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EXPLORING SOCIAL COMMERCE ADOPTION IN CHINA: A USES AND GRATIFICATIONS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

As a new e-commerce paradigm, social commerce has resulted from consumers relying on the online recommendations of friends and acquaintances. To clarify Chinese consumers' social commerce intentions, we conducted an empirical study based on a uses and gratifications approach. The results indicate that perceived gratification from entertainment was found to be the strongest predictor of Chinese consumers' social commerce intentions. This is followed by the perceived gratification from information seeking, expressive information sharing, cool and new trends, and social interaction. However, neither gratification from escape nor passing time was found to be significant predictor. In addition, perceived gratification from information seeking has a stronger influence on consumers' social commerce intentions in females than in males, while perceived gratification from expressive information sharing has a stronger influence on consumers' social commerce intentions in males than in females. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed in the paper.

Keywords: social commerce, social commerce intention, uses and gratifications, gender, mainland China.

1 INTRODUCTION

As a new e-commerce paradigm, social commerce (s-commerce) occurs when consumers rely on the online recommendations of friends and acquaintances (Liang et al. 2011). S-commerce refers to a combination of commercial and social activities that offers social interaction and supports user-generated content (Liang & Turban 2011). It utilizes social media to facilitate online buying and selling in the context of e-commerce (Linda & LAI 2011). Consumers can collaborate by sharing shopping experiences, predicting fashion trends, recommending online shopping sites, purchasing products, and making friends with people who share their same preferences (Kim & Park 2013).

S-commerce is different from traditional online recommendations because it is composed of friends and acquaintances who are not paid for their reviews rather than online strangers (Liang et al. 2011), and it offers a trustworthy atmosphere where potential customers can seek opinions before making buying decisions. However, there are still many other mediums such as commercial-oriented virtual communities comprising online strangers, offline recommendations, and word-of-mouth from real life friends. Not all traditional media are replaced by innovative and advanced ones (Ku et al. 2013). Traditional media can also provide considerable information in daily life. So why do people choose specific media when seeking commercial information? Uses and Gratifications theory sheds some light on why individuals choose special media and the associated gratifications achieved by using the specific media. The theory has been widely adopted by researchers (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke 2010; Carolyn 2002; Lampe et al. 2010; Park et al. 2009; Xu et al. 2012). Users initially look for a particular media to gratify their own needs.

Most researchers have focused on the relationship between the gratifications users were seeking and the specific media choice in a Western context. In China, s-commerce, including online recommendations, has attracted an ever-increasing number of consumers. According to China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) data, by the end of 2012, the recommendations of friends via social media resulted in an intent to purchase of 43.1% of the time (www.cnnic.net.cn). Moreover, Chinese peoples' traditional culture-specific values vary from Western style. For example, Chinese people usually use different rules for interacting with different people based on the degree of intimacy of the relationship (Zhao et al. 2012) and put more value on favorable social self-worth and social links in relation to the social network in China (Zhang et al. 2013). Research regarding the influence of online product sales reviews revealed many inconsistent conclusions when compared within a Western or Chinese cultural context (Fang et al. 2013). When considering the Chinese culture, Chinese people's perceived gratifications from social media usage (seeking commercial information) may have its own characteristics. Therefore, one purpose of this research is to explore what gratifications Chinese consumers seek when using s-commerce.

Further, this research goes beyond merely exploring s-commerce gratifications. The research also explores gender dichotomy as the most fundamental social and cultural means associated with developing market segmentation and marketing strategy (Okazaki & Mendez 2013). Research involving e-commerce revealed that gender significantly interacts with attitudinal and behavioral variables (Garbarino & Strahilevitz 2004; Okazaki & Hirose 2009). For example, females perceived more risk than males when buying online, and for females, perceived risk was reduced more than for males when they received a recommendation from a friend. Therefore, female consumers were more comforted than male consumers by friends' recommendations (Garbarino & Strahilevitz 2004). However, even though there is some research focusing on s-commerce, the role of gender in social commerce has not been well examined. Because females and males tend to think and behave in different ways (Sun et al. 2010), the gratifications they perceived from s-commerce may also be different. By better understanding the normal role of gender in perceived gratifications of social commerce, this research will generate new findings. Therefore, another purpose of this research is to explore differences in perceived gratifications between females and males who use s-commerce.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 Uses and Gratifications

Uses and Gratifications (U&G) perspective is adopted in this study to investigate the probable motivations behind an individual's use of s-commerce. U&G sheds some light on why individuals use social media and the gratifications achieved from the usage. "Uses" refers to an individual's engagement in certain media use, that is, individuals consciously chose specific media (Lim & Ting 2012; Wang et al. 2012). "Gratifications" are the perceived fulfillment of a need through an activity, such as a specific media use (Lim & Ting 2012).

Information seeking as a central gratification refers to acquiring helpful information through social media use. In general, information seeking gratification had a positive influence on dependent variables (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke 2010; Lampe et al. 2010; Park et al. 2009). Park et al. (2009) found that information seeking is one of the main reasons to use social network sites. Bonds-Raacke and Raacke (2010) also include information dimension as a gratification of social network sites usage. Social commerce involves using social network sites for commercial information. Therefore, information seeking gratification is also expected to have a positive effect on s-commerce intention. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1a: A consumer's perceived information seeking gratification will positively influence his/her s-commerce intention.

Expressive information sharing refers to users who tend to offer useful information to other users. Lampe et al. (2010) found that information sharing is one of the main reasons to take part in Everything 2.com. Users tend to share their experience, to make recommendations, and to share interesting things with others. S-commerce can facilitate participant sharing while offering commercial recommendations. Thus, expressive information sharing gratification is also expected to have a positive effect on s-commerce intention. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1b: A consumer's perceived expressive information sharing gratification will positively influence his/her s-commerce intention.

Entertainment refers to people participating in social media to relax, have fun and experience pleasure. (Hicks et al. 2012; Lampe et al. 2010; Lim & Ting 2012; Xu et al. 2012). Entertainment gratification was found to have a generally positive effect on the dependent variables. It was positively associated with commercial-oriented media usage (Hicks et al. 2012; Lim & Tin 2012). Hence, entertainment gratification is expected to have a positive effect on s-commerce intention. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1c: A consumer's perceived entertainment gratification will positively influence his/her s-commerce intention.

Social interaction occurs when people use social media to keep in touch with and interact with others to create an ideal image. Park et al. (2009) found that people used social network sites for socializing and self-status seeking gratifications. Participants used social network sites to create and manage their ideal image and achieve respect from others (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke 2010; Lampe et al. 2010), so social interaction gratification is expected to have a positive effect on s-commerce intention. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1d: A consumer's perceived social interaction gratification will positively influence his/her s-commerce intention.

Escape as a gratification from participation in social media refers to getting away from the real world and forgetting the problems and pressures of reality (Carolyn 2002; Xu et al. 2012). Opposite results were found in the two research studies regarding escape. Escape was found to be positively associated with online media service access (Carolyn 2002) but not with social network site usage (Xu et al. 2012). S-commerce is a relaxed atmosphere where everyone can express themselves freely;

communication with virtual friends is expected to relieve stress and eliminate real-life problems. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1e: A consumer's perceived escape gratification will positively influence his/her s-commerce intention.

Cool and new trends refer to people using social media to look stylish and fashionable. S-commerce is a relatively new trend and popular with young adults and using s-commerce to be fashionable and stylish. Cool and new trend gratification is expected to have a positive effect on s-commerce intention. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1f: A consumer's perceived cool and new trends gratification will positively influence his/her s-commerce intention.

Passing time refers to having nothing better to do than to just kill time. Passing time was found to be positively related to social media usage (Hicks et al. 2012). Consumers can read or write recommendations to kill time. Thus, passing time gratification is expected to have a positive effect on s-commerce intention. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1g: A consumer's perceived passing time gratification will positively influence his/her s-commerce intention.

2.2 Uses and Gratifications and gender

When processing information, female and male users differ significantly. Males were usually dependent on a subset of highly available and particularly salient cues rather than on detail-packed message content, whereas females relied more on detailed message content while assimilating all accessible information before making a decision (Meyers-Levy 1986). Moreover, significant differences are revealed when information processing cues between genders are studied. Females will address information cues of some importance, while males will only address information cues of high importance (Sun et al. 2010). In other words, females prefer to search as much useful information as possible, which they consider to be important, and this information will have a stronger effect on their buying decision. Garbarino and Strahilevitz (2004) noted that a friend's recommendation had a stronger influence over online purchase decisions in females. In the context of s-commerce, females can get advice from their friends and search for information more easily.

Females trend to focus on social influence, while males (with the purpose of creating and preserving their social status) care about the utilitarian aspects of communication (Gefen & Ridings 2005; Hofstede 1980). Additionally, a male's social contact usually has a hidden agenda based on establishing and maintaining social status (Okazaki & Mendez 2013). Expressive information sharing can fulfill a male's need to achieve. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2a: A consumer's perceived information seeking gratification will have a stronger effect on females than on males regarding s-commerce intention.

H2b: A consumer's perceived expressive information sharing gratification will have a stronger effect on males than on females regarding s-commerce intention.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Measures

The dependent variable is social commerce intention. It reflects a consumer's willingness to continuously seek and share commercial recommendation information using social media. The typical social media focused on online recommendations in China included renren.com, sina.com, meilishuo.com, t.dianping.com, bj.jumei.com, etc. Measurement scales were adapted from Liang et al. (2011). The independent variables are gratifications referring to the perceived fulfillment of a need through social media use. Measurement scales were adapted from Smock et al. (2011). Items in the scale start with "I use s-commerce..."

3.2 Data collection and participants

The survey was conducted in mainland China in January 2013. The questionnaire was uploaded to www.sojump.com. Both online and offline surveys were used to collect data. To recruit target respondents, the authors sent private messages to the members of the social media mentioned above to encourage them to visit www.sojump.com and fill out the questionnaire. The offline survey was conducted at a university in China. A total of 249 individuals including 72 undergraduate students and 177 university employees completed the questionnaire. Among the samples, 55.8% were female and 44.2% were males; 80.3% were at least university-educated.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Scale validation

Before testing hypothesized structural models, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted through the partial least squares (PLS) to assess scale validation. Scale validation and model testing were assessed by applying the software SmartPLS. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), to meet the convergent and discriminant validity factor loadings of all indicators should exceed 0.7; the average variance extracted (AVE) of 0.5 or higher are considered adequate, and the square root of AVE should exceed that construct's correlation with other constructs; and the composite reliability (CR) should be at least 0.8. In this research, the minimum item loading was 0.72 (See Table 1). All items presented high loadings (>0.72). The AVE was within the scope of 0.66 to 0.77, and the composite reliability ranged between 0.87 and 0.93. Additionally, the maximum correlation of any pair of constructs was 0.76, while the minimum square root of AVE was 0.81 (See Table 2). The square root of AVE exceeded that construct's correlation with other constructs. Therefore, the research results met all criteria of the convergent and discriminant validity.

Construct	AVE	CR	Alpha	Item	Item loading	Mean	SD
Social interaction (SI)	0.69	0.92	0.89	SI1	0.77	3.41	1.01
				SI2	0.86	3.57	1.05
				SI3	0.85	3.47	1.01
				SI4	0.82	3.65	1.06
				SI5	0.83	3.70	1.00
Relaxing entertainment (RE)	0.77	0.93	0.90	RE1	0.85	3.76	0.98
				RE2	0.86	3.59	1.01
				RE3	0.89	3.71	1.11
				RE4	0.90	3.72	0.99
Expressive information sharing (EIS)	0.68	0.89	0.84	EIS1	0.78	3.16	1.01
				EIS2	0.85	3.08	1.03
				EIS3	0.85	3.36	0.99
				EIS4	0.82	3.25	1.02
Escape (ES)	0.72	0.89	0.81	ES1	0.85	3.00	1.03
				ES2	0.91	3.16	1.02
				ES3	0.78	3.08	1.01
Information seeking (IS)	0.73	0.89	0.82	IS1	0.85	3.87	1.02
				IS2	0.83	3.73	0.95
				IS3	0.88	3.84	0.90
Passing time (PT)	0.70	0.87	0.78	PT1	0.72	2.79	1.15
				PT2	0.89	3.30	1.05
				PT3	0.89	3.39	1.08
Cool and new trends (CNT)	0.68	0.87	0.77	CNT1	0.85	3.43	0.91
				CNT2	0.83	3.00	1.07

				CNT3	0.79	2.98	1.04
Social commerce intention (INT)	0.66	0.91	0.87	INT1	0.78	3.77	0.92
				INT2	0.81	3.76	1.04
				INT3	0.85	3.61	1.03
				INT4	0.86	3.46	1.03
				INT5	0.75	3.43	1.04

Table 1. Validity, Reliability and Loadings

Construct	CNT	ES	EIS	IS	SI	PT	RE	INT
CNT	0.82							
ES	0.58	0.85						
EIS	0.58	0.57	0.82					
IS	0.41	0.30	0.55	0.85				
SI	0.58	0.54	0.72	0.64	0.83			
PT	0.38	0.48	0.40	0.35	0.42	0.84		
RE	0.54	0.52	0.63	0.70	0.75	0.40	0.88	
INT	0.58	0.49	0.67	0.68	0.72	0.37	0.76	0.81

*Square root of AVE for each construct is shown on the main diagonal.

Table 2. Factor Correlations & Square Root of AVE for Each Construct*

4.2 Hypothesis assessment

Both PLS structure model and hypotheses were assessed by testing the path coefficients and their significance levels. Figure 1 shows the results of the hypothesis tests. A majority of hypothesized gratifications were examined and found to be strongly significant at $p < 0.01$. Relaxing entertainment was found to be the strongest predictor of s-commerce usage ($\beta = 0.33$), followed by information seeking ($\beta = 0.22$), expressive information sharing ($\beta = 0.19$), and cool and new trends ($\beta = 0.15$). Social interaction was found to have a positive effect on s-commerce usage at the 0.05 level ($\beta = 0.14$). However, passing time and escape were not found to be significant predictors. Hence, H1a, H1b, H1c, H1d and H1f were supported, while H1e and H1g were not supported.

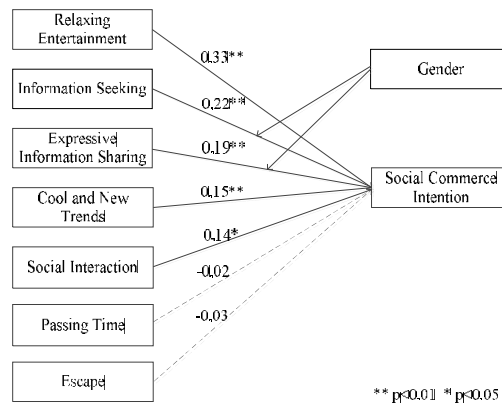


Figure 1. The results of the hypotheses tests

To compare the different influences of gratifications on s-commerce between genders (females vs males), multi-group PLS analysis was applied by contrasting the corresponding path coefficients for different genders based on Keil et al. (2000). The t-statistical comparison was computed following the procedure below.

$$Spooled = \sqrt{\left[\frac{(N_1 - 1)}{(N_1 + N_2 - 2)} * SE_1^2 + \frac{(N_2 - 1)}{(N_1 + N_2 - 2)} * SE_2^2 \right]}$$

$$t = (PC_1 - PC_2) / \left[Spooled * \sqrt{\left(\frac{1}{N_1} + \frac{1}{N_2} \right)} \right]$$

where S_{pooled} = pooled estimator for the variance
 t = t-statistic with the N_1+N_2-2 degrees of freedom
 N_i = sample size of database for gender;
 SE_i = standard error of path in the structural model of gender;
 PC_i = path coefficient in the structural model of gender;

Results show that the path coefficient from gratifications of information seeking to s-commerce intention in the structural model for females was significantly stronger than that for males ($t=15.6$, $p<0.01$). Hence, H2a was supported. While, the path coefficient from gratifications of expressive information sharing to s-commerce intention in the structural model for males was significantly stronger than that for females ($t=-14.5$, $p<0.01$). Hence, H2b was supported (See Table 3).

Hypotheses	Females N=139		Males N=110		t value
	Path coefficients	Standard error	Path coefficients	Standard error	
H2a	0.29	0.057	0.18	0.053	15.6**
H2b	0.16	0.049	0.27	0.071	-14.5**

** $p<0.01$

Table 3. Comparison of Path Coefficients between Genders

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Gratifications and s-commerce usage

Focusing on China, this research explores whether Chinese consumers' social commerce intentions are related to their perceived gratifications. We found individuals use s-commerce for relaxing entertainment gratification more than other gratifications; this is followed by information seeking, expressive information sharing, cool and new trends, and social interaction gratifications.

We believe that s-commerce users consciously know what gratifications they need. Individuals consume recommendations when seeking relaxing entertainment and information seeking gratifications more than other gratifications. S-commerce is a platform that offers users amusing and useful recommendations in different fields, so it is not surprising that the most significant predictors to consuming are the relaxing entertainment and information seeking gratifications. Especially in China's specific culture, the sheep-flock effect is common; consumers tended to consult with majorities. In accordance with Hicks et al. (2012), our results indicated that information seeking and entertainment were the most significant motivations for using social commerce. In contrast to information seeking, relaxing entertainment may be more vital in triggering media use (Rafaeli 1984). Individuals consume recommendations to relax, have fun, and rest comfortably, so it is not surprising that s-commerce is a cool new trend.

In addition to consuming, users may also take part in social media to provide recommendations. The users of the sites can communicate with each other through blogs, message boards, private messages, e-mail, micro-blogs, and other Internet venues. What's more, users can interact with content as well by sharing content, ranking content, saving their favorites, recommending content, and posting comments. Chinese people may be more willing to maintain good relationships with others that use s-commerce. Both direct user-to-user interaction and indirect user-to-content interaction can fulfill a user's expressive information sharing and social interaction needs.

Except for consuming and participating, some users actually generate content. It is suggested that Chinese consumers have a desire to show their real self to the outside world and to let others understand them as they envision themselves. User generated content may be generated to provide personal information and to share information that may be of use or interest to others.

5.2 Gratifications and social commerce intention between genders

Interestingly, perceived information seeking gratification will have a stronger effect on female consumers' social commerce intentions than on male consumers' social commerce intentions. This is consistent with findings from Grellhesl and Punyanunt-Carter (2012), who discovered that females reported higher information seeking gratification scores than males. Similarly, Kim et al. (2007) found that a friend's advice was more vital for females when choosing travel destinations online when compared to males. These findings revealed that Chinese females search for information gratifications online more than Chinese males. Chinese females seek to assimilate all accessible information before making a judgment.

However, perceived expressive information sharing gratification will have a stronger effect on male consumers' social commerce intentions than on female consumers' social commerce intentions. This indicates that males prefer to present themselves, to share information of use or interest to others, to communicate to establish social status, to control the conversation, to establish a hierarchy of domination, and to become opinion leaders because males are motivated by achievement-based needs (Hoffman 1972).

6 CONCLUSIONS

Our findings are in line with the principle of the Uses and Gratifications theory: individuals use s-commerce to fulfill their needs: relaxing entertainment, information seeking, expressive information sharing, cool and new trends and social interaction. Both traditional and new media users are not passive; they select the media that can fulfill their needs actively and they recognize how to take advantage of the specific media platform. Further, our research broadens the theoretical study of Uses and Gratifications theory by examining Chinese content. These findings help us have a better understanding of why Chinese consumers use social commerce. Other researchers have examined uses and gratifications of specific media in Western culture, such as Hicks et al. (2012). Together with these research studies, perceived gratifications in specific media use between different cultures have been depicted.

Several practical suggestions to s-commerce owners and business managers emerge from the research. First, social media owners or business managers could benefit from understanding why Chinese consumers use the sites to generate commercial recommendations. As individuals visit the sites principally for entertainment and information seeking, social media operators focusing on the Chinese market may want to consider incorporating these elements to attract more consumers and to generate more commercial recommendations. Second, information seeking gratification from s-commerce provides a stronger motivation for females, while expressive information sharing gratification from s-commerce provides a stronger motivation for males. Therefore, to attract more users to participate in s-commerce, operators should develop a market segmentation strategy. Third, as actual customers' opinions are acquired from s-commerce, business managers may want to improve upon weaknesses to fulfill users' needs and enhance their consumers' shopping experiences. Additionally, business managers may utilize social media to keep in touch with potential consumers and maintain customer relationships in the Chinese market.

This research also has some limitations. First, the measurement of gratifications used in this research was revised from a social network site context, and future research may develop the unique U&G scales to focus on social commerce. Second, the research only reported the different gratifications between female and male users of information seeking and expressive information sharing, and future research should explore other gratifications.

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