word-of-mouth.

Finally, we would like to conclude by making two points. Firstly, we do not claim to have conducted a valid cross-cultural comparison due to the limited data. Therefore, in order to deepen his/her knowledge about cultural differences and similarities, the reader may use other sources. Secondly, the questions asked in a questionnaire are necessarily limited in scope. Thus, the quantitative data produced might not reveal opportunities for marketing. For instance, thorough behavioural studies are footed on both quantitative and qualitative methods. The analysis of social media usage behaviour in this study was limited to quantitative data. Otherwise, based on the expert interviews that were also conducted, we believe that we arrived at reasonable conclusions on the implications for marketing.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Axel Schlich is Professor of Marketing at University of Applied Sciences Koblenz. He holds a PHD in Economic history and a master's degree in European sciences, both from RWTH Aachen. Before he opted for an academic career in 1998, he has been working in various positions, i.e. assistant to chartered accountants, export sales manager in the glass processing industry, and marketing consultant.

Professor Schlich has been a visiting professor at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences Helsinki for altogether more than two years. Furthermore, his international teaching experience includes guest lectures at Robert Gordon University Aberdeen, Dokuz Eylül University Izmir, ESCIP Longuenesse, Université Paris XII, and TEI Thessaloniki.

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