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Profiling online consumers according to their experiences with a special focus on social dimension

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Abstract

Strategic marketing management is basically based on segmentation, targeting and positioning. To develop marketing strategies, professionals and academicians increasingly consider customer experiences in recent years. This paper is focused on the segmentation part of marketing strategies combining it with customer experiences. The main objective of this paper is to introduce social experiences beside other experiences to consumer segmentation according to their experiential appeals in order to reveal new consumer profiles. In this way, marketing strategies can be developed on new consumer segments, since previous studies have not considered sensory, affective, creative cognitive, physical and social experiences all together for segmentation. For this purpose, online environment is used because of its expanding social-aimed use. A descriptive research is conducted with 320 participants in Istanbul. The research findings on online brands indicate new customer segments in addition to the existing ones. These segments are named as “individual hedonists, highly socials, holistic consumers, action-oriented consumers, knowledge seekers, sense-directed consumers and social utilitarian consumers”.

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1. Introduction

The heart of strategic marketing is segmentation, targeting and positioning [1]. In recent years, customer experiences are more considered for academicians and strategic marketing plans, since experiential marketing offers an opportunity of differentiation, a competitive advantage for organizations. In terms of online brands, consumers prefer to experience the exploration the unknown within the cyber space and to actively participate in the learning process. Internet users as learners or communicators on

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the internet are mainly involved in an efficient process which is experiential [2]. The experiential view holds that consumption experiences lie beyond the dimension of the decision for consumption; the crucial aspects of consumption are “fantasies, feelings and fun” [3]; [4]. In addition, the social potential of the internet is worth to regard it as a dynamic changing individuals, groups and societies life. With the internet, socialization is more active for individuals because of the ability to interact virtually. Online users interacting with a machine, virtual communities and individuals globally are interpreted in that their consumption experience of the internet is different to traditional media and traditional marketing [5].

Considering online consumer experiences and their social side, this study aims to profile online consumers according to their experiences with online brands and to observe their attitudes and post experience dimensions. For this purpose, strategic experiential modules are used as main distinguishing basis in consumer profiles. Then, the different profiles are compared with each others in terms of consumer attitude and reuse intention of the web site. The main contribution of this study is the focus on online customer experiences, especially considering the social dimension.

The article includes the following steps. Firstly, the literature is briefly reviewed to reveal the consumer profiles according to experiential appeals. Then, a descriptive research is conducted with 320 online consumers. Cluster analysis and regression analysis are used to reveal profiles of online consumers and their relationships with attitudes and reuse intention. Finally, contributions, managerial and academic implications are presented according to the results.

2. Strategic marketing management goals in the history

The word “strategy” is derived from the ancient Greek word “strategos” which refers to the “art of the general”. Beyond its military origins, the concept is developed for businesses since 1960 and the strategic management stands for a way of managing the firm from a strategic perspective [6]. From the marketing side, the strategies have different focuses in the history. In the production era (prior to 1920) where customer demand exceeds the supply, organizations are production-oriented and the managements should focus on improving their production and distribution efficiency [7]; [8]; [9].

As the result of the sophistication in production techniques in the United States and Europe, output grows from the 1920s into the early 1950s. Thus, manufacturers increase their emphasis on effective sales forces [10]. Thus, this second era is sales-oriented. The marketing-oriented era emerged since 1950s where satisfying the needs and desires of actual and potential consumers becomes important. The organizations apply outside-in perspective starting with a well defined market, their attention is on customer needs, they coordinate all the marketing activities affecting customers and they make profits by creating long-term customer relationships based on customer value and satisfaction [11]. Relationship era emerges in the final decade of 20th century. The main focus of this period is to develop long-term, value-added relationships over time with customers and suppliers. Organizations build strategic alliances and partnerships among manufacturers, retailers and suppliers [12]. The competitive advantage can be created by giving importance to long-term relationship with customers and it cannot be imitated by competitors [13]. Experience can be a differentiator for markets where relationships are not a competitive differential advantage anymore [14], since, innovations created through customer experiences are unique and cannot be imitated by competitors [15].

3. Customer experience management

According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), the history of economic progress includes four stages; agrarian economy, industrial economy, service economy and emerging experience economy. The commoditization of goods and services leads to experiences as the fourth step in the economic value progression [16]. Shorter life cycles make products and services more commoditized. Hence, differentiation and preference shift from the offerings themselves to the institutions that create experiences associated with their

acquisition, use and maintenance. People are naturally inclined to prefer pleasant and special experiences that have important and lasting effect on an individual [17]. While traditional marketing defines the consumers as rational decision makers concerning the functional features and benefits, the experiential marketing reveals the consumers' wants to relate to products as consequence of their feelings [18]. Considering consumer - organization interaction, the consumption experience is a response to a corporate stimulus which takes forms of sensory, affective, creative cognitive, physical and social identity [19]. From a business perspective, "experiences are events that engage individuals in a personal way" [20] (p.12). From a consumers perspective, "experiences are enjoyable, engaging, memorable encounters for those consuming these events" [21] (p.120).

Schmitt (1999) defines five strategic experience modules: Sensory Experience or SENSE Marketing appeals to the senses with the objective of creating sensory experiences, through sight, sound, touch, taste and smell; affective experience or FEEL Marketing appeals to customers' inner feelings and emotions, with the objective of creating affective experiences that range from mildly positive moods linked to a brand to strong emotions of joy and pride; creative cognitive experience or THINK Marketing appeals to the intellect with the objective of creating cognitive, problem-solving experiences that engage customers creatively; ACT Marketing which can be identified by physical experiences, behaviors and lifestyles enriches customers' lives by targeting their physical experiences showing them alternative ways of doing things, alternative lifestyles and interactions; social identity experience or RELATE Marketing expands beyond the individual's personal, private feelings, thus relating the individual to something outside his/her private state [22]. So, customer experience management includes the strategic management of these experiences appropriately. Customer experience management (CEM) differs from customer relationship management (CRM) in several ways. While CRM reveals the preferences of customers, CEM considers the environment, the dynamics of interactions between companies and customers [23].

Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010) offer five types of consumers based on their different experiential appeals. These groups of consumers are holistic consumers (who are interested in all aspects of experience), hedonistic consumers (who attach importance to sensory and affective dimensions), action-oriented consumers (who focus on physical actions and behaviors), inner-directed consumers (who focus on internal processes which are sensations, emotions and thoughts) and utilitarian consumers (who are low-experiential consumers) [24].

4. Social dimension in strategic market segmentation

A market segment is a cluster of consumers whose needs and wants are similar [25]. For effective market-driven strategies, market segmentation is an important capability linked to choosing market targets and positioning [26]. So, an organization should divide a market into small clusters and then decide to target segments and to position the brand. In marketing strategies; demographic, geographic, psychographic or behavioristic variables are generally used to segment consumer markets [27]. In this study, online consumers are considered to be segmented. Lee and Conroy argue that "the internet is used mainly for social learning, communication, social relationships and to foster a sense of belonging through shared play and virtual club membership" [28]. So, social dimension should be considered to segment online consumers.

For strategic segmentation, new variables can be used in current changing conditions and transforming societal value systems. In a deep relation to this complexity, classical strategies to identify consumer profiles seem insufficient for continuously complicating nature of the consumer culture. Beyond the changing dynamics of consumption, which have got effects fueled by the conditions resulted of urbanization, globalization and high technology, individuals' expectations and objectives in consumption, are manipulated by their social needs for experiment of real life on virtual environment and for healing the defects in face to face communication in a more individualistic and technologic world.

As stated by Slater (1997) for leisure time activities, the gains of consumption and the variety in consumers' leisure time activities are turning around the life style groups and so. By this means, to get the consumer profiles by the help of the classical sociological parameters is getting harder for an efficient detection of the new consumer profiles. This complex consumer culture, which is argued as the result of the post-modern or the continuing modern era, is no more signified as massive, but more individualistic. Plus, the individual as the basic consuming unit is segmented not as to demographic variables such as class, gender, age, but as to their identification of their 'self' in any Life Style Group [29]. Categorizing the consumers profile in Life Style Groups could be related to the way of the spending leisure time. By this relation, according to type of recreational use of the goods, in terms of representing the consumer's appreciation of individuality and diversity of style can be considered as individual marks [30].

General approach for Internet as a store and the web sites as the brands being sold in this store goes on giving the classic gains to consumer, such as the symbolic value, satisfaction of self, gained status, identity creation and the need of feeling belonged to a unity. Our discussion on new profiles, who shows distinctively a tendency to use internet as a socialization channel, have individualistic aims in internet use especially its experiential value that makes them more pleased, more social. Our research, trying to get new profiles, which have been emerged by the complicated nature of consumer culture laying on the experimental gains in this fast moving world, highlights the importance of social experiences taken by internet consumption.

We try to define new segments appeared in consideration of social dimension in experiential marketing. Consumers are divided as to their preferences in consumption of the internet in respect to the socializing effect of it, but not without caring for its signs to the Life-Style Group the consumers identify themselves in. To add a sociological interpretation of these new profiles of online consumers, we should review common discourses loaded by social scientists. The current general views about the online usage have profound effects on various aspects of the social landscape and individual lives [31]; [32].

As a social and cultural fact, consumption is evaluated in varied angles by primer social scientists, especially stressing the commodity signs. Consumption is focused with its specialties in its character maintaining the social fabric and plus, via consumption individuals practice upon diversified amount of messages in a communication process. Here, it's obvious that consumption itself is social; it's at the heart of communication and so experience. Then, to cover up the messages being transferred, it should be stated that commodity or brand that we consider internet web-sites as, is defined as the signifiers of identity and status [33]; [34]; [35]. Consumption of the commodity or brand to get signifiers of status or identity, allows people to expect the specified images of them perceived by others. Also the consumption patterns give the way of the formation of the class identity to consumers. Moreover, the brand has the esthetic value and it works as a transmitter of those values on the images of the consumer and consumed brand has the signs of life style and identity [36]; [37]. Beyond, the other view of consumption of a brand or commodity, states that consumption is a highway of communication in between the different cultures [38]; [39].

We can summarize some specific profiles stressed by social scientist for consumers as hedonists [40], manipulated victims [41]; [42], identity and status seekers [43]; [44]; [45] and rational choosers [46]. The profiles emerged in the study of Gabriel and Lang (2006) are choosers, communicators, explorers, identity seekers, hedonists or artists, victims, rebels, activists and citizens as summarized in the table 1 [47].

Table 1. Consumer Faces based on Different Academic Approaches

Consumer Face	Distinctive Marks
Consumer as a Chooser	is depicted as having goals, taking information actively processing and interpreting the information and selecting alternatives.
Consumer as a Communicator	individuals practice on consumption to get involved in world of signs and through the consumption of a specific brand. one would not only get the images attached to the good, but also could get in social contact to others, overcome prejudices or create another.
Consumer as an Explorer	discovering new lines, new fashions, new 'product ideas ' and new forms of fun are the motivating factors to consume for explorer whose quest for new pleasures, new meanings and even new identities.
Consumer as an Identity Seeker	through consumption individuals could get the signs of a set of values included in a class culture and alike, to be involved in a life style group, individuals tend to consume.
Consumer as a Hedonists Or Artist	social hedonism is defined by the social practices of consumption to establish social differences through diversified tastes. the other form, solipsistic hedonism shapes the consumer as pleasure seeker and hungry for distinction.
Consumer as a Victim	this portrait is presented as the consumers are passive receivers of the active decision makers of market. individuals, who do not demand but wholly supplied of the goods yielded by producers, are manipulated by trends and fashions, images and ideals created within the market.
Consumer as a Rebel	this aspect of consumers has the values of humanism which cares the ecology and oppose to the consumerist society.
Consumer as an Activist	experience of injustice can be a prime motivation for consumers getting organized in groups.
Consumer as a Citizen	as a component of the activist consumer as a citizen seeks for the legal rights and actively participates in shaping society's future.

Source: Gabriel, Y. and Lang, T. (2006), *The Unmanageable Consumer*, London: Sage.

5. Characteristics of online consumers

Internet is widely used for social purposes and in the literature; the common point of the studies on Internet users is their consideration of social experiences. Thus, this study considers online brands to develop social experience as a variable to cluster the consumers.

Internet is a new medium for human interaction. Understanding its use by consumers provides products and services more responsive to consumer needs [48]. In terms of online shopping consumers, two main motivations to shop online are experiential behavior and goal-oriented or utilitarian shopping. Utilitarian shopping is task-oriented and rational. However, experiential behavior appears as shopping with a desire to be entertained, to have fun and to be immersed in the experience. Specific benefits of experiential shopping are; surprise, uniqueness and excitement; online deal searching; product involvement and positive sociality [49]. Beyond online shopping, the Internet is used for self development and also as a social link to the environment [50]. Online users use Internet as a source of information, communication and socialization. Socialization is associated with the variables of chatting, friends, fun, interaction, newsgroups, people and relaxing [51]. It's generally considered a better method of communication than mails and telephones and it's a medium for friendships with strangers from different parts of the world. Thus, it can be seen as a virtual system where it's possible to share the interests, to express the opinions and to form relationships and communities globally [52].

6. Methodology

The subject of the quantitative research of this study is to profile online consumers according to their experiential appeals. The formation of sample by participants in Istanbul and the consideration of online brands are main limitations of the research. The main objective is to propose a new segmentation based on consumer experiences in addition to the previous studies with consideration of social dimension. The research type is descriptive and data are collected by face to face interviews. A sample size of 318 people is determined with a 95% confidence level and $\pm 5.5\%$ precision as shown with the following calculation:

$$n = \frac{z^2 pq}{e^2} = \frac{(1.96)^2 (0.5)(0.5)}{(0.055)^2} \cong 318 \text{ people.}$$

Based on this result, 320 respondents are considered as sample size of the study. The respondents answered the questions according to their most visited website's brand. In terms of sample technique, convenience sampling and snowball sampling, which are nonprobability techniques are used in this study. To obtain a sample of convenient elements, convenience sampling is used; it's the least expensive and least time consuming sampling technique. In snowball sampling, subsequent respondents are selected based on the information by the initial randomly selected participants, this technique increases the probability of locating the desired characteristic in the population [53]. The questionnaire is designed with four main parts; demographics, brand experience scale, website reuse intention and brand attitude questions. The brand experience scale of Brakus et al (2009) is used together with social experience items developed by Dirsehan (2011) on online brands [54]; [55]. The brand experience items used in the research is shown in the table 2. Three items are used per type of experience. The items are measured on seven-point Likert scales from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree".

Three standard questions on brand attitude (Bad/Good, Unpleasant/Pleasant, Unattractive/Attractive) take place like in the study of Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010) [56]. In addition, one question on website

reuse intention (I plan to reuse this website in the future) is introduced to the questionnaire. The brand attitude items are measured on seven point semantic differentials and the reuse intention on seven point Likert scale.

From this research's sample of 320 people, 169 (52.8%) are females and 151 (47.2%) are males. The mean age for participants ranging between 12 and 55 is 24.03 with the standard deviation of 6.089.

7. Research findings

The results of this research are analyzed with SPSS statistical analysis software. First of all, the reliability analysis is conducted for brand experience items. The results as shown in the table 3 show acceptable and high reliabilities for the scales used in the research.

The means of respondents for sensory, affective, creative cognitive and physical customer experiences (using the items based on confirmatory factor analysis) are used as clustering variables (referring to confirmatory factor analysis results). Cluster analyses are run to identify appropriate number of clusters. On the basis of dendrograms, the seven-cluster solution is chosen as the most appropriate one.

The clusters are named according to their means as indicated in the table 4. Highly socials and holistic consumers are most observed people and knowledge seekers are the least ones. The frequencies are shown in the table 5.

Table 2. Brand Experience Scale

Experiences	Items
Sensory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I find this brand interesting in a sensory way. - This brand makes a strong impression on my visual sense or other senses. - This brand does not appeal to my senses (reverse coded).
Affective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This brand induces feelings and sentiments. - I do not have strong emotions for this brand (reverse coded). - This brand is an emotional brand.
Creative Cognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This brand stimulates my curiosity and problem solving. - I engage in a lot of thinking when I encounter this brand. - This brand does not make me think (reverse coded).
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I engage in physical actions and behaviors when I use this brand. - This brand results in bodily experiences. - This brand is not action oriented (reverse coded).
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This brand provides me to build friendships. - This brand provides me to chat. - I'm in interaction with other people when I use this brand.

Sources: Brakus, J. J., Schmitt, B. H. and Zarantonello, L. (2009), Brand Experience: What Is It? How Is It Measured? Does It Affect Loyalty? *Journal of Marketing*, 73, (May), pp.52-68 and Dirsehan, T. (2011), Introducing the Social Dimension to Brand Experience Scale with the Perspective of Online Brands, Unpublished.

Table 3. Results of Reliability Analysis

Scales	Cronbach's Alpha	
Experiences	Sensory	0.879
	Affective	0.828
	Creative Cognitive	0.795
	Physical	0.787
	Social	0.916
Brand Attitude	0.878	

7.1. Individual Hedonists

The scores of individual hedonists are quite high on all experiential dimensions except the social one. They have second highest scores on the sensory and affective dimensions after holistic consumers. They look for brands providing them sensory and emotional appeals. Thus, this profile seems to Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010) study's hedonist profile as to these findings. On the other hand, they have the second lowest score on social dimension. So, they are individual hedonists. Other scopes in online experience are valued more than social scope and gains; then we notice that this profile has common characteristics with hedonist/artist and also explorer profiles engaging in explorations, fantasies, feelings and fun, stated by Gabriel and Lang (2006). Hence, it would be added that this profile is not interested in communication and involvement in social groups via internet. They enjoy individually in online experience, not socially involved in it.

7.2. Highly Socials

Highly socials have the highest score on social dimension and they have scores slightly below the average on other experiential dimensions, but those are not the lowest ones. This profile attracts attention with the highest score on social experience, so it is named as high socials. Except the social dimension, the scores on other experiential appeals are approximately similar to the scores of Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010) study's inner-directed profile. Social experiences in use the internet is above the average and the highest in the sample group. Internet use means as a canal to communicate and to be social for this group. This profile can be related to the profiles defined in study of Gabriel and Lang (2006), explorers and communicators.

7.3. Holistic Consumers

Holistic consumers have highest scores on all experiential dimensions except the social one which is the second highest score among the groups and their social experience score is close to the highest one. These are consumers attach great importance to brand experiences as a whole. They are attracted by brands which provide all types of experiences together. Thus, they are holistic consumers. This profile, again in the social scope, seems to the Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010) study's holistic profile. There are also common tendencies of online consumers who could be matched to the study of Gabriel and Lang (2006) as choosers, explorers, hedonists/artists, identity seekers, communicators, activists and citizens.

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations of Clustering Variables

Clusters	Means (SD) for Experiences				
	Sensory	Affective	Creative Cognitive	Physical	Social
Individual Hedonists	6.04 (0.83)	5.12 (0.95)	5.59 (1.04)	4.43 (0.86)	1.84 (0.81)
Highly Socials	4.73 (1.09)	3.65 (0.88)	4.07 (1.27)	3.21 (0.96)	6.22 (0.79)
Holistic Consumers	6.40 (0.61)	5.93 (0.83)	6.03 (0.88)	5.20 (1.41)	6.07 (1.16)
Action-Oriented Consumers	4.07 (1.08)	4.13 (0.77)	4.75 (1.01)	4.47 (0.91)	4.34 (1.13)
Knowledge Seekers	3.49 (1.72)	2.70 (1.03)	5.89 (0.78)	2.88 (1.00)	1.42 (0.61)
Sense-Directed Consumers	5.32 (0.70)	3.63 (0.87)	3.41 (1.43)	2.80 (1.24)	2.38 (1.08)
Social Utilitarian Consumers	2.15 (1.15)	1.52 (0.54)	2.70 (1.18)	1.60 (0.78)	4.80 (2.21)
Total	4.97 (1.54)	4.25 (1.49)	3.89 (1.52)	4.79 (1.52)	4.60 (2.07)

7.4. Action-Oriented Consumers

Action-oriented consumers have the second highest rating on physical experiences among other consumer segments. They have only creative cognitive experience near to the average, so these consumers seek information on web and they are attracted by brands engaging them actively. With this focus on action, they are called action-oriented consumers which parallel with the Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010)'s definitions. The social score of this profile is a little under average and consumption of internet is transformed deliberately in social activities of the consumer. The characteristics of this profile have common points with choosers and activist consumers from the study of Gabriel and Lang (2006).

7.5. Knowledge Seekers

Knowledge seekers have the second highest rating on creative cognitive appeal and their ratings for other experiential appeals are below average. They are not attracted with sensory or affective brand experiences. These consumers are attached with brands providing them information, thus they are knowledge seekers. This group prefers online use with the aim of reach to knowledge in today's information age.

7.6. Sense-Directed Consumers

Sense-Directed Consumers have only sensory experiences above the average and lower ratings for other dimensions. These consumers are attracted by brands providing them visual sense or other senses. Hence, they are sense-directed consumers.

7.7. Social Utilitarian Consumers

Social utilitarian consumers have the lowest ratings on all experiential dimensions except the social one. Because of these lowest ratings, they are utilitarian consumers. In addition, they have social dimension rating above the average. So, these consumers are not attracted by other brand experiences than social dimension. Thus these are social utilitarian consumers. Social experiences are the mere appeals in use the internet which functions as a vehicle to communicate and fulfill major humanistic needs in being social. This group can be related with the profiles as choosers, communicators, explorers and identity seekers from the study of Gabriel and Lang (2006).

	N	Percent	Mean (SD) for Brand Attitude	Mean (SD) for Website Reuse Intention
Individual Hedonists	34	10.6	6.61 (0.55)	7 (0)
Highly Socials	77	24.1	5.87 (1.04)	6 (1)
Holistic Consumers	77	24.1	6.65 (0.63)	7 (1)
Action-Oriented Consumers	60	18.8	5.53 (0.88)	5 (1)
Knowledge Seekers	19	5.9	5.98 (1.72)	6 (2)
Sense-Directed Consumers	33	10.3	5.95 (1.13)	6 (1)
Social Utilitarian Consumers	20	6.3	5.73 (0.85)	6 (1)
Total	320	100.0	6.08 (1.02)	6 (1)

Table 5. Frequencies of Clusters, Means and Standard Deviations of Brand Attitudes and Website Reuse Intention of Clusters

7.8. Brand Attitudes and Website Reuse Intention of Online Consumers

As indicated in the table 4, holistic consumers have the highest brand attitude rating among the consumer segments and they have the highest website reuse intention with individual hedonists. ANOVA analysis to compare the means between consumer groups indicates that holistic consumers do not have significant differences against individual hedonist in terms of brand attitude and website reuse intention at $p < 0.05$. The high score mean for brand attitude and website reuse intention can be explained as the result of respondents indicating the most visited website.

8. Research findings

In today's high competitive environments, strategic marketing management provides organizations to be differentiated from competitors. Its base depends on segmentation, targeting and positioning. New perspectives in these concepts create an innovation in the strategic management.

This study aims to reveal new consumer profiles based on online brands. The results indicate seven online consumer groups; "individual hedonists, highly socials, holistic consumers, action-oriented consumers, knowledge seekers, sense-directed consumers and social utilitarian consumers". As strategic marketing management is based on segmentation, targeting and positioning, the consumer profiles as the result of this study can be used by marketing managers to segment their consumers. According to this segmentation, they may target a segment and position themselves. For instance, an online information providing organization can segment the consumers according to the profiles revealed in this study and target knowledge seekers and holistic consumers and make difference between them and other consumers.

The results indicate the brand attitude and website reuse intention of different consumer groups. So, holistic consumers have the highest ratings on these dimensions. It implies that an organization should offer experiences as a whole to achieve high brand attitude and reuse intention consumers.

For academicians, the results are useful to profile consumers according to their experiential appeals in other sectors or countries too. So, further researches may consider different sectors and countries to

develop consumer profiles and to reveal the relationships between different attitudes from different segments with future behaviors.

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