The Effect of Flow on Users' Social Shopping Intention

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ABSTRACT

The application of mobile technologies such as 4G has triggered social commerce development. However, due to the perceived uncertainty and risk, users may obtain a poor experience when conducting social shopping. Integrating both perspectives of social support and network externality, this research examined users' flow experience associated with social shopping. The results indicated that both emotional support and network externality affect flow, which in turn affects identification and social shopping intention. The results imply that companies need to create a supportive climate and utilize network externality in order to improve users' experience and facilitate their shopping behaviour.

KEYWORDS

Flow, Network Externality, Social Shopping, Social Support

INTRODUCTION

With the application of mobile communication technologies such as 4G/5G, social media has been developing rapidly in the world. A few social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WeChat have received wide adoption among users. At the same time, e-commerce has become a popular channel for users to purchase products and services. A report indicated that about 79.7% of internet users (749 million) have conducted online shopping in China (CNNIC, 2020). Recently, e-commerce has been integrated with social media, which leads to the emergence of social commerce (Han et al., 2018). Compared to traditional e-commerce, social commerce can leverage the social networking relationship between users to create value for businesses (Wang et al., 2019). Realizing the great market potential, companies have begun to adopt social commerce model. For example, Facebook launched the F-commerce, which allows companies to create online stores in its platform. As one of the leading e-commerce companies in China, JD has cooperated with WeChat, which is the largest social networking platform. However, similar to e-commerce, social commerce transactions also involve risk and uncertainty, which includes seller uncertainty and product uncertainty (Bai et al., 2015). This may negatively affect users' experience, which in turn leads to their low transaction intention. Companies need to understand the factors affecting user experience and take effective measures to facilitate his or her behaviour.

Previous research has examined social commerce user behaviour from multiple perspectives, such as trust (Cheng et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2019; Wang and Herrando, 2019), social support (Molinillo et al., 2020; Tajvidi et al., 2021), and social interaction (Liu et al., 2016; Xiang et al., 2016; Wang and Yu, 2017). These factors are mainly related to cognitive beliefs. However, an individual user's behaviour may also receive influence from emotional beliefs (Tsai and Bagozzi, 2014), such as flow, which reflects an optimal experience. Especially, we still have a very limited knowledge on the

determinants of flow in social commerce. In other words, how to develop flow remains a question. This may undermine our understanding of social commerce user behaviour.

The purpose of this research is to identify the effect of flow experience on users' social shopping intention. We integrated both perspectives of social support and network externality to investigate their effects on the flow. Social support reflects the informational and emotional interaction between users (Molinillo et al., 2020). It has been found to be a significant determinant of user behaviour in the social commerce context (Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016). Network externality reflects the added utility with the increase of user number (Lin and Bhattacherjee, 2008). As social commerce is based on social media, it may exert a significant network externality. Network externality has been examined in the context of social networking services (SNS) (Zhang et al., 2017; Zhu and Bao, 2018). We propose that a social commerce user's experience may receive a dual influence from his or her peers (social support) and the platform (network externality). That is, a user's experience is not only influenced by the informational and emotional support offered by other members, but also influenced by the externality utility obtained from the platform. To some extent, social support represents a social factor, whereas network externality represents a technological factor. By combining both social and technological perspectives, we can gain a complete understanding of social commerce users' flow experience development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As a popular model, social commerce user behaviour has received great attention from information system researchers (Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016). Due to the perceived uncertainty, trust has been identified to be a significant factor affecting user behaviour. Wang and Herrando (2019) found that privacy assurance affects institution-based trust, which in turn affects social purchase intention. Yahia et al. (2018) argued that trust determinants include reputation, price advantage and social interaction. Trust can also be transferred from a known party to an unknown one. Sharma et al. (2019) noted that trust in firms and trust in Internet influence consumers' trust in social commerce. Cheng et al. (2019) suggested that particularized trust can be transferred to system trust, which further affects social shopping intention.

Social support is also a determinant of social commerce user intention. Tajvidi et al. (2021) found that interactivity affects social support, which in turn affects consumers' intention to co-create brand value. Social commerce constructs also have an effect on social support (Shanmugam et al., 2016). Molinillo et al. (2020) stated that social support affects customer engagement, which further determines customer loyalty toward social commerce sites. Li and Ku (2018) noted that social support facilitates users' switching from e-commerce to social commerce. Liu et al. (2020) argued that social support, which includes informational, emotional, esteem, and companionship support, affects users' belongingness to online health communities.

Previous research has noted that social interaction, which reflects a significant characteristic of social commerce, has an effect on user behaviour. Wang and Yu (2017) stated that social interaction, which includes word-of-mouth communication and observing other consumers' purchase, affects consumers' purchase intention. Similarly, Xiang et al. (2016) argued that parasocial interaction affects consumers' impulse buying tendency. Flow has also been examined in the social commerce context. Liu et al. (2016) found that interpersonal interaction influences consumers' flow experience and purchase intention. Kaur et al. (2016) noted that enjoyment, concentration and social interaction are the main components of flow in SNS-based brand communities. Pelet et al. (2017) argued that telepresence affects flow, which in turn determines social media use.

As evidenced by these studies, social commerce user behaviour has been examined from various perspectives such as trust, social support and social interaction. The effect of flow has also been noted. However, the determinants of flow have received little attention. This research tries to explore flow by integrating both social support and network externality.

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