

Abstract. *Social Networking Sites are a phenomenon of the times. For example, the largest of them, Facebook, has more than 798 million users worldwide. Unfortunately, not much is known about the usage of Social Networking Sites in the European context. This study tries to reduce the gap. The study explores some of the most important questions regarding usage of Social Networking Sites by heavy Internet users in the Czech Republic. Based on an online survey of 640 respondents, the study analyzes the main reasons for using Social Networking Sites, the intensity of this usage, the demographic profile of daily Facebook users, and the users' perceptions of marketing activities in the environment of Social Networking Sites. The Czech heavy Internet users report that the most important reason to participate on Social Networking Sites is "to be in touch with friends". Other significant reasons are "planning activities with friends" and "organizing events". Social Networking Sites have a high marketing potential not only because of the growing usage rate but also because of the relatively low resistance of the users towards marketing activities.*

Keywords: Social Networking Sites, Facebook, online marketing, Internet users, Facebook users.

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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1. Introduction

Social Networking Sites (SNSs), i.e. online collections of registered users who share information with other registered users (Trusov et al., 2010), have become extremely popular recently. This popularity is mainly given by the fact that SNSs “allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others” (Ellison et al., 2007). Using these functionalities, some SNS users establish hundreds or even thousands of friendship links with other users (Viswanath et al., 2009).

The popularity of SNSs can be well demonstrated by the example of the largest SNS, Facebook. Nowadays, this SNS has more than 798 million users worldwide and has become the second most visited website globally, after Google (statistics from www.socialbakers.com and www.alexa.com, 2012). These statistics are particularly sensational compared to 2007 when Facebook reported signing up its 30 millionth user worldwide (Joinson, 2008).

In the Czech Republic, the penetration of Facebook has exceeded 34% of the population and 52% of the online population (statistics from www.socialbakers.com, 2012). At the moment, Facebook is used by 3.5 million Czech Internet users, which makes Czech users the 43rd largest Facebook community in the world (statistics from www.socialbakers.com, 2012).

However, because of their novelty and dynamics, SNSs have not yet received adequate attention from academics. Some studies exist, but their conclusions are still insufficient and sometimes even inconsistent.

Relatively many studies have focused on the motives behind the usage of SNSs. For example, Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield indicated that people use Facebook typically to learn more about friends they have met offline and significantly less typically to find new connections online (with the intention to meet offline afterwards) (Lampe et al., 2006). This finding was supported by Joinson who identified “keeping in touch” (meaning “staying in contact with people I would otherwise have lost contact with”) as the far most mentioned motive behind the use of Facebook (Joinson, 2008), and by other studies (e.g. Pempek et al., 2009). The ability to make a connection with existing friends therefore seems to be the core functionality of SNSs (Joinson, 2008).

Bolar identified seven motives behind SNS usage. These were 1) self-reflection and image-building (i.e. expression of oneself on the SNS), 2) utility (i.e. using features and functionality of the SNS), 3) information-gathering and problem-solving, 4) networking, 5) simply-spending time, 6) revisiting-memories (i.e. search for old friends) and 7) peer influence (i.e. a friend invites a person to register on an SNS) (Bolar, 2009).

One study focused on how people use SNSs and how much time they spend in the SNS environment (Pempek et al., 2009). This study found that university students used Facebook routinely throughout the day to observe Facebook content and disseminate it to their friends. Interestingly, they spent more time observing than posting content. On average, students spent approximately 30 minutes per day on

SNSs. However, other studies found university students to spend almost three hours per day on SNSs (Raacke et al., 2008).

Some studies focused on the demographic profile of SNS users. For example, Stroud suggested that SNSs are intrinsically age-neutral (Stroud, 2008). This means that SNSs are not just a product for teenagers as assumed by some studies (e.g. Racolta-Paina et al., 2010). Other age groups use SNSs as well. Stroud predicts that as SNSs mature, they will become relevant for all age groups.

Attention was also devoted to practical marketing issues. Nowadays, more and more companies try to use SNSs for their marketing purposes. Because marketing activities in the environment of SNSs are relatively inexpensive, not only large corporations can make use of them. Also small and medium-sized enterprises and other institutions with limited resources can utilize SNSs for their marketing efforts very effectively. For example, KIASMA – the museum of contemporary art in Helsinki – has run a simple cost-effective Facebook campaign recently. It provoked a debate on the subject of contemporary art and invited the public to upload their own piece of art to a Facebook gallery. The campaign was a success. People submitted 599 pieces of arts, over 30 thousand people visited the museum's Facebook site and the campaign received huge attention in the media (Eurobest, 2011). Similar case studies suggest that a better understanding of the SNS environment is of high priority for most companies and institutions regardless on their financial power or size.

Some studies focused on the question of how SNSs enable spreading of marketing messages. This field of study is highly important because of the increasing number of both commercial and non-commercial institutions that use SNSs to generate online word of mouth (WOM). These institutions try to use SNSs to increase brand awareness, brand image, brand engagement, website traffic and even sales of their products and services.

The basic question regarding this field of interest is why SNS users spread marketing messages and become engaged with brands. Based on a commercial study from 2009, US Internet users who had ever “followed” a brand on Twitter or “friended” a brand on Facebook or MySpace reported the three most important reasons to do so; they were: “exclusive deals or offers”, “being currently a customer of the brand” and “interesting or entertaining content” (FEED, 2009). It is also interesting that “opinion leaders” should be more likely to openly communicate brands on their Facebook profile than are “opinion seekers” (Acar et al., 2007).

Research proved that brand engagement on SNSs is connected with higher probability of brand recommendation and purchase. According to 2010 study (CMB, 2010), 60% of Facebook fans and 79% of Twitter followers mentioned that they were more likely to recommend the brands they had become engaged with and 51% of Facebook fans and 67% of Twitter followers mentioned that they were more likely to purchase the brands since becoming a fan or follower.

Attention has also been devoted to some other diverse issues. Among these were for example: what are the benefits of SNSs for their users (Ellison et al., 2007); which factors influence attitudes of the users towards SNSs (Gangadharbatla, 2008); how privacy concerns and trust influence social interactions within the SNS

environment (Dwyer et al., 2007 or Acquisti et al., 2006); what are the differences between people who use SNSs and those who stay away (Hargittai, 2007); how interactions between users on Facebook develop over time (Viswanath et al., 2009); how SNSs can be used in market research (Casteleyn et al., 2009); how cues deposited by “friends” onto one’s online profile affect observers’ impressions of the profile owner (Walther et al., 2008); how to acquire most effectively new SNS members (Trustov et al., 2009); who are the most influential SNS users (Trusov et al., 2010); what is the indirect influence of SNSs on users and how that influence leads to WOM (Zhang et al., 2009); what is the political impact of Facebook (Williams et al., 2008); or even how SNSs reshape the interaction of doctors and their patients (Hawn, 2009).

All of the studies mentioned are of high importance for both the marketing practice and theory. However, the above mentioned findings are still insufficient. Many important questions regarding SNSs have still not been answered adequately and conclusively. Moreover, the studies mentioned are mostly from the US environment and their applicability into the context of the European markets is thus limited.

2. Goal and methodology

This study focused on description of SNS usage in the European setting, concretely in one of the post-communist countries, the Czech Republic. The study was realized to identify some of the most important questions regarding SNSs, which should help companies and other institutions to better understand the specifics of the SNS environment and adjust their marketing efforts appropriately.

The research questions were the following: 1) What are the main reasons for SNS usage in the Czech Republic, 2) How much time do Czech heavy Internet users spend on SNSs, 3) Who are the daily users of Facebook in the Czech Republic, and finally 4) What are the perceptions of marketing activities on SNSs.

The study analyzed only the behavior of the heavy Internet users in the Czech Republic. These were people who used the Internet several times a week and who were therefore most relevant for our purposes.

As for the methodology, an online questionnaire was designed. The survey was held in the period of April and May 2010 among a sample of 640 Czech heavy Internet users. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are visible in Table 1.

The respondents were relatively equal in gender, which corresponds with reality. According to www.socialbakers.com, 49% of the Czech Facebook users are male and 51% of them are female (statistics from www.socialbakers.com, 2012). As for age, most of the respondents were relatively young. However, even this overbalance corresponds with reality (at least to some degree). According to www.socialbakers.com, people over 45 account for just 11% of Czech Facebook users (statistics at www.socialbakers.com, 2012). Respondents were diverse with regard to income, size of site and region, and mostly they had either high school or university education.

Table 1

Respondents' demographics (in absolute numbers)

Gender	Men	314
	Women	326
Age	15-29	319
	30-44	174
	45-59	110
	60+	35
Education	Basic	37
	Basic plus	60
	High school	272
	University	272
Income in CZK	Up to 20 000	157
	20 001 - 30 000	136
	30 001 – 50 000	196
	More than 50 000	105
Size of Site	Less than 5 000 (village)	139
	5 001-19 999 (small town)	116
	20 000-99 999 (large town)	156
	100 000 and more (city)	230
Region	Prague (capital city)	113
	Bohemia	361
	Moravia	166

Most of the respondents were Facebook users (almost 75% of them used Facebook every day). A majority of the respondents also visited the Czech local site “Spolužáci.cz”, but not often. Twitter had a small penetration among the sample. However, those who use Twitter used it frequently. Other SNS were used by the respondents much less intensively.

3. Main findings

The study first explored the reasons to participate in SNSs (see Table 2). Based on our survey, heavy Internet users in the Czech Republic participate in the SNS environment especially “to be in touch with friends”. This motive was stated by almost 85% of the respondents. The second most important reason was “planning activities with friends”. This motive was mentioned by almost 50% of the respondents. Approximately 34% of the respondents stated that their reason for SNS participation was “organizing events”.

Table 2

Reasons to participate in SNSs

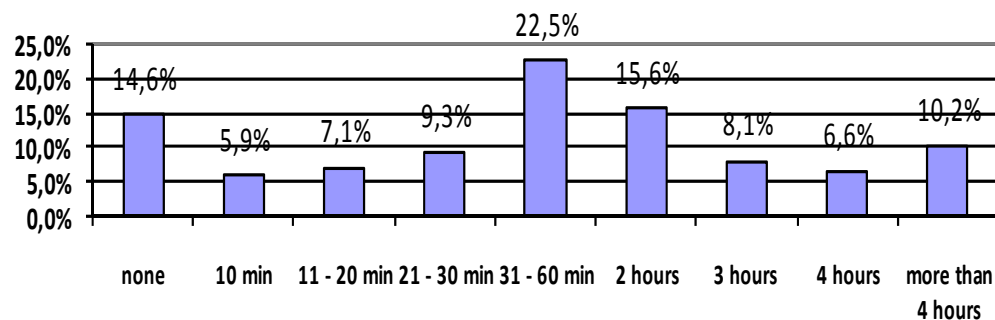
To be in touch with friends	84.7%
Planning activities with friends	48.7%
Organizing events	34.2%
Obtaining hints, advice, recommendations	32.8%
Promoting myself or my activities	22.0%
Finding new friends	16.8%
Finding business opportunities	16.2%
Solving some problems	15.4%
Flirting	9.2%
Nothing in particular	2.6%

N = 640

All three reasons mentioned above are actually very similar. All of them are primarily focused on maintaining and developing existing “offline” social relationships. This finding is consistent with the US studies (Lampe et al., 2006 or Joinson, 2008). We therefore supported the finding of these studies that satisfying social needs within existing social structures is the main motive for SNS participation.

Other reasons mentioned were far less common. About 33% of the respondents mentioned that they participated in SNSs to obtain hints, advice and recommendations. This motive is very different from the previous ones. It is not connected to the need for social interaction, but to the use of SNSs as an information source.

The respondents also mentioned that they participated in SNSs for self-expressive reasons, i.e. to promote themselves and their activities (22%). Finding new friends online was mentioned only by 16.8% of the respondents, which is again consistent with the US studies (Joinson, 2008). “Solving some problems”, which could be added to “obtaining hints, advice and recommendations”, was mentioned by 15.4% of the respondents; 9.2% of the respondents stated that they participated in SNSs because of flirting.

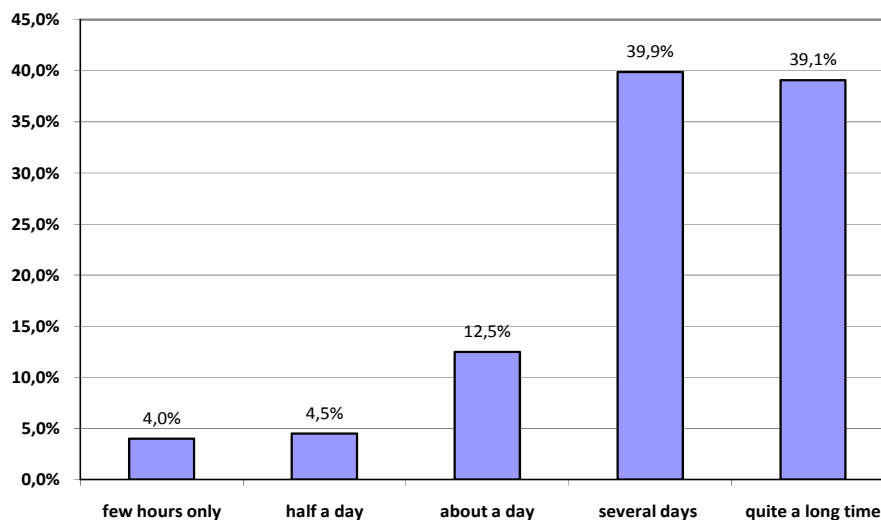


N = 640

Figure 1. Time spent on SNSs yesterday

After analyzing the motives behind SNS usage, we focused on the intensity of the SNS usage. We found that heavy Internet users in the Czech Republic spend quite a lot of time on SNSs (see Figure 1). Over 40% of them reported that yesterday they spent two or more hours there; 10.2% of the respondents even claimed that they spent more than four hours on SNSs. However, most typically heavy Internet users in the Czech Republic participate 31 to 60 minutes per day in SNSs, which seems to be consistent with the US literature (Pempek et al., 2009).

SNSs are sometimes criticized by the popular media and general public for causing some kind of “addiction”. “SNS addicts” cannot do without visiting their favorite site, i.e. they check this site as many as 10 times per day, look at it when they first wake up, etc. (CNN, 2009). Therefore, we also focused on this negative dimension of SNS usage.



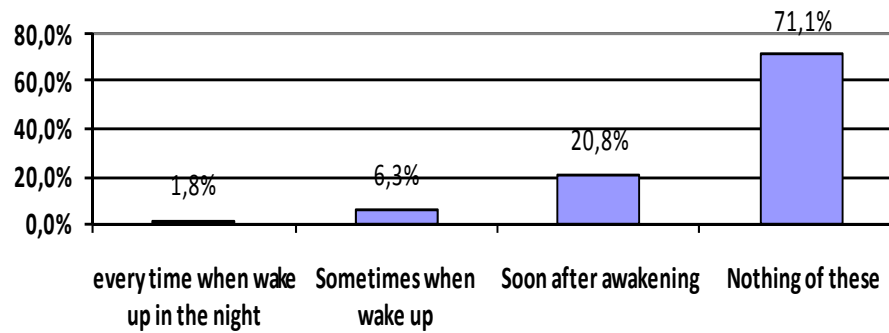
N = 640

Figure 2. **How long will you go without visiting SNSs?**

Based on our study, even though heavy Internet users in the Czech Republic participate in SNSs extensively, the level of “addiction” to SNSs by most of respondents seems to be relatively limited. A large majority of respondents reported that it was no problem for them to “survive” without SNSs for a long time (see Figure 2). To the question “How long will you go without visiting SNSs?” almost 80% of the respondents answered “several days” or “quite a long time”. However, 12.5% of the

respondents answered that they would go just “about a day” without visiting their favorite site. Moreover, 8.5% of the respondents could not imagine being without SNSs more than few hours or half a day. We can therefore estimate that some level of “addiction” could be relevant for approximately 20% of the SNS users.

This finding was supported by another research question. When respondents were asked if they accessed SNSs during night or soon after awakening, over 70% of them answered negatively (see Figure 3). This means that, similar to the previous research question, a large majority of the SNS users reported no sign of “addiction”. On the other hand, some level of “addiction” could be anticipated for approximately 30% of the respondents. Those respondents answered that they accessed SNSs “soon after awakening”, “sometimes when I wake up” or “every time when I wake up during the night”.



N = 640

Figure 3. Do you access SNSs at night or soon after awakening?

We can conclude that a large majority of SNS users in our study showed no indication of any “addiction”. However, some signs of “addiction” were found for approximately 20 to 30% of the respondents. For some of them, these signs were relatively alarming.

Next, our study also explored the demographic profile of Facebook daily users in the Czech Republic. These findings are of high importance for companies and other institutions because they point at the consumers who can be most effectively reached by Facebook marketing campaigns.

The results are visible in Table 3. As for gender, Czech users who visit Facebook every day are slightly more often women than men: 78.3% of the female respondents and 71.3% of the male respondents were daily Facebook users.

Daily usage of Facebook tends to decline with increasing age; the following were daily Facebook users in each age category: 87.5% of the young respondents among 15 and 29 years, 65% of the respondents among 30 and 44 years, 71.2% of the respondents among 45 and 59 years, and 20.2% of the respondents over 60.

Counter-intuitively, our study proved that daily usage of Facebook tends to decline with increasing level of education. Daily usage of Facebook was most widespread among respondents with basic or basic plus education (95.6%, resp.

98.1%). Among respondents with a high school education, the percentage of daily Facebook usage was 81.3%. However, only 60.5% of the respondents with a university degree visited Facebook on a daily basis.

Table 3

Percentage of Facebook daily users in different demographic groups

Gender	Men	71.3%
	Women	78.3%
Age	15-29	87.5%
	30-44	65.0%
	45-59	71.2%
	60+	20.2%
Education	Basic	95.6%
	Basic plus	98.1%
	High school	81.3%
	University	60.5%
Size of site	Less than 5 000 (village)	92.3%
	5 001-19 999 (small town)	74.4%
	20 000-99 999 (large town)	71.6%
	100 000 and more (city)	66.8%
Region	Prague (capital city)	66.6%
	Bohemia	69.1%
	Moravia	93.1%

N = 640

Daily usage of Facebook tends to decline with the increasing size of site, too. The highest percentage of daily Facebook users was in the segment of respondents living in villages (92.3%); 74.4% of respondents living in small towns visited Facebook on a daily basis. The corresponding rate for respondents living in larger towns was 71.6%. However, the percentage of daily Facebook users among respondents living in cities with more than 100 thousand inhabitants was relatively low; only 66.8% of these respondents visited Facebook daily.

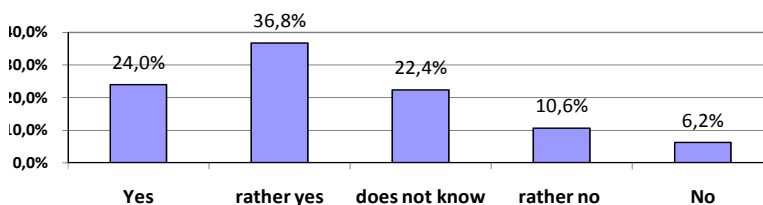
We also found a significant difference between Bohemia and Moravia. According to our study, heavy Internet users living in Bohemia tend to use Facebook on a daily basis less often than those living in Moravia (69.1% versus 93.1%).

We can conclude that frequent users of Facebook are more typically women than men. They tend to be relatively young. However, counter-intuitively, daily Facebook users are not typically represented by well-educated people living in large cities. Contrary to this assumption, daily usage of Facebook tends to decline with both education and size of site.

Last but not least, our study focused on the level of SNS users' acceptance towards marketing activities in this environment. This research question is highly

important because there is a general tendency to resist marketing efforts by most consumers nowadays. Negative attitudes and resistance of consumers towards marketing are caused by the fact that consumers feel overloaded by the ever-present advertising and other marketing tools (Sheth, Sisodia, Barbulescu, 2006). For example, approximately 80% of Czech consumers perceive the level of advertising on commercial television stations as too high. However, feelings of oversaturation by advertising clutter are also typical for other advertising media such as leaflets, billboards or print (Vysekalová, Kopecká, 2011).

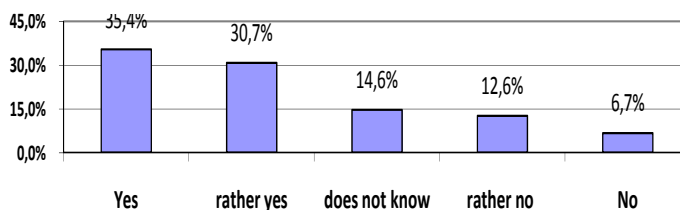
Based on our study, marketing in the SNS environment does not yet cause much resistance. The majority of the respondents (over 60%) agreed that brands should have their profiles on SNSs. Over 22% of the respondents were neutral regarding this question. Only approximately 17% of the respondents stated that brands should not have their profiles on SNSs (see Figure 4). This finding suggests that in general, marketing activities on SNSs are not perceived negatively by heavy Internet users in the Czech Republic.



N = 640

Figure 4. Do you think brands should have their profiles on SNSs?

This conclusion was further supported by another research question: “Should brands maintain an active dialog with consumers on SNSs?” Over 65% of the respondents agreed with this statement. Approximately 15% of the respondents did not know what to answer and some 20% disagreed (see Figure 5).



N = 640

Figure 5. Should brands maintain an active dialog with consumers on SNSs?

With regard to the high level of irritation caused by other advertising media, these findings seem to be relatively positive for SNSs. It seems that marketing usage of SNSs by Czech companies and other institutions should be perceived by the SNS users relatively positively. From this perspective, the effectiveness of marketing efforts on SNSs should thus be relatively high.

4. Conclusions

This study investigated some of the most important aspects of SNS usage in the Czech Republic. It focused on the main reasons for SNS usage, intensity of this usage, daily Facebook users' demographic profile, and SNS users' perceptions of marketing activities in the environment of SNSs.

The heavy Internet users in the Czech Republic reported that the most important reason to participate in SNSs is "to be in touch with friends". Also, the second and third reasons mentioned seemed to be related to social interactions within the existing social relationships. Participation in SNSs is thus primarily motivated by maintaining and developing friendships from the real "offline" world. This means that SNSs are used as a surveillance tool for maintaining previous relationships and as a tool for investigating people the users have met offline, as stated by Lampe et al. (2006). This finding is consistent with the US studies.

Other reasons for SNS participation stated by the respondents in our study were far less important. These were, among others, "obtaining hints, advice and recommendations" and "solving problems" (i.e. satisfying informational deficit), "self-promotion" (i.e. self-expressive motive) or "finding new friends online".

We also found heavy Internet users in the Czech Republic spend quite a lot of time on SNSs. Over 40% of them stated that they spent two or more hours per day on them. However, most typically heavy Internet users in the Czech Republic spend 31 to 60 minutes per day on SNSs, which seems to be consistent with the US literature.

Our study suggests that even though heavy Internet users in the Czech Republic participate in SNSs intensively, the general level of "addiction" to them seems to be relatively limited. A large majority of the respondents stated that it was no problem for them to "survive" without SNS for a long time. They also stated that they do not access SNSs during the night or soon after awakening. However, for 20 or 30% of the heavy Internet users in the Czech Republic we found some signs of "addiction". For some of these respondents, the signs of "addiction" seemed relatively alarming.

The study also examined the demographic profile of the Czech daily Facebook users. We found that as for gender, Czech daily Facebook users were slightly more often women than men. In our study, daily usage of Facebook tended to decline with increasing age. Counter-intuitively, daily usage of Facebook tended to decline also with increasing level of education as well as with the increasing size of site. There was also a significant difference between respondents from Bohemia and Moravia;

according to our study, heavy Internet users living in Bohemia tended to use Facebook on daily basis less often than those living in Moravia.

Last but not least, the study analyzed the level of acceptance of SNS users towards marketing activities. Based on our study, marketing in the SNS environment is still relatively well accepted by the SNS users. A majority of the respondents agreed that brands should have their profiles on SNSs. At the same time, a majority of the respondents agreed that brands should maintain an active dialog with consumers on SNSs. Approximately 20% of the respondents advocated the opposite opinion. In comparison to other advertising media, it is possible to conclude that marketing on SNSs is still perceived by Internet users relatively positively. The question is, how long will this state sustain. As more and more companies learn how to do marketing on SNSs, the level of irritation will most probably grow.

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Management & Marketing

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