

Online customer reviews vs celebrity-endorsed sport brands: Effects on customers' brand image perception

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the last years the internet has undergone a lot of changes in terms of the emergence of the Web 2.0 and electronic Word of Mouth. Individuals nowadays spend a lot of time online in order to read news, get in touch with friends on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter or get information about a product or service. Furthermore, the internet is used to share experiences with other people and give advice about products, leading to the development of electronic Word of Mouth. This high level of online activity motivated sport brands to also work on their online appearance. Researchers have found that advertising on social media platforms can rise a brand's level of popularity and will also bring along new customers. To better utilize this new form of advertisement sport brands use celebrities as part of their social media campaigns for product promotions. The present study investigates the effectiveness of advertisement using a celebrity endorsed product vs. online customer reviews about the product. Based on a survey of 211 respondents it can be concluded that the online customer reviews have a greater influence on the customers' brand image perception than a celebrity does. Factors which are taken into account were the amount of reviews needed, different reviewing platforms and most influencing words and phrases.

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Keywords

Social Media, Celebrity Endorsement Advertisement, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Brand Perception

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Relevance of topic

The internet has experienced a variety of changes throughout the last years. Important factors which have played a significant role during this development are, among others, the increasing globalized world and the emergence of the Web 2.0., which enables the consumer to use social media platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, on a frequent basis (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011). With these developments and the newly available communication channels, people are spending a lot of time online in order to, for example, purchase new products, socialize with friends or gather information on products and services. Consequently, these communication channels enable the user to communicate “open-ended, branching, hyperlinked, cross-media [...] and unpredictable” (Alexander & Levine, 2008). Social networking and communicating has thus emerged as a global movement (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011). Users are highly interested in how they appear on social media platforms but are also paying a lot of attention to other users’ activity and their experiences. Applications and platforms which are used the most are, among others, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Such channels and online platforms are also used to share positive and negative experiences about a product or brand with other users, which leads to a significant growth of electronic Word of Mouth (Wang, Jiang, Guo, 2012), representing the most influential factor when it comes to online purchases (Wei & Lu, 2012). Reviews published on different kinds of websites are therefore personally created by other individual users and not published by a professional institution (Gaines-Ross, 2010). Those comments and reviews will help other consumers to get informed about the product or service they are interested in. Recent studies have shown that 70% of global consumers trust other buyers’ reviews more than marketer-generated information (Vázquez, Munoz-García, Campanella, Poch, Fisas, Bel & Andreu, 2014).

Furthermore, brands and companies are also becoming aware of the growing importance and development of social media. Especially in the sport sector, an emerging trend, which is observable, is the frequent use of online communication channels in order to keep fans and followers posted about news and changes and “deliver value when, where and how fans want to receive it” (Balluli & Hutchinson, 2010). Brands such as Nike, Adidas and Puma are examples of big companies who make use of social media advertising successfully. Besides the traditional advertisements on the companies’ websites they make use of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. This online presence results in an effective communication with the consumer (Santomier, 2008). Consumers become more aware of what a brand is currently doing and which new products they are launching.

Additionally, sport brands started making more and more use of celebrities when promoting a product. A professional from a specific field of sports, suitable to the brand’s product, is chosen to promote a product and make the campaign more attractive to the targeted market segment. This high level of popularity of many celebrities as part of a marketing strategy gives the customer a more personal picture of the brand (Erdogan, 1999). However, with critical consumers online, posts including celebrities will also be evaluated and commented by other users, always accessible to people interested in the promoted brand. Those user-generated reviews have a high influence on consumers when choosing a brand and perceiving a brand image. Nowadays, consumers not only chose a brand and buy a product,

but instead they are paying a lot of attention to other peoples’ experiences and suggestions before making a purchase.

Therefore, it is important to elaborate on the extent of influencing factors on a consumer’s perception towards sport brands. Influencing factors which will be taken into account in the present study are, on the one hand, posts uploaded by sport brands including celebrity-endorsed products on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, and, on the other hand, comments and online customer reviews on different platforms about this specific promoted product.

1.2 Background

Throughout the last years the presence on social media platforms became an attractive marketing opportunity for companies, individuals as well as celebrities. The most popular social media platforms are, among others, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs. Nowadays around 73% of listed Fortune 500 companies have a Twitter account and 66% are active on Facebook (Abzari, Ghassemi & Vosta, 2014). Twitter and Facebook gained a lot of new members since their launch. Facebook has been launched in 2009 and has now over 1.44 billion members. Twitter can count more than 100 million users which is even more than the whole population in Germany (80 million). To illustrate how much user content is generated on social media, one has to look at the content sharing on the aforementioned applications. For example, every minute 10 hours of content, in terms of videos, are uploaded to the video sharing platform YouTube from places all over the globe (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The immense growth of social media platforms shows that mankind is in the middle of a shared communication landscape (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). Within the last years, companies became aware of the importance of their appearance on such platforms and even hired professionals that are solely responsible for taking care of the online presence of the organization. Sharing news, posting information about a new product, dealing with customers online and several other tasks are part of their job.

To understand the function and structure of the social media Kietzman et al. (2011) analyzed seven building blocks which need to be taken into account when making a step into the online world, namely identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups – the so called honeycomb of social media (Figure 1).

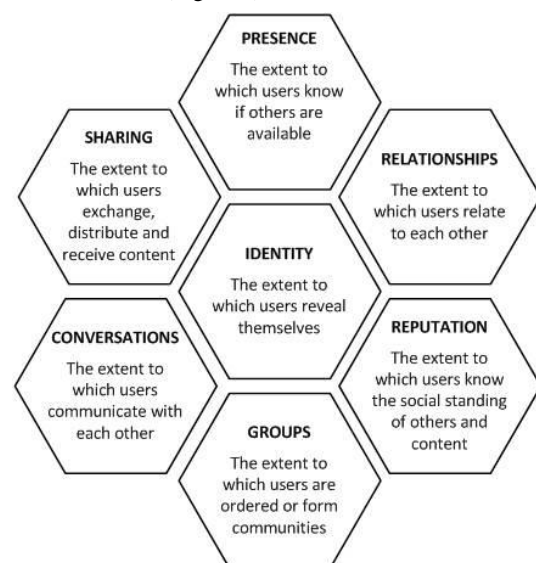


Figure 1. Social media functionality (Kietzman et al., 2011).

The different blocks do not all have to be included in a successful social media strategy, however, they function as a guideline to know in how far social media works (Kietzman et al., 2011). Hence, they are the fundamentals for a successful presence on online platforms. When analyzing this model based on the specific context of the firm, it can help to better understand the community and target group and develop a suitable social media strategy according to the needs and functions depending on the balance between the different blocks.

1.3 Goal of the study

The present study aims at familiarizing the reader with the phenomenon social media and its increasing importance in a world in which the internet has become a crucial part in the everyday life of many individuals. To get a better understanding of the topic and its characteristics the corresponding factors such as Web 2.0 and user generated content (UGC) will be discussed.

The degree to which certain factors influence consumers' brand image perception towards sport brands will be analyzed. Factors which will be taken into account are celebrity-endorsement advertisement on social media platforms and online customer reviews about these brands in the sport industry. The aim is to figure out which of the two factors has the greatest impact on consumers' brand perception. Due to the vast amount of literature already available on the topic, a clear and objective study has to be provided.

Academic Relevance

This study will bring value to existing literature on social media and its different functions. To make this more specific the main focus lies on celebrity-endorsed sport brands vs. online customer reviews in regard to a customers' brand perception with focus on the sport sector. There already exists literature which describes the power of social media, celebrity endorsement advertisement and online customer reviews, however, there are no studies which identify the relationship between the aforementioned elements and the influence on the customers' brand image perception.

Practical Relevance

Since nowadays consumers more frequently purchase products online, it is important to assess to what extent online content influences their buying behavior. Besides becoming aware of products promoted by a celebrity, which are posted by the companies themselves using social media platforms, consumers also value learning about other consumers' experiences with the promoted brand. This empirical study will give an insight on which factor will have the greatest influence on a brand image perception. Reviews which will be taken into account will be comments belonging to a brand which uses celebrities to launch its new products. An example for this can be Nike, who closely works together with the professional basketball player Michael Jordan in order to advertise a new basketball shoe (See Appendix, Figure 1).

Consumers can post their reviews directly under the advertising post on social media platforms, on other reviewing websites such as Zalando or Amazon or on the brand's website itself. When a consumer starts gathering information he will take these reviews into consideration. Once the customer builds up an image about the brand he or she will decide if the product is worth buying. However, until this final decision is made, the user has undergone a lot of different stages which in literature is also described as the AIDA model of consumer behavior - Attention, Interest, Desire, Action (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). It starts with becoming aware of the product and goes further to getting interested in its functions, until making the final buying decision. The present study will only include the first three stages as

background information and will not account for the fourth stage as action is the consequence of the first three stages and therefore not influenced by the two factors assessed. In the first three, the degree of influence will be the greatest and are thus more interesting for the performed study. This model is mentioned as a background theory in order to understand the steps a consumer is going through when buying a product. Nonetheless it does not need to be analyzed in detail since it is not a necessary part of the actual research and its variables.

After introducing the topic and describing its importance in today's world, the following research question is formulated:

Which external factor, online customer reviews vs. celebrity endorsement advertising, has the greatest influence on a customers' brand image perception in the sport industry?

Sub-research questions:

- *What is celebrity endorsement advertising and how is it performed?*
- *Are comments of other online users important for the choice of a brand?*
- *Are there specific styles of reviews and reviewing platforms customers are more interested in (in regard to used words, scale rate and platform)?*

The structure of the present paper will be as follows. The literature review part will explain all relevant key concepts concerning the study, such as social media, user generated content, electronic word-of-mouth and consumers' brand perception. Afterwards, the main outcomes of the conducted empirical study will be described and a critical view on the data will give a conclusion to the aforementioned research questions.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to evaluate the aforementioned academic relevance, the study systematically analyzes relevant scientific literature covering the topics and characteristics of social media, celebrity endorsement advertisement, online customer reviews and consumers' brand image perception. To define the most important key terms, a literature review will be conducted which enables the combination of findings of different research and the identification of a suitable definition.

The used literature has been collected through online search engines such as Google Scholar and Scopus. Additionally, the online library of the University of Twente has been helpful in finding relevant literature. To the extent of getting an overview of the conducted literature, all useful information was listed in a literature matrix, in which key words and the used articles are mentioned. This makes it easier to find suitable information when writing the literature review. In consideration of only using applicable articles, after finding a potential article the abstract of the found article is scanned and information such as the journal, year of publication, key words and the conclusion is checked. This helps, to eliminate unusable articles before including it into the literature matrix. Only if an article is of high importance regarding key word definitions, the year of publication, for example, is not relevant anymore. Key words, which helped to find useful articles were, among others, social media, celebrity endorsement advertising in the sport industry and in general, electronic word-of-mouth and online customer reviews.

For the purpose of looking how a customer is actually behaving, a survey has been developed aiming at students and people who are active on social media platforms and have a sportive lifestyle, since the study will focus on the influence in the sport industry. The background and main current occupation is not determined in advance since a variety of different kind of people will bring more insight into the topic and thus more significant results.

The questionnaire has been created via Qualtrics, an online software tool for developing surveys. The online survey has been sent via Social Media platforms such as Facebook and via mail to the respondents. It included questions about the online activity and personal research on celebrities and sport brands, online reviews about these brands and the resulting perception towards these brands (See Appendix 'Questionnaire'). It consisted of a mixture of closed questions, demographic questions and rating scales questions. In total 211 respondents filled out the survey.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section identifies key concepts relevant for understanding the topic. Suitable definitions based on previous research will be conducted.

3.1 Social media, Web 2.0 and user generated content

Social media and user generated content are two terms which in the world of the Web 2.0 belong together, however they should be differentiated in their definitions. To understand the basic idea of these concepts a look into the history is appropriate.

It all started with a worldwide discussion system developed by two students in the 80s, the so called 'Usenet' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As the word 'Usenet' already says, it enabled the early users to use this platform in order to publish their thoughts and messages online and thus make it available to the public world. Another successful innovation, already launched 20 years earlier, is known as the nowadays called 'blog'. Two students developed a platform on which online diaries were put together in one community in which the writers could get into contact (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Those two innovations were the starting point for the nowadays well-known platforms Facebook and MySpace. Knowing the basic idea of Social Media leads to the next steps, the phenomena of Web 2.0 and user generated content.

The emergence of the Web 2.0, first introduced in 2004, makes it possible for online customers to share their opinions and experiences about goods and services with other users (Wei & Lu, 2012). The web is no longer a world in which only professionals post information and news, it became a personal world in which content is created by every kind of person who has access to the World Wide Web (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It thus works as a people's mind, in which the interaction between several users is facilitated. Social media, enabling users to "create, modify, share and discuss internet content" (Kietzman et al., 2011), is part of the Web 2.0 which thus shows that the Web 2.0 is the name for a world with different internet based applications (Laroche, Habibi & Richard, 2012). Laroche et al. (2012) analyzed that consumers spent 1/3 of their time online, which is a great amount and emphasizes the great importance of the World Wide Web in today's world.

To first make clear what actually stands behind user generated content (UGC), first used in 2005, the following definition is used: "User Generated Content can be seen as the sum of all ways in which people make use of Social Media" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Due to UGC a tribal community with different kind of people is developed (O'Brien, 2011). Consumers get the chance to learn something about a brand, product or service with the help of experiences shared by more than 10 million people online (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This content is shared variously which is however publicly available. The most obvious character of UGC is the high level of creativity and the fact that it is created by an individual and not by professionals (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). This shifts the consumer from a passive observer to a more

active user, who not only buys products online but also shares its own experiences with a good or service (O'Brien, 2011).

3.2 Sport brands on social media platforms using celebrity endorsement advertising

During the last years, companies made more and more use of social media platforms to promote their brand and products. The companies figured out that being active on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter is an extremely powerful way to monetize the brand in a digital way (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010). Especially in the sport industry a lot of brands have, for example, a Facebook page in order to get in direct contact with their customers (Santomier, 2008). Examples for this, are among others, Nike, Adidas and Puma.

There are several motivating factors which play a role when companies from the sport industry decide to be active on social media platforms. Social media enables a company to actually 'live' its brand and products and promote it to the consumers effectively (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010). As previously mentioned, these platforms are a great possibility to influencing interested customers and are thus more or less mandatory in a companies' marketing strategy (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011). Since it is an important part of a successful strategy, social media makes it possible to "develop brand awareness more rapidly in new markets" (Santomier, 2008).

When looking at the posts different sport brands are publishing, one thing is really conspicuous. A lot of brands are using celebrities who are promoting a specific product. To make clear, a celebrity is "an individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement" (Steve, 2010). It is analyzed that including celebrities in marketing campaigns will lead to greater advertisements recall rates (Ilicic & Webster, 2011). Additionally, the more personal the celebrity appears in these posts, the more the customer can identify with him or her. Nonetheless it is important that the celebrity who is included in the commercial is actually a professional of the sport the product can be used for, such as Michael Jordan, a professional basketball player, is promoting a new basketball shoe for Nike (see Appendix Figure 1). Previous research concluded that 25% of all American commercials use a celebrity to make it more successful and influence the consumer (Sheu, 2010) since a celebrity used to be more trustworthy, believable and likeable (Silvera & Austad, 2003).

Celebrity endorsement advertisement thus evolved as a modern day marketing tool, since a lot of the consumers will combine the promoted brand with a famous person and make them feel closer to their idol when having the product he or she is promoting (Wei & Lu, 2012).

3.3 Electronic Word-of-mouth

Due to the emergence of the Web 2.0, electronic word-of-mouth (in the following mentioned as eWOM) and online customer reviews became more and more popular. Since such content is available anywhere and anytime, 70% of all consumers trust in the reviews posted by other users (Vazquez et al., 2014). To define word of mouth the following description is the most appropriate one: eWOM is an "oral or written recommendation by a satisfied customer to the prospective customers of a good or service" (Business Dictionary). The reviews posted online are not created by professionals but rather by persons like you and I who are willing to share their own experiences with a specific brand or product. This makes the reviews more reliable and plays a huge role when choosing a brand. The reviews can be published on the website itself or on third party websites (Weo & Lu, 2012).

The published reviews mostly include information and opinions of others, which leads to an advice for the costumer who is interested in the brand or product (Goldsmith, 2008).

The different reviews can be good or bad, which thus leads to positive or negative eWOM and since companies do not always have the ability to control the comments by users it is all trustworthy (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). Based on a study by Wang et al. (2012), 82% of online reviews have a direct influence on purchasing decisions, which also states that not only one review is taken into account, but that people are influenced by a group of consumers. The former opinions about products are not shared between friends only anymore, those private conversations are now published online (Wang et al, 2012).

3.4 Consumers' brand perception

An appearance of different brands on social media platforms using celebrity endorsement advertisement will help a consumer to choose for a brand and its products. Since brands spend a lot of time on choosing the right channel, celebrity and words, the promotion seems really trustworthy and convincing. The more credible and attractive such a post is, the more interested the users become in the brand (Steve, 2010).

Furthermore, if the celebrity is chosen carefully and is not playing its role as a famous person but rather like a friend, the consumer can identify with the promoted brand more easily (Steve, 2010). But not only celebrities have a high influence on a consumers' brand perception. Other peoples' opinion also play a great role in choosing a product. The more a consumer learns about a product, the more likely it is that he or she is passing from the attention phase to the interest and finally desire phase of the AIDA model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action (Bickart & Schindler, 2001)). For consumers it is easier to make a choice when more than one user has voted for the brand, since a product will probably be better than one which only has a few reviews (Burnkrant, 1982).

3.5 Conceptual Model

Based on the aforementioned components and key literature, the following conceptual model, including the different variables, can be developed:

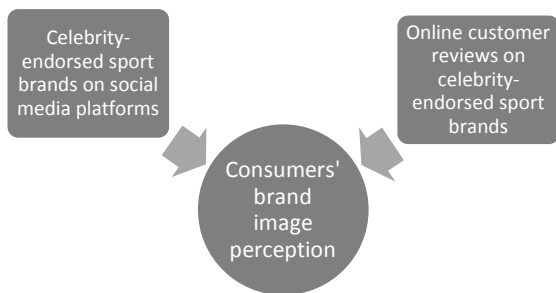


Figure 2. Influencing factors on a consumers' brand perception.

This conceptual model describes the different steps a consumer experiences until choosing a brand and which are thus the main factors which are going to be analyzed in the present paper.

4. RESULTS

4.1 General Information about Respondents

After running the survey for 7 days, 211 complete surveys have been collected. However, in total 422 respondents have started the survey, but did not completely finish it leading to a dropout rate of 50%. Since n=211 is still a high number of participants, the following results can be seen as significant in order to answer the research questions.

From the valid 211 respondents the distribution regarding gender is even with 43,60% men and 56,40% women which therefore leads to a general result. The resulting median of all respondents is 24 years.

Table 3. Gender distribution

#	Answer	%	Response
1	Male	43,60%	92
2	Female	56,40%	119
	Total	100%	211

In order to be able to generalize the analyzed results and conclusions later, respondents from different countries have been collected. Even though more than half of the respondents are from Germany (62,09%), there are still a lot of respondents from other countries, such as, the Netherlands, Australia, Scandinavia or US-America. Therefore, the results will be significant enough to make a general conclusion regardless the country of origin if there are no outliers with regard to specific questions asked in the survey.

Regarding the current main occupation of the different respondents, the majority are students, 77,25%, which are also the most active people on social media platforms and thus, as aforementioned, the main target group of this paper. This, however, does not mean that the other respondents are not taken into account including occupations such as being employed, self-employed or unemployed. All occupations are going to be analyzed equally. Other mentioned occupations, which were not an option in the survey and has to be written down individually, are doing a traineeship or internship. The following table shows the different distributions on the given answers:

Table 4. Current main occupation of respondents

#	Answer	%	Response
1	Student	77,25%	163
2	Self-employed	2,84%	6
3	Employed	16,59%	35
4	Unemployed	2,37%	5
5	Other	0,95%	2
	Total	100%	211

4.2 Social Media Behavior

Since the survey was mostly shared on social media platforms, all of the respondents are consequently using social media platforms, which was a requirement for the data collection. The respondents do not only use one social media platforms, most of them are using two or three platforms from which the majority is using Facebook, 98,10%, and YouTube, 70,14%. Nearly all of the respondents are using Facebook, which shows that this channel has a very high level of popularity. As stated in the literature, Facebook is a still growing platform which is used all over the world to connect with other people. Other platforms which are used quite often are the professional platforms LinkedIn and, its German version Xing, 45,02%, and the photo sharing app Instagram, with 46,45%.

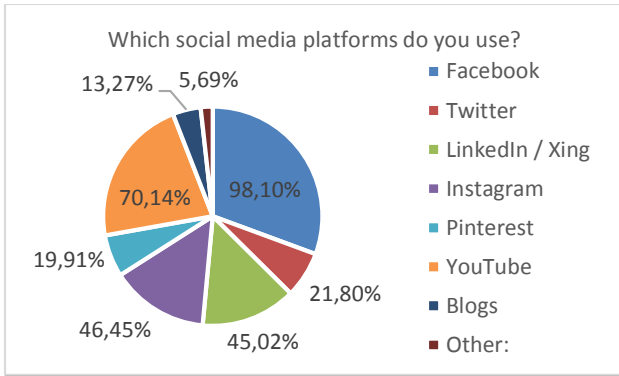


Figure 5. Social media platforms used

Nowadays, brands, in the sport sector, are also using the high popularity of social media in order to promote their brand and products. Therefore, people are also following brands online. Popular platforms on which users are following sport brands are, again, Facebook, 23,70%, and Instagram, 12,80%. Other platforms which are also quite popular are YouTube, Pinterest and the normal daily offline newspapers or magazines. Even though these numbers are not that high, it shows that there is some interest in the online activity of brands. The main reason for following a sport brand online, such as Nike or Adidas, is the interest in the products offered by the brand. More than half of the people following a sport brand online are doing it for the reason that they like the products offered by the brand (65,96%). The second most popular reason is the fact that brands give tips on how to live healthy, 23,40%, and give motivation to actually work out. Only 7,45% say that they follow the brand because of the celebrity who is endorsing a specific product.

Given an example of a celebrity-endorsed product (See Appendix Figure 1) and asking the respondent how likely it is that he or she is more convinced to buy the product, the percentage is surprisingly low. Only 1,90%, 4 respondents, say that it is very likely to be more convinced to choose a product of the celebrity-endorsed brand. More than half of the respondents say that it is very unlikely to be convinced, 29,38%, 62 respondents. As table 6 shows, there are still 22,27% who say that it is somewhat likely that if an advertisement includes a celebrity they will buy a product of the brand. Therefore, it can be said that using celebrity endorsement is nevertheless a successful tool for promoting a brand and gaining more costumers.

Table 6. Convinced to buy a product of a celebrity-endorsed brand

#	Answer	%	Response
1	Very Unlikely	23,38%	62
2	Unlikely	24,17%	51
3	Somewhat unlikely	15,64%	33
4	Somewhat likely	22,27%	47
5	Likely	6,64%	14
6	Very likely	1,90%	4
	Total	100%	211

All respondents of the survey are active users on social media platforms and are more or less interested in sport brands' online activities. However, when it comes to the definite decision of

choosing a brand or product, there are several steps and influencing factors which the user has to deal with. These factors and different steps are described and analyzed in the following sections.

4.3 Online Customer Reviews and Consumer Brand Perception

4.3.1 Other Users' Comments and Experiences

When a customer got aware of a brand or a specific product, it does not automatically mean that a product will be bought without looking for other information about it. 97,63% of all respondents confirm that they have already checked other customer reviews and opinions before actually buying a product. These are 206 out of the total 211 respondents, which shows that nearly everyone is gathering more information about the product before making a final buying decision. In general, 80 people out of 211 (37,91%) say that they look at customer reviews quite often before the actual product choice. Only around 11% rarely or even never check other experiences and make their own choices. When it comes to celebrity-endorsed sport products, which are promoted on social media platform, the numbers are quite different. Comments under those posts written by other users are not that relevant for choosing a product than are other online reviewing platforms. Only 35,15% are checking these posts in order to learn more about the brand and other peoples' opinions and experiences. When seeing a celebrity-endorsed product on, for example, a Facebook page of a sport brand, the user prefers to check different kinds of platforms including online customer reviews before making his or her own decision about buying the product. The interest in other reviewing platforms will be described in the next paragraphs.

4.3.2 Online Customer Reviews and Reviewing Platforms

If other reviewing platforms are taken into account, the majority, 81,52%, is choosing retailing websites such as Amazon in order to get suitable information about the brand or product they are interested in. The second most popular source for looking for product reviews are independent reviewing platforms such as tripadvisor.com for the tourism industry. Figure 8 shows the distribution among different reviewing platforms which are popular for getting information about a brand the user is interested in. The 2,84% of other websites are, for example, the German platform testberichte.de and the Dutch technology reviewing platform tweakers.net

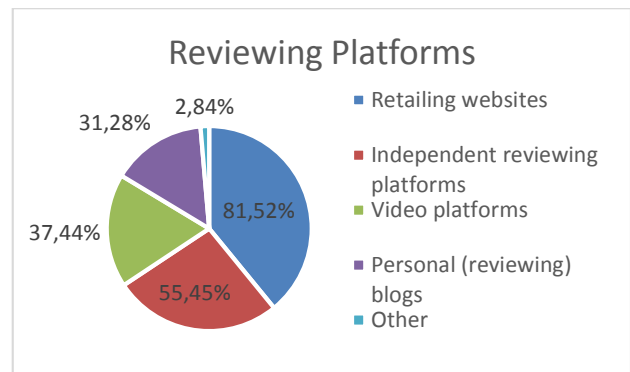


Figure 8. Use of other reviewing platforms

When looking at how many reviews a user needs in order to be convinced of the product, the number is relatively low. More than half of all the respondents, 129 out of 211 (63,86%), only need around 1-10 respondents in order to trust the celebrity endorsed brand. Whereas only 16 (7,92%) need more than 51 reviews before making a decision (See Appendix Table 9).

Additionally, there are also differences in the type of reviews users prefer. On reviewing platforms two types of reviews can be identified. On the one hand there are qualitative reviews in form of written descriptions or videos and, on the other hand quantitative reviews, giving a product a grade or star rating. Even though one would expect that there is a significant difference in the preferred type of reviews, the distribution is only 55% voting for qualitative vs 45% who would rather prefer quantitative reviews for a product.

4.3.3 Words and Phrases influencing a consumers' brand perception

Having a closer look at reviews and how they are constructed, a content analysis can be performed in order to identify the most important words and phrases which have the greatest influence on a consumers' buying decision. This type of quantitative method helps to make an evaluation of the content which is useful and which can be excluded in a text. In the questionnaire the respondents were asked to evaluate different positive and negative words, which are the most common ones in reviews, regarding their level of importance and influence (see questionnaire in Appendix). Table 10 shows a list of the positive and negative words used in the questionnaire.

Table 10. Positive and negative words used in online customer reviews

Positive words	Negative words
1 Happy - Satisfied	1 Not working
2 Comfortable	2 Never again
3 Good quality	3 Not how expected
4 Always again	4 Price too high
5 Brand is like expectation	5 Picture not like product

As one would expect one phrase to be the most important one, all of the listed phrases are ranked to be equally important. When first looking at the outcome regarding the positive words (see Table 11), most of the respondents say that such kind of words are 'very important' for their brand image and consequently the buying decision, whereby the phrase 'good quality' has reached the greatest amount of respondents (45,50%, 96 respondents). 42,65% still say that it is extremely important and less than 3% see it as somewhat important or even not important at all. The phrase 'always again' has a kind of regular distribution throughout the level of importance. The highest amount is still on very important (45,50%), however, there are still around 30% who say that such a review is somewhat or not important at all. All of the listed phrases got between 30% and 45% on 'very important' regarding on which words or phrases the users are paying the most attention to. One conspicuous fact however, is that the phrase 'good quality' is obviously a pretty convincing one, since only 3% of all respondents say that it is somewhat unimportant or even very unimportant.

Table 11. Importance of positive words and phrases

	Not at all important	Very unimportant	Somewhat unimportant	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
1	2,37%	2,84%	8,06%	32,23%	40,28%	14,22%
2	2,84%	1,42%	9%	31,28%	43,6%	11,85%
3	0,95%	0,95%	0,47%	9,48%	45,50%	42,65%

4	5,69%	5,21%	19,91%	28,91%	30,33%	9,48%
5	4,74%	0,95%	12,32%	30,815	36,02%	14,69%

When looking at the negative phrases (see Table 12), the distributions are quite similar. However, hereby the majority thinks that the listed words are somewhat or very important, such as 36% say that the phrase 'price too high' is 'somewhat important' and for 43% 'not working' is 'very important'. If a review contains the words 'never again' most of the respondents think that this is 'extremely important' (30%) and has the greatest influence on their brand image. Other percentages can be seen in the following table:

Table 12. Importance of positive words and phrases

	Not at all important	Very unimportant	Somewhat unimportant	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
1	1,90%	1,43%	3,33%	12,86%	43,81%	36,67%
2	3,33%	2,86%	15,24%	21,43%	27,14%	30%
3	2,86%	1,90%	12,86%	31,90%	37,62%	12,86%
4	4,76%	6,67%	21,90%	36,19%	22,38%	8,10%
5	1,90%	3,33%	10,48%	24,76%	37,62%	21,90%

4.3.4 Most important aspects when choosing a product – Ranking

Asking the respondents to order key words which have an influence on their brand image based on their importance, the outcome is quite surprisingly (See Appendix Table 13). Options to be ranked were the following:

1. Marketing communication of the brand (via e.g. the website, Facebook Page, Twitter channel)
2. Endorsed celebrity
3. Comments by other users under those posts of the brand on social media
4. Online customer reviews on other websites
5. Peer group influence (friends and family)
6. Nothing bothers me – I make my own choices.

The options which are on the first position the most are online customers reviews with 27,49% and the influence by friends and family (26,07%). Remarkable is that only 0,95% say that the endorsed celebrity is an important factor for choosing a brand. More than half of the respondents (51,66%) say it is the least important factor of influence and put it thus on the last position. There are still around 22% who are not interested in all of the aforementioned options and only make their own choices. Marketing communication of the brand and comments by other users are having an equal distribution regarding their level of importance. Therefore, for both options the first rank is chosen by around 12% and the fifth rank by around 15%. Online customer reviews and peer group are thus the options which are chosen for first position the most.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The following section will evaluate whether there exists a relationship between the different variables and if there are any outliers within these relationships. By this, one can assess whether the aforementioned results could be explained by, for

example, demographics or occupations, or if the respondents can be seen as one group without any differences between their online behavior and gender or nationality.

5.1 Relationship between different variables

5.1.1 Gender and social media platforms

As already mentioned in the description of the results, in total there are 92 male and 119 female participants which is a representative sample number in order to draw conclusions on the basis of the given answers. The distribution of the gender among the use of social media platforms is in general equal between men and women, however there are some differences. All female respondents are using Facebook, whereas for the male respondents it is 95%. For both sexes it is common to, for example, share, comment or like posts on Facebook or to get in touch with friends. The same counts for Twitter and the professional platforms LinkedIn and Xing. The amount of women and men using these platforms is quite the same. In addition the music video platform YouTube is used by around 70% of all women and men. However, when it comes to Instagram and Pinterest, both platforms on which the user is asked to share or like pictures, more women are actively using them. Only around 34% men are on Instagram, 56% of the women. On Pinterest 9% of men are active users, whereas the percentage for women is three times higher (9% men vs 27% women). Female users thus seem to be more interested in sharing pictures or looking at other peoples' lives whereas men rather seem to focus on platforms such as YouTube or LinkedIn, platforms which do not require a lot of one's own initiative or creativity to socialize whereas women use platforms to actively interact with other users.

5.1.2 Age and frequency of checking online customer reviews before purchasing a product

The respondents can be divided into three groups, 16-20 years old, 21-25, 26-30 and 31 and older, in order to get a better overview over the different age groups. The first group most likely includes students from a high school, the second one students studying at a university, the third group people who just started working and the last one people who already have been working for some time. It is interesting to compare these age groups as they are expected to show a different behavior regarding online customer reviews and how often such reviews are checked before purchasing a product.

After having a close look at the data, some striking numbers can be noticed. Independently of the age groups, almost no one says that online customer reviews are never checked. Only 1.3% of the 21 till 25 years old group say they are never checking reviews before a product purchase. The majority of this group (43%) are looking at online customer reviews quite often, so are the people between 16 and 20 years (40%). The majority of the third group (34%), between 26 and 30 years, says that online customer reviews are viewed very often. Those people want to be certain about the product they are buying and what to expect and are hence checking other people's opinion more frequently.

In the oldest group, however, most of the people rarely check reviews (20%) or only sometimes (46%). The reason for that may be that those people are from a generation in which the internet and social media have not been popular yet and they are not used to getting information about a product on the internet. They rather make their own decisions about what products or services to buy and look for information elsewhere.

In conclusion one can say that there actually is a relationship between age and frequency of checking online customer reviews before purchasing a product. The younger the people the more often they are checking online reviews and get more information

about a product. This may be due to the fact that those people grew up with the internet and the Web 2.0. They are used to be online and get information as a part of their everyday life. The groups with older people also check reviews, however, not as frequently as the other groups do. They are not as familiar with the internet as the younger people and rather look for product information in other places.

5.1.3 Nationality and number of reviews needed

The majority of Dutch, German and US American respondents need between one and ten reviews to read to be convinced of a product or brand. Around 40% and 50% of the Dutch and US American respondents need between one and ten reviews. The amount of Germans is somewhat higher, namely 63%. German customers thus do not need that many reviews and the opinion of others in order to be convinced of the product or brand. They built up their own brand image and make buying decisions on their own. For all nationalities, the number of people checking 51 reviews or more is below 10%. Thus only a few people need such great amount of reviews.

All nationalities have more or less the same distribution among the different options and all prefer to have between one and ten reviews. Hence, there is no relationship between the nationality and the number of reviews needed in order to be convinced of a brand or product.

5.1.4 Nationality and most influencing factors

When looking at the relationship between the nationality of the respondents and the most influencing factors, such as the marketing communication of a brand, the endorsed celebrity or online customer reviews, there are differences to be noticed in the chosen most important influencing factor. All three groups, German, Dutch and US American, have chosen a different top one. Whereas most of the respondents from the US say that nothing bothers them and they make their own choices on a brand or product (50%), the majority of Germans chose peer groups, such as family and friends as the most important factor of influence in the buying decision process, followed by online customer reviews with only one respondent less. For the Dutch respondents, online customer reviews are the most important one followed by peer groups.

These results show that there actually exists a difference between nationalities and their brand perception behavior. German and Dutch people rather prefer to read different reviewing platforms and get informed about a product or brand before actually buying something, whereas people from the US are less interested in other consumers' experiences and comments and rather want to make their own choices.

5.1.5 Current main occupation and influence of celebrities

Asking the respondents in how far an advertisement containing a celebrity is influencing their buying behavior, the results are more or less the same among the different occupations. As already mentioned, most of the respondents (77%) are students, 35% employed, 3% self-employed and 2% unemployed. Since students often have an idol they are interested in, for example a musician or sport person, one would expect that if a brand is using celebrity endorsement in order to promote a product, the student will be more convinced to buy a product. However, only 8.5% say that it is likely or even very likely that they are choosing the brand if the advertisement contains a famous person. More than half of the students (56%) are sure that it does not matter if the advertisement includes a celebrity who is promoting a brand or not. The other groups have a more or less a neutral opinion about such brand advertisement campaigns. Students are admittedly interested in a famous person's life, however, they

state that campaigns including celebrities will not influence their buying decision.

Looking at respondents with other occupations, the answers are quite similar. Only employed people are somewhat more influenced by a celebrity endorsed advertisement. 31% are convinced that the chance is somewhat likely that they would buy a brand's product when promoted by a celebrity.

Occupation therefore does not seem to influence the respondents' buying behavior. There is no obvious relation between those two variables. Nevertheless, employed people are a little more influenced by celebrity endorsements, however, the number is not significantly high.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study aims at getting a clearer picture of the social media behavior of people with different backgrounds and by which factors they are influenced the most, namely celebrity-endorsement advertising or online customer reviews. After having a close look at the collected data, the research questions can be answered critically.

Social Media Behavior

Nowadays people spend a lot of their free time online, on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or LinkedIn. As can be seen in the results of the survey, nearly everyone between the ages 20 and 35 is active on one of the aforementioned social media platforms. The top four of the most popular platforms are Facebook (98,1%), YouTube (70,14%), Instagram (46,45%) and the professional platforms LinkedIn and Xing (45,02%).

Since the gender distribution is quite similar among the different questions of the survey, the results can be generalized and no distinction has to be made between sexes. There is no significant difference between the online behavior of women and men nor does the country of origin play a significant role. Therefore, regarding most of the results, the respondents can be seen as one large group without making any differences between gender and nationality.

There are different reasons for why people are using social media platforms. These are, for example, contacting friends, reading news or buying products or services. More and more users are also sharing events from their life which they want other people to see, for example pictures on Instagram or writing blogs to show everyone the experiences they have made which is also shown in the high number of people from the survey. This also leads to the large amount of user generated content and the going away from content which has been created by professional agents as it is explained in the literature review part.

As known from literature, sport brands are using social media platforms on a regular basis in order to promote their brands. Users are interested in the brand and especially the products and follow the brands on different channels such as Facebook and Twitter. This usually helps users to stay tuned with the latest activities of the brand. In recent times it has become a trend to live a healthy and active lifestyle and as a consequence users want to get professional tips on how to do so. Brands help following such tips by offering certain products that support that kind of lifestyle. Celebrity endorsements do not seem to have an effect on consumers as can be observed from the survey. The endorsed celebrity is only an additional reason to buy a product but is not the number one reason. People require facts to make a purchase decision and thus regard objective and factual information about products as the main reason for their interest in a brand.

Influence on Brand Perception and Buying Decision

Nowadays people do not only go into a shop and buy a product without an in-depth thinking about it. They rather want to learn as much as possible about it beforehand. Based on the conducted study the consumers are interested in the features of a product whether it is of high quality and if they can expect what the product promises. Nearly all respondents say that they always check online customer reviews before making an actual buying decision because they do not simply trust a brand and the information the company provides.

Even though most of the marketing campaigns seem to be quite successful, the user will not choose a product from the brand without further considerations. Marketers know how to convince people and put their products into the best light. Customers are aware of that and therefore check online customer reviews to receive trustworthy firsthand information of other users. Comments on other independent reviewing platforms are nevertheless more taken into account than comments under the brand's post on a social media platform. Next to that, the opinion of friends and family are also playing a significant role regarding a consumers' brand image perception. Additionally it can be said, that respondents from Germany and the Netherlands are more interested in the opinion of their family than US-American respondents.

When checking online reviews, users usually require more than one source. Based on the conducted survey, the majority needs between one and ten reviews. This shows that no one will be convinced by only one opinion. People sometimes find it hard to believe in something and thus want to be sure to make a good decision which requires a lot of information and research before buying the product. Next to the amount of reviews the source is important. The more different platforms one is looking at, the more reliable the information seems to the user. Taking into consideration different consumer experiences, the user can ultimately make the decision whether to purchase a specific product or not. These reviews and comments help people to build up a brand image. Such an opinion is thus not solely made up by the user himself.

However, there are no words or phrases within a review or comment which are more important than others. The main point is that a user gets the information he or she is looking for, as it is observed in the answers given by the respondents, it does not matter which words are chosen, negative as well as positive. The way of conveying an experience is not important, the review only has to be understandable and convincing.

Another factor of influence, which has already been discussed extensively in several studies, is the influence of the celebrity who is promoting a product of a specific brand. Naturally, one requirement is that the celebrity is a professional from the sport area the brand is making products for. Therefore, a football player such as Marco Reus cannot be an endorser of a basketball shoe or vice versa, Michael Jordan, a basketball player, promoting a tennis racket. As several theories already stated, a celebrity makes the brand more personal and attractive for the consumer. The conducted survey, however, does not support this thought. People who participated in this survey are not convinced of the brand or product because a celebrity is promoting it. A celebrity sometimes seems to be not 'reachable' or is just seen as doing his job. Therefore, a celebrity included in an advertisement can only be seen as an additional incentive for a user to buy a product of the brand.

6.1 Two factors of influence: Celebrity Endorsement Advertisement vs Online Customer Reviews

As described in the previous section, there are thus two types of influence on a consumers' brand image perception: Celebrity endorsement advertisement and online customer reviews. As already stated in the research question, it is interesting to know which factor has thus the greatest influence on a consumers' brand image perception.

Based on the collected data and the existing literature, the results show that the majority of the respondents see the online customer reviews as the greatest factor of influence regarding a brand image perception. Even though the celebrity makes the brand or a product more interesting it does not alter the fact that it will not change the opinion of a user regarding a brand or specific product. The celebrity is a famous person who is hired by a brand to promote a product and make the brand more personal. The consumer, however, will most likely see it as such and will not be influenced by it. He or she will rather look for opinions and experiences made by the same kind of people. Therefore, online customer reviews will be taken into account. These reviews are way more trustful than a promotion by a famous person.

Nowadays, customers need such reviews in order to be sure about their buying decision. A lot of brands promise something the product is not fulfilling. If additionally a celebrity is promoting this product, the customer will be blinded and make a decision with which he or she will not be happy. A lot of customers have experienced such a situation and will thus check a huge amount of online customer reviews before purchasing something they do not actually want or which is not working the way they expected. Additionally, others' people reviews are more trustful than descriptions of the brand itself. Those reviews are real reviews and the person who came up with it wants to help other people by either suggesting a product or warning interested consumers not to buy a product which does not deliver what the brand promised. To gather different information the consumer will most likely choose different sources of reviewing platforms in order to get other users but also professional reviews which will help to make a final decision.

Following, a celebrity endorsement will thus not necessarily mean the follower is interested in the brand the celebrity is working for. The user is more interested in the lifestyle of the celebrity, as a follower also is when following a sport brand online. Getting tips for a healthy life or information about the product is more important than the relationship between the product and the celebrity.

Other indirect factors which play a role in the brand image perception process are the marketing communication of the brand and one's peer group influence. However these two are not as important as online customer reviews and comments posted by other users.

6.2 Limitations

The main limitation regarding the work and topic is the time limit. Students writing a bachelor thesis were given a time scope of in total 10 weeks. The different steps of, among others, coming up with a problem, plan the paper, conduct a survey and analyze the results had thus a limited timeframe. More time is needed in order to go deeper into the topic and maybe even come up with different results regarding the topic since more respondents could have been collected. Even though 211 respondents is a relatively high number, the problem of generalizability can occur since no one knows what the results will be when more respondents would have been collected.

Additionally, since as students we only have limited skills regarding creating an online survey, the distributed survey might not be as professional as it should be in order to get reliable results. The respondents might have gotten confused by some questions or did not get the intention of the questionnaire.

Due to the time frame, the survey has been kept really general. Giving the respondents more detailed questions, or even conducting a case study, might have been more successful.

6.3 Advice for further research

There are several further research possibilities which will give more insight into the topic. First of all, after determining the influencing factors on brand image perception, one should go one step further and analyze in how far this brand perception is actually performed and additionally, how long it will last. Meaning that if customers only buy one product they saw online or if they stick to the brand and become a loyal customer. Of course, it would then be more useful to carry out the research in a longer time frame in order to get more respondents and maybe also a variety of different kind of people.

To go more into the 'Why' regarding the behavior and opinion of the respondents one can on the one hand study the intention of a brand using celebrity endorsement and how they try to get new customers with the help of a specific type of advertisement. On the other hand, analyzing the actual reviews more deeply and asking the people why they are actually commenting or writing their opinion and experiences, will help to understand the topic and the different steps.

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9. APPENDIX

9.1 Images and figures



Figure 1. Nike Advertisement including the professional basketball player Michael Jordan (Forbes.com, 2013)

Table 9. Number of reviews needed

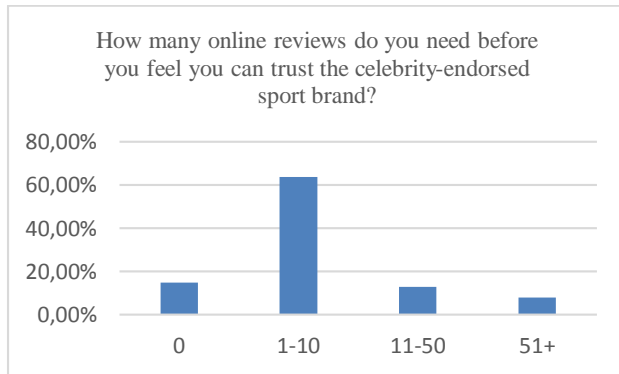


Table 13. Most important aspect when choosing a brand (numbers)

Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6
Marketing Communication of the brand	26	37	40	64	37	7
Endorsed Celebrity	2	10	17	16	57	109
Comments by other users	24	38	51	52	35	11
Online customer reviews on other websites	58	63	38	28	19	5
Peer group Influence	55	46	43	24	32	11
Nothing bothers me	46	17	22	27	31	68

9.2 Questionnaire

- Age: _____
- Gender:
 - Male
 - Female
- Nationality:
 - Dutch
 - German
 - US-American
 - Other:
- Current main occupation:
 - Student
 - Self-employed
 - Employed
 - Unemployed
 - Other:
- Which social media platforms do you use? (Multiple answers are possible)
 - Facebook
 - Twitter
 - LinkedIn/Xing
 - Instagram
 - Pinterest
 - YouTube
 - Blogs
 - Other:
- Have you ever checked online customer reviews/opinions before purchasing a product?
 - Yes
 - No
- How often are you checking online customer reviews before a product purchase?
 - Never
 - Rarely
 - Sometimes
 - Quite Often
 - Very Often
- When looking for product reviews. What platforms do you mostly choose? (Multiple answers are possible)
 - Retailing websites (e.g. Amazon)
 - Independent reviewing platforms (e.g. Tripadvisor.com; revoo.com)
 - Video platforms (e.g. YouTube)
 - Personal (reviewing) blogs
 - Other:
- Are you following sport brands online (e.g. Nike, Adidas, Puma etc). If yes, on which channel?
 - Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Instagram
 - Other:
 - No
- For what reason are you following the brand?
 - I like the products
 - I like the tips they give on how to live a healthy lifestyle
 - I like the celebrity who is endorsing the brand
 - Other:

11. If an advertisement of a brand contains a celebrity (e.g. David Beckham – Adidas, Michael Jordan – Nike) would you be more convinced to choose the brand?



- Very Unlikely
 - Unlikely
 - Somewhat Unlikely
 - Somewhat Likely
 - Likely
 - Very Likely
12. Are you looking at other users' comments under posts on social media platforms containing celebrity-endorsed sport products?
- Yes. I want to learn more about the brand and other peoples' experiences.
 - No. I make my own choices.
13. How many online reviews do you need to read before you feel you can trust the celebrity-endorsed sport brands?
- 0
 - 1-10
 - 11-50
 - 51+
14. Are you considering online customer reviews on other platforms? If yes, which websites?
- Retailer's websites (e.g. Amazon)
 - Independent reviewing platforms
 - Video platforms (e.g. YouTube)
 - Personal blogs
 - Others:
 - No
15. When looking at other reviews about the brand, on which positive words/phrases are you paying the most attention?

	Not at all important	Very unimportant	Some what unimportant	Some what important	Very important	Extremely important
Happy – satisfied						
Comfortable						
Good quality						
Always again						
Product is like						

expectation						
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16. When looking at other reviews about the brand, on which negative words/phrases are you paying the most attention?

	Not at all important	Very unimportant	Some what unimportant	Some what important	Very important	Extremely important
Not working						
Never again						
Not how expected						
Price too high						
Picture not like product						

17. What is most important when choosing a brand? (Please drag and order options – most preferred at the top)
- Marketing communication of the brand (Website, Facebook, Twitter channel)
 - Endorsed celebrity
 - Comments by other users under post of the brand on social media platforms
 - Online customer reviews on other websites
 - Peer group influence (friends and family)
 - Nothing bothers me – I make my own choices
18. What kind of online reviews do you use as a basis for your buying decision?
- Qualitative (written description or video)
 - Quantitative (a scale/star rating from e.g. 1 to 5)
19. What kind of review do you consider as more **credible**?
- Qualitative (written description or video)
 - Quantitative (a scale/star rating from e.g. 1 to 5)
20. What kind of review do you consider as more **user-friendly**?
- Qualitative (written description or video)
 - Quantitative (a scale/star rating from e.g. 1 to 5)

