

# African Generation Y Students' Propensity to Engage in Word-of-Mouth Communication on Facebook

Ayesha Bevan-Dye

North-West University (Vaal Triangle Campus)

**Abstract:** *This paper reports on a study conducted to determine African students' propensity to engage in word-of-mouth communication on Facebook in the South African context. In addition, the study sought to determine whether male and female African Generation Y students differ in their propensity to engage in Facebook word-of-mouth communication. Data was gathered from a convenience sample of 268 students registered at the campuses of three public South African universities using a self-administered questionnaire. This questionnaire included existing scales designed to measure opinion seeking behaviour, opinion sharing behaviour and product information sharing information on social networking sites. The captured data was analysed by means of descriptive statistics and an independent-samples t-test. The results of the study reveal that while African Generation Y students share product information to a limited degree on Facebook, they do not engage in opinion seeking or opinion giving behaviour on the site. Furthermore, there was no significant difference between male and female participants' propensity to engage in word-of-mouth communication on Facebook. These findings suggest that marketers in South Africa are failing to harness the power of social networking sites to benefit from positive electronic word-of-mouth communication amongst the significantly sized African Generation Y cohort.*

**Keywords:** *Facebook, opinion giving behaviour, opinion seeking behaviour, product information sharing behaviour, African Generation Y students, South Africa*

## 1. Introduction

Consumption is a frequent topic in social communication exchanges and word-of-mouth communication refers to consumers informally giving advice or seeking advice concerning consumption-related behaviour [1]. It involves any unpaid interpersonal communication between two consumers [2], where one takes on the role of the opinion leader, offering direct consumption-related advice, and the other takes on the role of the opinion seeker, seeking advice from the person who they perceive as having more knowledge of and more experience with a consumption-related situation [1]. This then leads to the behavioural consequence of product information sharing [2]. Word-of-mouth communication is viewed as one of the most persuasive forms of communication due to its inherent credibility [3], [2], [4]. This credibility stems from the fact that any consumption-related advice offered is objective in that the source is not likely to gain any material benefit from the exchange, thereby rendering it more authentic and trustworthy than marketer-sponsored forms of influence [5], [6].

In the pre-Internet world, the spread of word-of-mouth communication was slow, confined to two or a few individuals [7], and occurred in a spontaneous fashion and then disappeared once the conversation was ended [8]. However, the connectivity afforded by the Internet and the subsequent development of channels, including e-mails, blogs, chat rooms, product review forums, virtual brand communities and social networking sites [9], [10], [7] have given rise to electronic word-of-mouth communication, which is substantially different from traditional word-of-mouth communication. In comparison to traditional word-of-mouth communication, electronic word-of-mouth communication can be spread easily and rapidly to a large number of geographically dispersed individuals, who, in turn, can interactively add their own opinions [4]. In addition, it is more accessible and persistent in that it is typically text-based and, therefore, can be archived, making it available and accessible indefinitely [2], [7]. This has significantly increased opinion seekers ability to gather unbiased consumption-related advice from a multitude of other consumers from across the globe, whilst simultaneously providing opinion leaders with a platform to reach a substantial worldwide audience [11].

Essentially, word-of-mouth communication, whether offline or online, is a form of social communication and social influence [1] that occurs within a social network [12], [13], which renders the collaborative and social

nature of online social networking sites particularly suitable to the spread of electronic word-of-mouth communication [10]. Facebook, a social networking site launched in February 2004, originally served as an online forum for students at Harvard University [14]. Over the past 10 years, it has grown into the largest global social networking site, dwarfing rival social networking sites such as Google+, Twitter and Snapchat [15]. At the end of December 2014, Facebook had an average of 1.39 billion monthly active users [16], up from the 1.23 billion users at the end of 2013 [17]. Despite experiencing a slowing down in its growth rate, Facebook remains the most popular social media site and is expected to continue to grow in the foreseeable future [18]. This situation is echoed in South Africa, where Facebook is also the most popular social media site, with an estimated 11.8 million users in 2015, of which 75 percent accessed the site via their mobile phones [19].

Facebook allows users to update their status concerning their thoughts, opinions, activities and concerns, as well as to upload content that they find interesting and want to share with others, such as photographs, pictures, videos, quotes and the like [20]. On Facebook, approximately 510 comments are posted, 293 000 statuses are updated and 136 000 photos are uploaded every 60 seconds. In one month, an estimated 4.75 billion pieces of content are shared and an average 4.5 billion 'likes' are generated daily [21]. Facebook users can add to their list of friends by accepting friend requests or making friend requests [20]. This feature also allows Facebook users to add organisations to their list of friends by 'liking' their page [4]. They are then able to 'like', comment on and/or share the content posted by their Facebook friends [20], including content from those organisations that they have added to their list of friends.

In terms of the demographics of global Facebook users, there are slightly more female (53%) than male members (47%), and the most common age group is the 18 to 34 year olds [21]. This is similar to the South African Facebook landscape where there is a relatively even split between the genders, with most of the users being between 18 and 29 years of age (37.84%) and being either university graduates (26.58%) or having a postgraduate qualification (19.55%) [22].

Word-of-mouth communication, which may be positive or negative, is essentially beyond the control of the marketer; however, it is essential that steps be taken to manage it given its potential influence on an organisation's brand [23], especially in light of the spread and reach of electronic word-of-mouth communication [11]. Recognising the powerful influence that word-of-mouth communication has on consumers' consumption-related attitudes and actions, marketers have over the years applied a wide variety of strategies to harness its power in an attempt to simulate and stimulate positive word-of-mouth communication [3].

An essential step in engaging consumers in word-of-mouth communication on Facebook is encouraging them to 'like' the organisation's Facebook page. To this end, other media platforms such as television, radio, magazines and newspapers are likely to prove valuable in directing consumers to the organisation's Facebook page [24]. The organisation's Facebook page needs to contain sufficient information because consumers are more likely to discuss brands that they feel they are knowledgeable about [9]. It is also important that opinion leaders be allowed to voice their opinion about the organisation's products/services on the Facebook page, as this will help engage them in the brand encounter [25]. Care should be taken that viral marketing campaigns are not perceived as a form of spamming. Rather, buzz messages should incorporate aspects of fun or humour to engage consumers' interest [26]. Alternatively, they should evoke strong emotions such as fear, sadness or have an inspirational quality to them [12]. Another tactic that may encourage people to share a message on Facebook is to support or sponsor causes that are known to be important to the target audience [9]. Whichever route is followed, the appeal used in the viral campaign should appeal to the need for fun, entertainment and, most importantly, the need for social connection [12]. There should also be mechanisms in place to monitor negative word-of-mouth communication on Facebook, as organisations need to respond officially to such postings to prevent them from spreading further [4]. Finally, it is also essential that the campaigns be carefully targeted at specific segments and that the message content is linked clearly to the brand [26].

The Youth, who in generational studies are currently classified as the Generation Y cohort, represent an important current and future consumer segment across a range of industries [27] and the older members of this cohort, particular university graduates, are also the dominant demographic of the Facebook community globally [21] and in South Africa [22]. While the literature contains several conflicting definitions for the Generation Y cohort [28]-[30], in this study the cohort is defined as including individuals born between 1986 and 2005 [31], [27], which in 2014 included individuals between the ages of 10 and 29. In South Africa, members of the Generation Y cohort made up approximately 38 percent of the country's population of 54 million people in 2014, with the vast majority of that age cohort comprising black Africans (84%) [32]. Clearly, the significant

size of South Africa's African Generation Y cohort makes them an important consumer segment. Those pursuing a university qualification are likely to be of specific interest to marketers in that graduates typically have a higher future earning potential, which translates into a greater amount of future disposable income and stronger spending power. In addition, a tertiary education is commonly associated with a higher social class standing and status within a society [28]. The combined effects of a higher social status and future earning potential are likely to manifest in graduates being trend-setters amongst their peers [20]. This suggests that understanding African Generation Y students' propensity to engage in Facebook word-of-mouth communication may offer important insights into harnessing social media to encourage positive word-of-mouth communication amongst members of this cohort.

While several studies have been conducted in developed economies [24], [2], [10], [4] concerning consumers' propensity to engage in electronic word-of-mouth communication, a perusal of four large online academic databases (Google Scholar, EbscoHost, Sabinet Reference and Emerald) revealed a dearth of such studies in the South African context and none that focused specifically on the country's significantly sized African Generation Y cohort.

As such, the purpose of this paper is to report on a study undertaken to determine African Generation Y students' propensity to engage in word-of-mouth communication in the Facebook environment and to determine whether gender has any effect on this propensity.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Sampling method**

The target population for the study was defined as 18 to 24 year old male and female African students registered at South African public higher education institutions (HEIs). From an initial sampling frame included the 28 public HEI campuses located in Gauteng, judgement sampling was employed to narrow the sampling frame down to include the campuses of three HEIs situated in the Gauteng province – one from a comprehensive university, one from a traditional university and one from a university of technology.

Thereafter, a non-probability convenience sample of 300 students across the three campuses was selected. This sample size of 300 was deemed sufficient as it is similar to several published studies on online word-of-mouth communication that utilised sample sizes of 200 [4], 250 [2] and 309 [24].

A senior academic employed at each of the three campuses was contacted and requested to act as the custodian to students on that campus. Each of these three academics was shown a copy of the questionnaire and asked to go through it to ensure that none of the information requested breached any ethical boundaries. Once their permission had been obtained, fieldworkers distributed the questionnaires to students at the three campuses. Student participation was voluntary and the cover letter of the questionnaire provided an assurance of full confidentiality concerning the information provided by the participants, including the name of the HEI where they were registered.

### **2.2 Research instrument**

A self-administered survey questionnaire was used to gather the required data. African Generation Y students' word-of-mouth communication was measured using the opinion leadership and opinion seeking scales [1] that were adapted for online social networking sites [10]. Their product information sharing behaviour was measured using the online forwarding scale [2], adapted for social networking sites [10]. These scaled responses were measured using a six-point Likert scale that ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). The questionnaire also contained a section for demographic questions that included mother-tongue language, province of origin, age and gender.

A pilot test of the questionnaire was run using 44 students registered at a campus that did not form part of the sampling frame. The Cronbach alpha values returned for the individual constructs in the pilot study ranged between 0.828 and 0.936, which infers satisfactory internal-consistency reliability [33]. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS) and Analysis of Moment Structures (IBM AMOS), Version 22 was used to analyse the collected data.

### 3. Results

Of the 300 questionnaires distributed across the three selected campuses, 268 usable questionnaires were received back, which equates to 89 percent response rate. Each of the seven specified age categories specified in the target population were represented in the sample, and the sample included more females (59.7%) than males (40.3%) participants. The sample included participants from each of South Africa's 11 official language groups, with most indicating being Sesotho speaking (28.7%), followed by those reporting their mother-tongue language as Zulu (14.2%), Tswana (13.1%) and Xhosa (11.9%). Each of the country's nine provinces was represented in the sample, with the most respondents indicating their province of origin as the Gauteng province (54.1%). The provinces of the Northern Cape (0.4%) and the Western Cape (1.1%) were the least represented in the sample. A description of the sample is given in Table 1.

TABLE I: Sample Description

Age	(%)	Gender	(%)	Language	(%)	Home province	(%)
18	16.8	Male	40.3	Afrikaans	1.1	Eastern Cape	5.6
19	34.3	Female	59.7	English	5.2	Free State	7.8
20	22.0			Ndebele	1.5	Gauteng	54.1
21	12.3			Xhosa	11.9	KwaZulu-Natal	4.1
22	9.7			Zulu	14.2	Limpopo	16.4
23	2.6			Sepedi	9.7	Mpumalanga	4.9
24	2.2			Sesotho	28.7	North West	5.6
				Tswana	13.1	Northern Cape	0.4
				Swati	3.0	Western Cape	1.1
				Venda	6.7		
				Tsonga	4.9		

Cronbach alpha values of 0.906 for opinion seeking construct, 0.885 for opinion giving construct and 0.861 for product information sharing construct were computed, thereby providing evidence of the internal-consistency reliability of the scales in the main survey.

Thereafter, the data were analysed by computing the descriptive statistics of the mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis, as reported in Table 2.

TABLE II: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Opinion seeking	2.60	1.42	0.579	-0.736
Opinion giving	2.36	1.28	0.701	-0.469
Product information sharing	3.10	1.44	0.116	-1.071

The negative kurtosis values, coupled with the positive skewness values reported in Table 2 suggest a relatively flat distribution with a build-up of low scores [34]. Given that the scale ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6), the only mean value marginally in the agreement portion of the scale is the one for product information sharing behaviour (mean=3.10). The mean values for opinion seeking behaviour (mean=2.60) and opinion giving behaviour (mean=2.36) are both in the disagree area of the Likert scale. This infers that whilst African Generation Y students engage in moderate product information sharing behaviour on Facebook, they do not use the site to give or receive consumption-related word-of-mouth communication. This is in contrast to two separate studies conducted in the U.S.A., which both found that university students utilise online social networking sites, especially Facebook, to engage in the word-of-mouth communication activities of opinion seeking, opinion giving and product information sharing behaviour [10], [4].

In order to assess whether there was a difference between male and female participants' propensity to engage in Facebook word-of-mouth communication, an independent samples t-test was conducted, where the significance level was set at 0.05. The results of this test are reported in Table 3.

TABLE 3: Gender differences in Facebook word-of-mouth communication

	Mean Males N=108	Mean Females N=160	Mean difference	t-values	p-values
Opinion seeking	2.67	2.55	0.12	0.695	0.488
Opinion giving	2.46	2.29	0.18	1.111	0.267
Product information sharing	3.14	3.02	0.12	0.673	0.502

As is evident from Table 3, there is no significant difference between male and female African Generation Y students' propensity to engage in opinion seeking ( $p=0.488>0.05$ ), opinion giving ( $p=0.267>0.05$ ) or product information sharing ( $p=0.502>0.05$ ) behaviour on Facebook. Despite these differences being non-significant, it is interesting to note that males scored slightly higher than females on all three dimensions. This is in contrast to the literature where females, who tend to have a greater desire to socially connect with others [35], typically score higher than their male counterparts on both opinion seeking and opinion leadership behaviour [35]-[37].

## 4. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to determine African Generation Y students' propensity to engage in the Facebook word-of-mouth communication in the South African context and to determine whether gender has any effect on this propensity. The findings indicate that there is a low propensity to engage in Facebook word-of-mouth communication amongst African Generation Y students in South Africa. Furthermore, no significant differences were found between male and female' Facebook word-of-mouth communication inclination. It appears that marketers in South Africa have been slow to take advantage of social networking sites such as Facebook to encourage the diffusion of positive electronic word-of-mouth communication. Indeed, the press notes that South African marketers have failed to fully realise the marketing opportunities afforded by social media in general [38]. Marketers need to use other media forms to encourage African Generation Y individuals to 'like' their organisation's Facebook page. In addition, they need to create buzz and launch viral online marketing campaigns by appealing to strong emotions, especially the desire for social connection.

## 5. Acknowledgements

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