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Summer 5-28-2023

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Yabin Yang

Harbin Institute of Technology, Harbin, China, hityabinyang@gmail.com

Wenchao Du

Harbin Institute of Technology, Harbin, China

Xitong Guo

Harbin Institute of Technology, Harbin, China

Doug Vogel

Harbin Institute of Technology, Harbin, China

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Recommended Citation

Yang, Yabin; Du, Wenchao; Guo, Xitong; and Vogel, Doug, "Understanding the Role of Social Commerce Engagement in Promoting Physicians' Online Return: A Social Media Affordances Perspective" (2023). *WHICEB 2023 Proceedings*. 72.

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Understanding the Role of Social Commerce Engagement in Promoting Physicians' Online Return: A Social Media Affordances Perspective

Yabin Yang¹, Wenchao Du¹, Xitong Guo¹, and Doug Vogel¹

¹ Harbin Institute of Technology, Harbin, China

hityabinyang@gmail.com (Yabin Yang, corresponding author)

1. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With the continued prevalence of social networking sites (SNSs), social commerce (s-commerce) has witnessed significant growth during the last few years, showing its value in discovering, discussing, and purchasing products and services [1]. S-commerce generally refers to online commerce activities mediated by social media [2]. Nowadays, it is increasingly popular for brands and firms to engage their consumers on social media sites in order to promote and obtain valuable feedback on products and services. As of 2021, the number of social commerce users reached 850 million in China, while its market size was estimated to surpass 2.5 trillion yuan [3]. S-commerce platforms have been acting as a way to connect firms, influencers, and potential consumers, leading the future of China's e-commerce. The importance of s-commerce has prompted an increasing body of research investigating its business model [4]. In the era of social media, personal branding is increasingly vital to individuals such as freelancers and professionals, influencers and celebrities, and top-level executives. However, most scholars have focused on the interaction among s-commerce platforms, firms, and consumers, paying little attention to the activities of the individual as a personal brand on s-commerce.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the role of personal branding in the success of physicians' s-commerce and examine the mediating effects of s-commerce engagement based on social media affordances theory. Our research questions are as follows: (1) Whether individuals as a personal brand can benefit from s-commerce activities? (2) How do they promote their online business by attracting s-commerce engagement?

2. THEORY AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Based on social media affordances theory, the hypotheses and research framework are proposed herein (Figure 1).

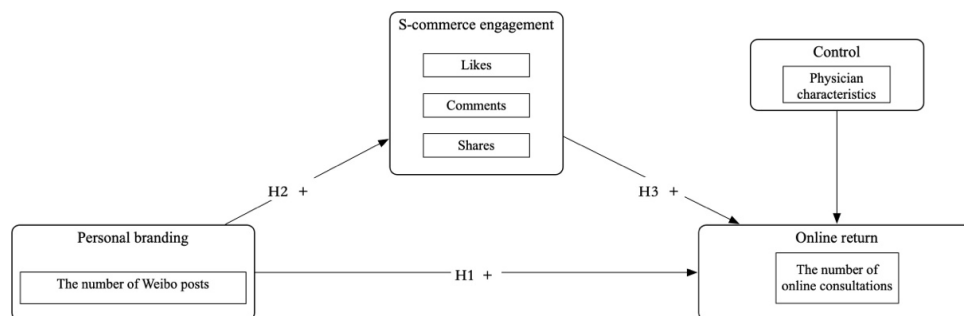


Figure 1. Personal branding and s-commerce engagement in relation to physician online return

The dataset consists of 7,597 physicians' 15-month panel data, which is derived from the most popular social media platform in China and its associated online healthcare community (i.e., Sina Weibo and Sina Health), using a python-based data-crawling program. To verify our hypotheses, two-way fixed effect models are adopted to test direct effects and a bias-corrected bootstrap method is used to examine the mediating effects.

3. RESULTS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

This study observed some valuable and interesting findings: (1) Physicians' personal branding activities on social media can bring more online consultations on online healthcare community. (2) It is the s-commerce engagement with physicians'

personal branding such as leaving likes, comments, and sharing posts, that attracts more patients to consult. This may rely on the improvement of physicians' social visibility on social media from s-commerce engagement (e.g., shares of physicians' posts). Besides, the electronic word-of-mouth conveyed by users' attitudes and comments helps others to evaluate physicians, which mitigates the information asymmetry on their medical service quality.

Table 1. Results of fixed effect models.

Variables	<i>Ln (Consults)</i>	<i>Ln (Likes)</i>	<i>Ln (Comments)</i>	<i>Ln (Shares)</i>	<i>Ln (Consults)</i>	<i>Ln (Consults)</i>	<i>Ln (Consults)</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
<i>Ln(Posts)</i>	0.009*** (6.29)	0.910*** (75.69)	0.760*** (73.34)	0.588*** (47.17)			
<i>Ln(Likes)</i>					0.004*** (3.21)		
<i>Ln(Comments)</i>						0.008*** (5.20)	
<i>Ln(Shares)</i>							0.006*** (3.36)
Constant	0.198*** (5.75)	0.493*** (3.55)	0.365*** (3.11)	0.221* (1.77)	0.204*** (5.90)	0.199*** (5.77)	0.205*** (5.97)
Control Variables	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Two-way FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Adj. R ²	0.005	0.575	0.549	0.375	0.005	0.005	0.005
F	7.914	351.6	360.7	126.9	6.769	7.430	6.757

Notes: Robust t-statistics in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1; FE represents fixed effect.

Table 2. Test results of the mediating effect of s-commerce engagement.

Hypotheses	Indirect effects	Bias-corrected 95% CI	
		Lower	Upper
Physicians' personal branding → <i>Likes</i> → physicians' online return	0.034	0.030	0.039
Physicians' personal branding → <i>Comments</i> → physicians' online return	0.049	0.045	0.054
Physicians' personal branding → <i>Shares</i> → physicians' online return	0.028	0.025	0.032

4. CONTRIBUTIONS

Our research not only enriches the existing literature on the relationship between personal branding and online returns, but also sheds lights on the mediating role of s-commerce engagement. This study indicates that physicians can improve online revenue by developing and maintaining their personal brand on social media. Meanwhile, physicians should also attract more s-commerce engagement by offering high-quality contents, which is a good way of enhancing social connections with potential consumers and improving online income. In addition, we only collected the dataset from a single social media platform in China, and the empirical results may be limited.

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