

## NICHE DIGITAL MARKETING: THE IMPACT OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES ON PARENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

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### ABSTRACT

Virtual communities offer, among others, information sharing and support to their members. Parents of special needs children often participate in online communities to post questions and concerns and gain knowledge from other users. This presents an opportunity for marketers to promote products and services related to special needs. The current study aims at exploring motivations of parents with special needs children to communicate through Facebook virtual communities and particularly focuses on the support aspect of such communities by using certain constructs of TAM model. Results of the study showed that users believe that it's easy to get recommendations and answers by other members and virtual communities help them to stay informed about products and services related to special needs. Moreover, participants in the study argued that they can get information to support their families. Finally, a significant percentage of participants agreed that they intend to use information posted on virtual communities for making decisions on relevant products/services. Based on the key findings of the study, companies could build digital marketing strategies to gain competitive advantages in the special needs niche market.

**Keywords:** Virtual communities, Facebook, Digital marketing, Special needs, Niche markets.

### INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Dholakia et al. (2004, p.241-242), virtual communities are “consumer groups of varying sizes that meet and interact online for the sake of achieving personal as well as shared goals of their members”. Virtual communities disseminate information, knowledge and have the power to influence their members’ decisions and choices (Dholakia and Bagozzi, 2001). Online communities are effective vehicles of marketing communication which enhance target marketing (MacAulay et al., 2007). They also offer emotional support to their members (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). Participants in online communities are often driven by informational value, i.e. getting and sharing information of a particular issue. Furthermore, members also seek instrumental value, e.g. to influence others or validate a decision already made (Hars & Ou, 2002; Dholakia et al., 2004).

Social media is often a source of information and interaction for health related issues. People are looking for support and information about particular health problems and conditions. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, have mostly been attracted by young adults mainly because of low costs and the potential interaction with peers who face similar health issues (Jin et al., 2015).

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) defines disability as “an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions.” (World Health Organization, 2016). The discovery of a disability is possibly a traumatic

event for parents. Social life is changed, stress levels are higher, and feelings of anger, shock, depression, denial, confusion and self-blame are common emotions faced (Heiman, 2002). Many children have restrictions in their everyday lives, which provoke communication and learning challenges to their families (Gomes et al, 2016). Parents of children with special needs, are confronted with many health related decisions and therefore seek information and support to deal with this complexity (Oprescu et al, 2013). Past studies have shown that affection and bonding, influence positively caregivers, help them make better appraisals and develop more effective problem-focused coping strategies. These strategies, as Namkoong et al (2012) explain, can be developed in the online environment.

Adler et al (2015) argue that parents of children with special health care needs are looking, among others, for information on the diagnosis of a particular condition or illness, potential treatment, daily care of the child, and share their concerns about the future. The diversity of products and services that those families require to improve their quality of life could be viewed as a market opportunity for several sectors, such as health care.

Parents of children with special needs can become members of traditional support groups or volunteers in various organizations. However, this participation demands time, resources and commitment that can sometimes become overwhelming (Bewley, 2012). On the other hand, online communities can connect parents from all over the globe effortlessly overcoming most aforementioned constrains (Petruniak et al., 2011).

According to Namkoong et al. (2012), Internet based communication can help parents feel more comfortable while sharing health information or discussing about sensitive topics, as physical presence is not necessary and anonymity can also be provided. Mohd Roffeei et al. (2015) argue that communities for Autism Spectrum Disorders are self-defined as social support tools, while Margalit and Raskind (2009) believe that such communities contribute to emotional support and empathy.

Using technology acceptance model (TAM) as a basis, the current study aims at exploring motivations of parents with special needs children to communicate through virtual communities. TAM theory focuses on technological factors that can influence levels of satisfaction and intentions of users when utilizing technology (Shipp & Phillips, 2013). TAM model has been applied to social media to analyze users' adoption of these platforms in diverse environments (Wirtz & Göttel, 2016 and Ngai et al., 2015). Considering that the Internet has been adopted and used as a tool through which families can fulfill their need to get informed (Blackburn & Read, 2005), TAM may reliably provide the theoretical base of this study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study uses quantitative research to explore certain concepts of TAM in virtual communities for parents that take care of children with special needs. The questionnaire was designed based, with a few adaptations, on Rauniar et al (2014) work which focused on social media usage. The questionnaire included aspects of TAM, such as ease of use, usefulness and intention of use. Facebook adoption and trust were also examined as potential antecedents of Facebook use (Hwang et al., 2016, Rauniar et al, 2014). Items of the questionnaire were measured by using 5-point Likert type scales (e.g. 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

Initially, a pilot test was performed to 10 participants to receive feedback on the questionnaire items. The final version of the questionnaire was posted to Facebook communities which focus on special needs and users were asked to voluntarily complete it. All participants were assured that their answers will be used only for the study's purposes without mentioning their names or any other personal data. One hundred and twelve (112) questionnaires were fully completed and used in the analysis. Among respondents 33.9% were 25-34 years old, 52.7% were 35-44, 9.8% were 45-54 and 3.6% were 55+ years old. Thirty three percent (33%) of the participants own a Bachelor's degree, while 26.8% hold a postgraduate degree.

## RESULTS

Half (50%) of the respondents strongly agree that Facebook is a flexible tool to interact with other parents, while 48.2% believe that is very easy to post a comment to Facebook special needs communities. Moreover, half of the respondents agree that it's easy to search for Facebook communities which concentrate on special needs (Figure 1).

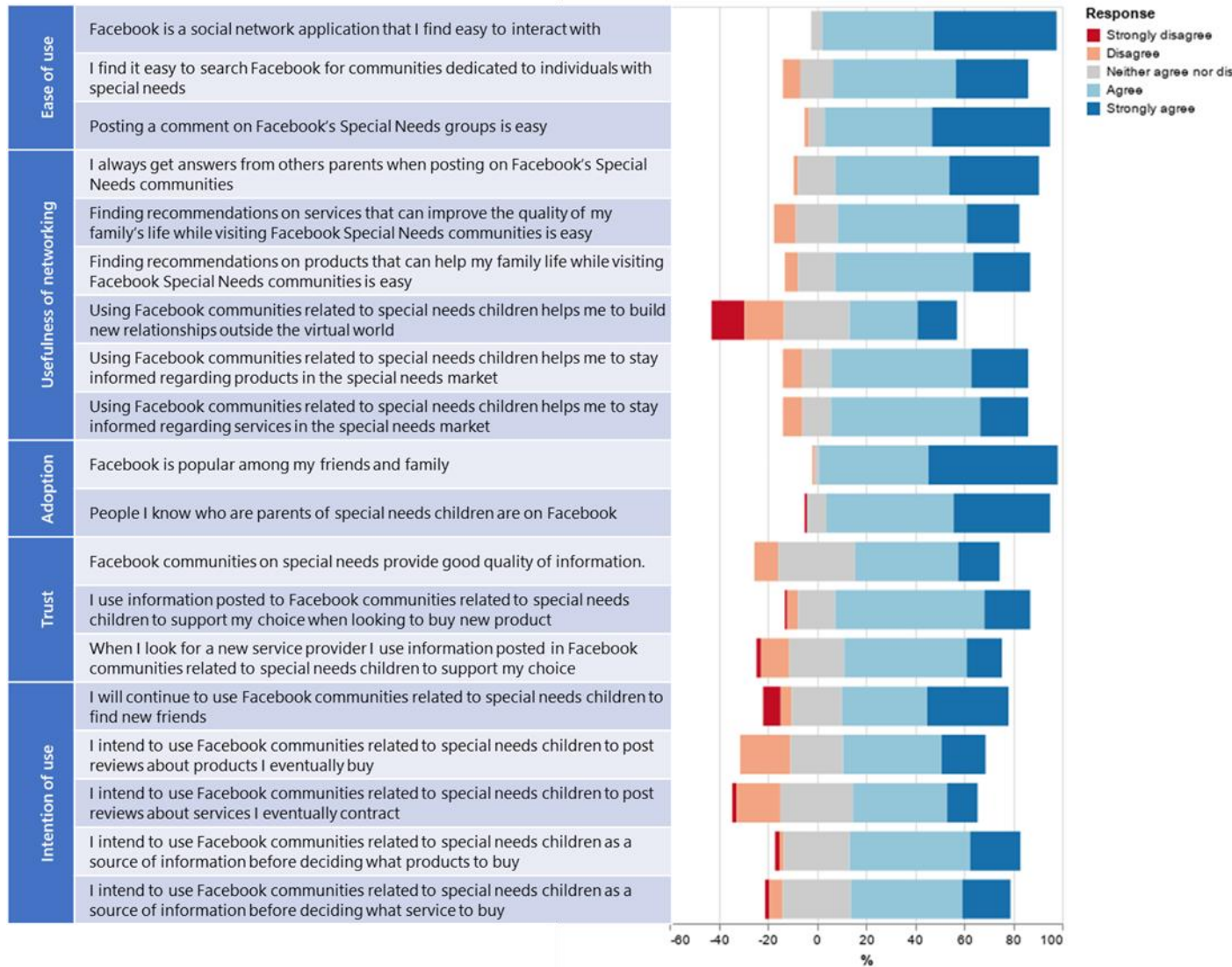
Regarding respondent's experience in finding recommendations on products related to special needs, 56.3% argue that it's easy to get such recommendations that may help the family of the child. 52.7% had the same opinion for services connected to special needs. More than 80% of the respondents agree or strongly agree (believe that it's easy or very easy) that it's easy to get answers by other parents when submitting a post to a special needs virtual community. In addition, 27.7% neither agree/neither disagree that virtual communities affect them to build relationships with other parents in the offline environment. Only 13.4% answered that the online communities have no effect on their offline relationships. As also shown in figure 1, more than half of the participants (i.e. 57.1%) agree that virtual communities help them to stay informed about products related to special needs. This percentage is a bit higher for services (i.e. 60.7%). The percentage of disagreement in the last mentioned two questions was 8%.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, 52.7% strongly agree that Facebook is popular, while 51.8% agree that other parents of children with special needs are on Facebook. More than 73% in total strongly agree (42%) or agree (31.3%) that virtual communities on special needs offer good quality of information. A great percentage of respondents (i.e. 79.5% in total) agree or strongly agree that such information are personally adopted to support their families. Furthermore, 50% agree and 14.3% strongly agree that they use information posted on Facebook when looking for a new service provider.

A significant percentage of the participants agree that they intend to use information posted on virtual communities to decide which product related to special needs (49.1%) or service (45.5%) to buy. On the other hand, 38.5% do not intend to leave any review about a product or service (17.9%). Finally, 67.8% agree or strongly agree that they will continue to use virtual communities related to special needs to find new friends.

Among respondents, 37.5% use Facebook more than 8 hours per week. It is notable that 16.1% spend more than 8 hours to virtual communities connected to special needs, while 27.7% dedicate 2-4 hours weekly to such communities

Figure 1: Results of the Study



**DISCUSSION**

The research findings suggest that special needs parents become members to relevant virtual communities because of the perceived easy use and their trust feeling. High level of trust is present when one perceives that the other users' online behavior may be helpful (Chari et al, 2016). Information and emotional support are demonstrated by users' interaction and constitute the base for perceived usefulness. Davis (1989) adds that perceived usefulness is positively correlated to user acceptance of the technology and as a result, professionals should design and implement new systems based on how users perceive the utility of the page. The 2016 Nielsen Social Media Report found that a significant percentage of heavy users (those who spend almost 7 hours per week on social media) would be willing to support their favorite brands if the web content is easy to find and make relevant shares on Facebook (Casey, 2017).

Parents of special needs children suggest that FB adoption and trust interfere on intention to use this media. Past studies on Facebook which used TAM analysis also conclude that trust is a factor that contribute to the intention of use (Rauniar et al, 2014). High levels of trust in user generated content has been linked to high levels of trust toward Facebook friends (Chari et al, 2016), which makes its adoption more appealing. Thus, ensuring an easy use or



emphasizing various Facebook tools that allow higher levels of communication among users, would contribute to subscriptions to relevant pages by parents of special needs children.

Facebook seems to affect relationships among users in online special needs communities by creating virtual relationships which does not necessary require a physical contact. Mohd Roffeei et al. (2015) point out that relationships outside the virtual community are hard to maintain. Ngai, Tao & Moon (2014) also agree with the findings of the current study, that virtual group members do not have strong motivations to participate in activities held outside Facebook.

Members of special needs communities use information to make products or services decisions. The Nielsen Social Media Report of 2016 agree that social media is important to its users as a search tool of unbiased reviews regarding products and services (Casey, 2017). Companies that sell products or services related to special needs or NPOs, may post advertisements, if permitted, or place easy links of paid ads. Esteem support, information support and tangible assistance would be related to intention to use Facebook and could actually be parts of the cycle that keeps users to repeat visiting this social media.

## CONCLUSIONS

Marketing professionals, who know what kind of social support special needs families are looking for while interacting in Facebook, may create strategies to influence the target public for initiating communication, improve relationships in the communities and have an impact on families' decision-making. Once Facebook adoption and trust are present, the acceptance of this technology on the daily routine of special needs families could increase opportunities for business to attract and better serve these users.

Organizations could have a presence in pages related to special needs children. They could produce and post videos to create affection, and even demonstrate products or services based on true stories to attract customers (Costa-Sánchez, 2017). Videos which reflect emotional support would also be appreciated and brands, if presented in such videos, could be the involved in online discussions creating a desirable e-buzz. Overall, organizations should be able to move from a traditional advertising strategy to the creation of conversations around brands (Bright et al., 2015).

The importance of the special needs market and its growth, make companies realize that choosing the right strategies to promote their products and services is crucial. Disability is still not represented equality in advertisements (Randjelovic, Pirsl & Pirsl, 2012), however some companies have made efforts to promote their products addressed to special needs individuals in social media. For example, "Target" ad, which includes a model with disability, was widely discussed in social media and the brand was much appreciated (Gibson, 2016). Conclusions of the study should be given in this section. Font Size 12, Times New Roman, single spaced. All the subheadings in this section should be in font size 12 Bold, Times New Roman, single spaced. The first letter of each word in subheading should be capital.

This study relied on TAM model to investigate users' perceptions of virtual communities, while only descriptives were extracted as a preliminary analysis. Future research could use equation models to explore in detail the relationships among constructs in virtual communities related to special needs. Moreover, products and services were not defined in

this study, users were asked in general if they are influenced by the online community when searching and buying products/services related to special needs. Future research could examine the impact of such communities on different product/service categories connected to special needs. In addition, future studies could explore in more depth the role of trust and its impact on emotions as well as the concept of e-friendships in virtual communities. The impact of demographics on perceived usefulness and influence of virtual communities could also be examined. Finally, it would be interesting to compare special needs communities to other support communities (e.g. breastfeeding or child nutrition support groups) to detect differences and similarities regarding perceived usefulness and support.

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