



PERSUADING NEW GENERATION CONSUMERS VIA SOCIAL MEDIA: A CASE STUDY ON TURKCELL

Assist. Prof. A.Banu Bıçakçı, Phd, Yeditepe University
Instr. Zeynep Çolak, MA, Yeditepe University

Abstract

Social Media phenomenon changed the corporations' approaches regarding their consumer relations. Today for the corporations that are aiming to reach young consumers, the most effective channel of persuasion is the social media. The main focus and argument of this study is that there has been a significant transformation in the perceptions of the receiver, thus the channels of persuasion, with the advancement of the social media. In the present study the leading telecommunications and technology company Turkcell's social media use within the consumer relations context is examined in a three-fold study, with a focus on persuasive communication. In the first part of the study a structured in-depth interview is carried out with the digital communications director of the company that is followed by a content analysis of social media messages of Turkcell. And finally in the third part, a communication audit is conducted via a survey among the university students. Upon the analysis of these data, Turkcell's persuasive strategy, its reflections in the social media and consumer perceptions of social media messages are evaluated.

Keywords: Social Media, Persuasion, Consumer Relations, Case study, Turkcell

INTRODUCTION

In the recent years remarkable changes in the online industry have been happening, particularly with the drastic development of the social media. Technological innovations, smart phones and tablet PCs have made social media even more available than any time before. 'Social media' may be conceptualized as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows creation, and exchange of user generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010:61). Blogs, collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), virtual social/game worlds (e.g. Second Life, Sims) content communities (e.g. YouTube), open platforms/ forums and bulleting boards (e.g. personaldemocracy.com) and global social networks (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) are classified under social media category (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008; Doyd and Ellison, 2007; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The substance of the content experience is determined more by the user than the supplier. This leads to a massive shift in the balance of power between the two (Larson, 2004; Thompson, 1997). According to Wright and Hinson (2008) social media have changed the way the organizations communicate, especially to external audiences. With the advanced technologies there has been a serious shift to openness as a result of a shift from traditional media centric universe to social media centric universe. Consequently, in the rapidly emerging era of virtual relations, for the corporations aiming to persuade new generation consumers the most effective pathway is the social media. The phenomenon altered the relationship between corporations and its various publics who has an impact on or who can be affected by an organization (Yang and Lim, 2009). As Hwang's (2011) puts forth in his recent research, many business owners in US consider social media as an appropriate platform to invest in activating and maintaining their communication with the end users. By means of social media communication teams, they can operate their corporate Facebook or Twitter accounts and they can inform their followers about recent products, services, campaigns...etc.

Communication and public relations professionals utilize social media in order to engage in main conversations and to enhance understanding of markets, customers, competitors and employees. Social media is seen as a cost effective way for timely targeted dialogue (DiStaso et al., 2011:327), such as persuasive communication. The ultimate goal of the persuasion is to change or reinforce a receiver's behavior, which involves a conscious attempt to modify receiver's attitude, beliefs and preferences (Benjamin, 1997). In this study persuasive communication is conceptualized as a process of co-creating a state of identification between a source and receiver that results from the use of verbal and/or visual symbols (Larson, 2004:11). For the corporations, this co-creation will only be possible by using the same language with their consumer at the age of 'user generated' media. As a matter of fact, the way the new generation perceives the world is relative to the social context. Respectively young consumers are represented in this study as new generation consumers that are able to reach and utilize technology and electronic sources as a part of their daily lives. The social context for the young consumers is their virtual relations, and their virtual representation on the social networks and the platforms. The corporations are now willing to take their places in this new structure, since what they aim to reach is already there. Engagement with the consumer requires more than simply creating a first-rate visual or an advertisement. The content provided by the corporations should be engaging, fresh and appealing for the audiences. Gaining individuals compliance to respond to surveys, sign up for information or purchase products requires persuasion, i.e., the shaping, reinforcing or changing the message receivers' responses (Miller in Wilson and Lu, 2008:2555). Within this framework this paper studies the underlying structure of organizations' communication goals in utilizing from the social media and message impacts on their consumers. To meet that objective Turkcell has been taken as a case study.

GSM-based mobile communication in Turkey began when Turkcell commenced operations in February 1994. It has more 34.4 million subscribers; Turkcell is not only the leading operator in Turkey, but also the third largest GSM operator in Europe in terms of subscriber number. The main reason for preferring Turkcell was the fact that it has more than one million members on the Facebook and more than 130.000 followers on Twitter (May, 2011) which makes them very strong in the social media. The value that the company puts on communication is another reason of the choice.

The aim of the study is to explore the place of social media in Turkcell's persuasive communication within the context of consumer relations. Via the research, the concepts like cross-channel effectiveness, the return on investment, celebrity endorsement in the social media context, the effects of social media communication and the message contents are analyzed. Upon the analysis of these data, Turkcell's persuasive strategy, its reflections in the social media and consumer perceptions of social media messages are evaluated.

Research Method

The methodology of the case study is based on a three-fold analysis. Initially a structured in-depth interview is made to reveal the strategy adapted by Turkcell in the social media and to undercover the place of persuasive communication within their social media use. The interview is conducted in Istanbul Turkcell head office with the digital media manager of the company, who is responsible for the management of social media. The interview questions are asked to get information regarding the place of social media in Turkcell's communication, identifying role and importance of social media in their consumer relations, persuasive tactics that are utilized and the company's perspective on the future of social media. The interview was audiotaped and the dialogs were transcribed afterwards.

In the second part of the study, a content analysis is carried out. For a full month, Turkcell's 110 messages posted on Twitter and Facebook (blogs and other social media are not taken into consideration) are collected. The tactics of persuasive communication that can be used on social media are coded upon the information retrieved from the in-depth interview. The messages are evaluated within 8 frameworks and 10 different broad story topics to reveal Turkcell's persuasive strategy in the social media. This study employs the coding scheme devised by PEJ (Pew Research Center [PEJ] 2009).



And finally in the third part, a communication audit is carried on via a survey among the university students to measure whether the messages of Turkcell that are being communicated to the target audience are understood in the intended manner. The main purpose of the survey is to evaluate whether the communication of Turkcell's Social Media platforms are giving the intended message to the target audience, and to assess the effect of the tools and tactics used in the Turkcell's social media communication. The findings are converted and analyzed via SPSS.

Findings

In-depth interview findings

The interview was conducted with the digital media communication's social media group manager, who is responsible from the social media platform, on 6th May, 2011. According to the findings Turkcell Social Media Department (SMD) has 20 employees. The department is not recorded as an independent SMD; it functions as a group in the digital media department. The department was founded in the beginning of 2011 for the purpose of increasing awareness in the social media. One team is responsible from the interactivity, which are responsible for following the posts about Turkcell and to respond those posts. The main reason of the interactivity is to manage the content, since social media is a very transparent structure, and the messages are exposed to everyone. Turkcell developed patented software, which monitors the positive and negative comments about the company, and they turn those comments to statistics by content analysis. If negative comments are detected in the system they immediately interfere with negative comments, criticisms unless they are reprimands or profanities. Within this regard the company is working with an independent social media agency for communicating with those people, to remodel the content. In addition to the interactivity issue SMD's responsibilities are to decide the content of the messages and the channel selection. At the end of each week the engagement rate, the response rate and other data's are analyzed for the purpose of deciding the following week's content. All those reports are analyses in combination with the reports coming from the digital agency and independent social agency reports and they run campaigns.

The training is the important part of their social media structure. The company is well aware of the fact that social media requires constant innovation and updates. Thus even though the company is working with social agencies they still do not count on solely their feedback. In order to use the social media platforms as efficient as possible the employees of the SMD are under constant training within Turkey and abroad for the topics ranging from persuasion, branding, how to be a lovmemark, communication and technical trainings. They are importing experts for technical training regarding Facebook and Twitter.

The most frequently used social media platforms from the most used to the less used are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Turkcell Blog. The reason for the platform selection is the popularity of Facebook in Turkey. Turkey is ranking the second biggest Facebook user in the world. Also the professionalism of the platform is the secondary reason for the platform selection of Turkcell. Facebook provides Turkcell a substantial amount of communication opportunities such as brand pages, advertisement opportunities and advance technical infrastructure. Since Twitter is in its infancy in Turkey, the focus to that social platform is in the secondary place.

According to the findings the advantage of social media is creating a two-way communication. By this way a brand experience is realized via the dialogue. The consumers are generating content and stories about the brand by giving feedbacks, which is enhancing the brand experience. Social media platforms are used for giving the touch and feel of the brand. Without the social media the experience is created via the stores, the visual, that is how the brand interacts with the consumers. The second advantage of the platform is that interaction is fast. Changing the minds of the people is easier, since all the demographics are available to the company. And the message construction is realized depending on that measured data. Instead of posting general messages, on social media there are more targeted messages depending on the target audience and even the time of the day.

Compared to television it gives the opportunity of sending unlimited messages and they are not limited with certain visuals, and time limits. Thus, you can have more intimate relations with consumers through social networks.

The celebrity selection is rather seasonal. Depending on the popularity of the celebrity the deals are made. Generally the method is to make exclusivity agreement. Such as broadcasting a video for the first time on the Turkcell's Facebook page. They generally work with young pop singers, or comedians considering their young consumers and their tastes. They avoid using celebrities as reference point, since in the social media advertorial content does not work. They also provide content for Internet celebrities like blog writers, or people who have too many followers in Facebook or Twitter. The deals are based on mutual relations. The Internet celebrities need content, and Turkcell delivers this content to those people with press releases. They do not have any contracts or deals officially.

The social networks are defined as efficient economy. They give the opportunity of reaching the targeted consumers very fast and very economically. From the existing platform all sort of promotional activities are announced. After the announcements the purchases are measured. If there is an increase in the sales after the content post, it shows the effectiveness and the success of the campaign. The immediate measurements differ from the measurement of likings, retweets and the engagement rate. Those are the main advantages of social network platform.

The first main reason for using the social media is in the first place informing. The primary approach is to gather information by following the posts of people, and analyzing the responses. Upon that responding people, to inform them about services and products that they may be willing to purchase. This is considered as a very effective way for fulfilling the needs of the consumer. The second reason is to create image. By creating dialogs with the consumers a level of communication is maintained. Interactivity also considered as an indispensable part of social network. The interactivity in the social platforms is evaluated as an advantage compared to the traditional ways of reaching the consumer. The feedbacks of the consumers have become the focal point for optimizing the services resulting an increase in the return of investment. In the social network sites the main measurement is based on the number of the followers, engagement rate, like and dislike amounts, comments and the content analysis of the messages posted by the consumers. By means of data collected from these measurements the strategies are reshaped.

Among the persuasion strategies the main strategy is providing exclusive content and service to the consumer. With the innovative products and services they keep updating and informing the consumers. By using not-only-but-also technique they constantly inform the consumer about the products and they are creating an image of being exclusive. The main identity of Turkcell is based on the exclusivity sense. The main strategy of the company is based upon the message that using Turkcell is a privilege. The messages are intended to arise the feelings of the consumers. The second method they are using is the big words strategy. By making researches they are finding out the words, which are effective on the consumers. And those words are used in the short messages. Simplicity of the message is the other tactic they used. Word like free, make a comment, like are the classical words, which are considered to be engaging in the social media. Since the people are following the messages from their smart phones they are preparing the layouts compatible with the layout of the digital media. Most of the messages are below 90 characters. The celebrities are used for many reasons. Mainly the promotional campaigns are including the celebrities. Meet and greet campaigns are conducted and announced. Those campaigns give the opportunity of meeting celebrities and participating their concerts. Also exclusivity agreements are signed with the celebrities thus the social media follower can watch the celebrity's videos for the first time.



The place of the social media is seen very crucial in the future, especially with regard to the new generation whose is fully wired to the technology. It is perceived as the center of communication and the most appropriate channel for delivering the messages to the targeted consumers in the future. It is the channel where the worth-of-mouth will dominate too. Not only the corporations will announce their services and products, but also the friend and the follower will be spreading the content. The respondent also indicated that the 60% of the online content is spread through Facebook. If the corporations manage to create a content, which has a potential to spread, they will have a big advantage, since the content will reach to friends as well. In the decision making process the recommendations of the friend are considered highly important. That is why in future the social networks will be focal point to reach the real people and to disseminate the message through them. There are upcoming trends like social commerce and social CRM in which people not only see the recommendations but also the products that use will be visible to everyone by means of e-commerce sites. Even though these applications are in the infancy, in future this is considered to be the main tactic for the corporations. Within this regard Turkcell also will be working on the social CRM concept. This system monitors the mavens and the opinion leaders, and close relations are maintained with those people. A sort of brand loyalty is constructed with constant dialogue. These people will function as a bridge making researches and giving feedback. The spread of the social networks makes the process even more valuable. Also the social network will be used as a qualitative and quantitative data gathering platforms.

Content Analysis Findings

In the first step, a summary of the content codes is developed. At the second level of the analysis whole messages starting from the date of 15th May to 15th June (2011) have been scanned and coded under 10 broad story topics, 6 frames which are retrieved from the in-depth interview results and 6 different time zones. SPSS content analysis report is prepared for the evaluation of the data. The data is evaluated via the frequency rate (Table 1). According the statistics the amount of the messages posted vary each day. The highest message post was on the first of June and the lowest post was on the second day of the June. This information is consistent with the information achieved from the in-depth interview. The posts are decided upon the engagement rate, they do not have a standard approach in the number of the messages.

Table 1 – Source

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Facebook	49	45.8	45.8	45.8
Twitter	58	54.2	54.2	
Total	107	100.0	100.0	100.0

The second variable was the time as shown in Table 2 below. The limitation of the analysis is the lack of hours of the Twitter posts. In this parameter only Facebook content was evaluated. Between the hours of 12 PM and 3 PM there is a higher rate of message post. Yet the variation is not meaningful. There is a balance between two different time zones as 12 PM to 3 PM, and 3 PM to 6 PM.

Table 2 – Time

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 9 am to noon	9	8.4	8.4	8.4
12 pm to 3 pm	13	12.1	12.1	20.6
3 pm to 6 pm	12	11.2	11.2	31.8
6 pm to 9 pm	5	4.7	4.7	36.4
6 am to 9 am	10	9.3	9.3	45.8
not available	58	54.2	54.2	100.0
Total	107	100.0	100.0	

In the third variable –broad story topic- there was a significant difference as indicated in Table 3 below. The most common broad story topic is the consumer products and product recalls. The cumulative percentage is 82.2% and the frequency ratio is 39%. Celebrities, lifestyle trends and topics regarding technology and sports follow it. The low frequency number of the business further proves the younger target consumers and it makes a sense.

Table 3 – Broad Story Topic

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Business	5	4.7	4.7	4.7
Technology	9	8.4	8.4	13.1
Celebrities	13	12.1	12.1	25.2
Human Interest	6	5.6	5.6	30.8
High Arts/Culture	4	3.7	3.7	34.6
Lifestyle trends	12	11.2	11.2	45.8
Consumer news/products and product recalls	39	36.4	36.4	82.2
Sports	9	8.4	8.4	90.7
Other	10	9.3	9.3	100.0
Total	107	100.0	100.0	



The fourth variable was the frame, which indicates the purpose of the content (Table 4). According to the frequency rates Facebook and Twitter post were used primarily for the purpose of informing, promotional content and exclusivity messages. Other tactics and celebrity endorsement follow it. This data also reconfirm the in-depth interview findings. As shown in the table 5, the lead new makers were mainly the celebrities like sport people and pop singers. Even though the dissemination of the lead makers is almost equal, the highest frequency rate belongs to Burhan Altintop (Table 5). As it was relieved in the in-depth interview this campaign's engagement rate was too low since they later found out that Burhan Altintop is not appealing for the young consumers due to his age.

Table 4 - Frame

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid exclusive content	15	14.0	14.0	14.0
promotional	25	23.4	23.4	38.3
market research	6	5.6	5.6	43.9
information	38	35.5	35.5	79.4
other	12	11.2	11.2	89.7
Celebrity endorsement	11	10.3	10.3	100.0
Total	107	100.0	100.0	

Table 5- Lead Newsmaker

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Non-topic	92	86.0	86.0	86.0
Bon Jovi	1	.9	.9	86.9
Burhan Altintop	4	3.7	3.7	90.7
Kenan Dogulu	1	.9	.9	91.6
Marcel Ilhan	2	1.8	1.8	92.5
NilKaraimbrahim	4	3.7	3.7	96.3
g	1	.9	.9	98.1
Ricky Martin	2	1.9	1.9	100.0
Sebahat	107	100.0	100.0	
Total				

All the finding and result of the content analysis was consistent with the information collected from the in-depth interview.

Survey Findings

The survey is conducted with 110 university students between the ages of 18-23. The ratio between the followers of Turkcell's social media messages and the appeal of these messages to those people are rather high: 60% of the participants indicated that the celebrities of Turkcell are appealing for their age group. The ratio is 64, 58 %for women, and 56, 45 %for men. 78, 57 %of the people who consider the Facebook messages of Turkcell appealing indicated that the celebrities are appealing too (see Figure 1).

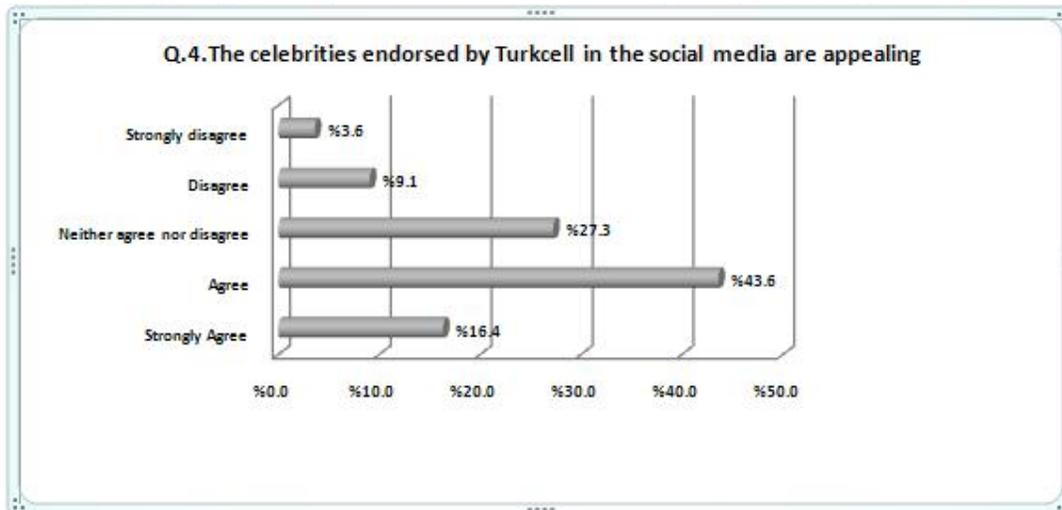


Figure 1 - The celebrities endorsed by Turkcell in the social media



The consumers' reason for preferring Turkcell is asked as well. According to the survey findings, the primary reason is the quality services, and being a familiar brand and promotions follows it. %54,55 of the participants considered Turkcell's communication appealing to the young people. %52, 73 of the participants agreed that utilization from social media contributes to the success of Turkcell (see Figure 2).

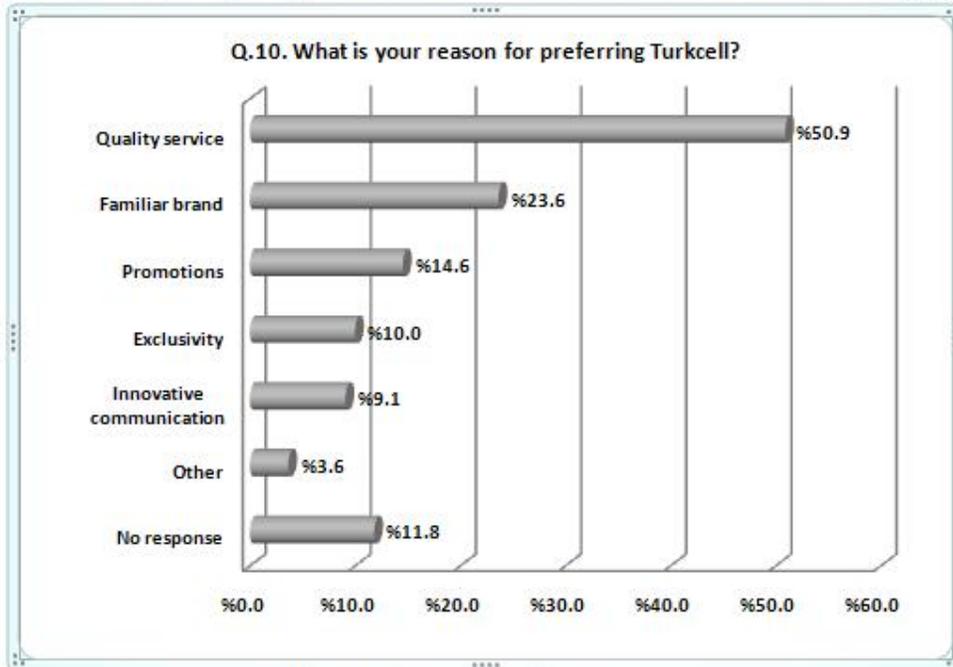


Figure 2 - Reason for preferring Turkcell

%54,55 of the participants considered Turkcell's communication appealing to the young people. %52, 73 of the participants agreed that utilization from social media contributes to the success of Turkcell (see Figure 3).

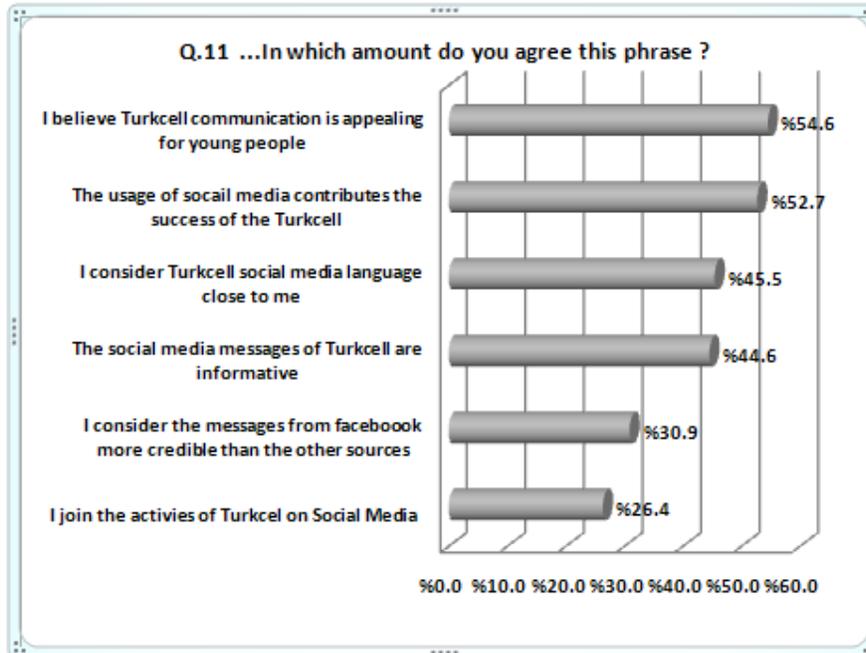


Figure 3– Overall attitude towards Turkcell in social media

Therefore, social media utilization of Turkcell seems to be appealing for young consumers.



CONCLUSION

For today's profit organizations, social media is an appropriate platform to invest in initiating and preserving the communication with their consumers. As stated in the study, there has been a paradigm shift to two-way communication with the advanced technologies and social media needs to be placed in the core of this communication to tackle in the competitive markets. This study shows that the corporations have indeed started making these changes. Social media is considered by the corporations to be fast, targeted and efficient in comparison with the traditional forms of mass media.

There are upcoming trends like social commerce and social CRM in which people not only see the recommendations but also the products that are used will be visible to everyone by means of e-commerce sites. Even though these applications are in the infancy, in future this is considered to be the main tactic for the corporations. The trends in the social media are developing in parallel with the engagement of people in that social network. Facebook has been growing rapidly since the day it has been founded, and it has reshaped the way people communicate, thus the corporations' strategies when dealing with the consumers. Social media made the communication more transparent since there is dramatic change in the way the mass media content is created. This transparency also brought the corporations the advantage of knowing their consumers better. With this data in hand they can reshape their services and products in accordance with the requirements of their consumers in a more targeted way. Social media also has changed the language of corporations when they are providing messages to their target consumers. The tone of the communication is rather friendly in social media, thus the first aim is know them and gain their trust.

Depending on the research findings, it is visible that the traditional ways of persuasion still exist in the social media, such as celebrity endorsement, since the source credibility has been the core of persuasion since the times of Aristotle to the present day. Celebrity endorsement is a convenient strategy depending on the appropriateness of the chosen character with the target audience. Within this frame, the system monitors the mavens and opinion leaders as well.

Turkcell with its Facebook members more than one million and three thousand uses their advantage. The foundation of a new department, all the investment for training and future researches proves this fact. Based on research findings, Turkcell is using social media both for communicating with the consumers, with various purposes -informing, promoting products and image enhancement- and for research. The researchers are conducting tailor-made messages for each segment, thus increasing their followers and prospects each day. The company wishes to build up a strong and positive image among its consumers, reflecting its identity based on exclusivity. They are willing to be a lovemark, so they use persuasion tactics such as 'not only but also' to mention their advantages for the consumers and to make them feel privileged. Using big words is another persuasion tactic while they are aiming to manage the consumers' perceptions. Simplicity in the messages is their overall strategy as the company aims to reach young audiences and brand loyalty is constructed via constant dialogue. The survey results are also proving Turkcell's success in the social media communication; such as young consumers find the messages appealing to themselves and tend to accept the content of the messages voluntarily. As a conclusion, regarding the use of social media, Turkcell's persuasive communication objectives are associated with image creation and reinforcement rather than improving the marketing communication.

In the study we have seen that the importance of social media in corporate communication will be even more important in the future, since the number of the social media users are increasing every day. The new generation is growing with the social media culture. So, for corporations it is crucial to take their place in this formation by creating infrastructure and developing innovative and relative methods to engage with the consumers. The fact that corporations are paying more attention to the social media shows that it is not just a current trend but, a paradigm shift. Within this regard, the social media communication should be the focal point of corporations' public relations departments that are aiming to inform, educate or persuade their publics. Thus they need to invest more time and effort to understand the publics and their way of communication since it all seems that social media will be the most effective way of engaging with the young consumers.

REFERENCES

- Benjamin, J. (1997). *Principles, elements and types of persuasion*. Boston: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.
- Constanides, E. & Fountain, S. (2008). Web 2.0: Conceptual foundations and marketing issues. *Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice*, 9, 231-244.
- DiStaso, M. W., McCorcinda, T & Wright, D. K. (2011). How public relations executives perceive and measure the impact of social media in their organizations. *Public Relations Review*, 37, 325-328.
- Doyd, D. M. & Ellison, N. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 11, 210-230.
- Hwang, S. (2011). The strategic use of Twitter to manage personal public relations, *Public Relations Review*, 38(1), 159-161.
- Kaplan, A. M. & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 53, 59-68.
- Larson, C. U. (2003). *Persuasion: Reception and responsibility*. 10th edition, London: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Pew Research Centers Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ). (2009). *News Coverage Index Reports*. Washington, D.C. <http://www.journalism.org>.
- Thompson, D. (1997). An introduction to the digital media. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 2, 79-80.
- Wilson, E. V. & Lu, Y. (2008). Communication goals and online persuasion: An empirical examination. *Computer in Human Behavior*, 24, 2554-2577.
- Wright, D. K. & Hinson, M. D. (2008). How blogs and social media are changing public relations and the way it is practiced. *Public Relations Journal*, 2(2).
- Yang, S. U. & Lim, J. S. (2009). The effects of blog mediated public relations (BMPR) on relational trust. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 21(3), 341-359.