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Online Consumer's Acceptance Of Social Networking Sites As Potential Shopping Guide

Key words: Social networking sites (SNSs), Online Shopping, Perceived ease of use (PEOU), Perceived Usefulness (PU), Trust and preserved risk.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media has significantly altered the strategies that companies use to communicate with customers (Lee, Xiong, & Hu, 2011). As social media moves from “buzz word” status to strategic tool, more practitioners are developing skills related to this online communication technology (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008). With the development of networks, especially electronic commerce's appearance, consumers enter a new environment of trade, therefore, with the high degree of price dispersion in the online market, for example, customer information, search behaviour also changes (Guan & Cheng, 2009). In fact, with the rapid development of Web 2.0 technologies, such as Ajax and XML, a great number of social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Renren, MySpace, Kaixin, and LinkedIn) are emerging, which makes mass users interactions easier and more convenient (Yanli, Yi, & Yuli, 2010). These social media tools allow users to search, organize, share, annotate and contribute to contents in a collaborative way. For example, Curtis et al. (2010) found that social media techniques are becoming more abundant as public relations practitioners become mindful of their effectiveness in respect of reaching target audiences, promoting a specific cause, and further developing communication strategies. More than half of America's teens and young adults send instant messages and use social networking sites, and more than one-third of all Internet users engage in these activities (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zúñiga, 2010).

Social media provide various forms of consumer-generated content (CGC), such as videos, photos, ideas, opinions, interests, and news through blogs, podcasts, social networking sites

(SNS) (W. Lee, et al., 2011). Community generated content, or social media, has become increasingly important over the past several years (Elsas & Glance, 2010). The use of social media has grown tremendously all over the world in recent years, and the impact of such growth has expanded in unexpected ways (Poblete, Garcia, Mendoza, & Jaimes, 2011). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), the concept of social media is top of the agenda for many business executives today.

With the enormous amount of information potentially available, the Internet constitutes an important platform for information exchange between the consumer and industry suppliers (e.g., hotels, transportation sectors, attractions), intermediaries (e.g., travel agents), controllers (e.g., governments and administrative bodies), as well as many non-profit organizations, such as destination marketing organizations (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Decision makers, as well as consultants, try to identify ways in which firms can make profitable use of applications, such as Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, Second Life, and Twitter (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social networking reaches hundreds of millions of users and has become fertile ground for a variety of research efforts, since it offers an opportunity to study patterns of social interaction among a population larger than ever before (Ratkiewicz et al., 2011). They have become a major factor in influencing various aspects of consumer behaviour including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behaviour, and post-purchase communication and evaluation (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Previous studies examining personality and social media use were based on college-aged samples and did not explore the potential influencing effect of gender, nor did they control for the possible impact of life satisfaction and socio-demographic variables on the disposition of users (Correa, et al., 2010).

The emergence of Internet-based social media has made it possible for one person to communicate with hundreds or even thousands of other people about products and the companies that provide them (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). For instance, before and during vacations, tourists use the Internet to obtain information about the trip, share their experience and compare services related to the trip, and then use tools to share photos and videos, to blog and to micro blog, as well as use podcasts, customer ratings and evaluation systems, maps, etc. in order to organize trips or contribute their experiences and recommendations. This is becoming generalized in what has been named as Travel 2.0 (Parra-López, et al., 2011). With the high adoption levels of digital social media by individuals as well as organizations, and indeed the demise of the traditional press (witness the number of major national newspapers that have closed in North America alone over the past year), the value of the traditional press release has faded significantly (Pitt, Parent, Steyn, Berthon, & Money, 2010). In the new era of the Internet, user interests on products are strongly affected by everyday new information, and, consequently, exhibit complex patterns (Jin, Gallagher, Cao, Luo, & Han, 2010). Accordingly, this study is driven by explanatory and descriptive objects in the hope of exploring some of the new areas of study that have been previously suggested by scholars.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Technology Development and Social Network Sites

The use of the Internet is a quick and convenient way to get information concerning travel products (Lin, Wang & Hwang, 2010). The structure of social networks has been studied extensively because structure is strongly related to the detection of communities and to how information is propagated (Poblete, et al., 2011). Major Web technology players, such as Google, Bing and Yahoo! Search, now incorporate micro blog posts and trend analysis in their results; in addition to using social information in conjunction with existing search and retrieval models, significant efforts are dedicated to developing new applications (e.g., user and post recommendation services) for the new, real-time social realm (Pennacchiotti & Popescu, 2011). The proliferation of rich social media, online communities, and collectively produced knowledge

resources has accelerated the convergence of technological and social networks, producing environments that reflect both the architecture of the underlying information systems and the social structure on their members (Kleinberg, 2007).

Web 2.0 describes a suite of interactive web-based utilities made possible by these advances. Among the most common Web 2.0 applications are social networking sites (e.g., MySpace, Facebook), social bookmarking and tagging sites (e.g., del.icio.us), and image-hosting sites (e.g., Flickr) (Burhanna, Seeholzer, & Salem Jr, 2009). Web 2.0 facilitates collaboration and sharing among users through social media, such as online discussion forums, electronic bulletin board systems, blogs, etc. Such applications are significantly changing our life and the relationship between consumers and retailers (M. K. O. Lee, Shi, Cheung, Lim, & Sia, 2011).

Social Network Sites for Information Sharing

Social networks allow consumers to voluntarily post personal information, upload photographs, send and receive messages, join groups, and blog at their leisure (Pookulangara & Koesler, 2011). The research findings show that being networked and being engaged with multiple or particular SNSs indicate a difference in information seeking and sharing behaviour (Jansen, et al., 2011). A major trend in the current studies on social multimedia is using the social media sites as a source of huge amount of labelled data for solving large scale computer science problems in computer vision, data mining and multimedia (Jin, et al., 2010). With the Web 2.0 applications, this is seen to a higher extent; users have started to develop their own applications and services and businesses are monitoring users to learn what their next idea should bring to the users (Sorensen, 2009). The problem of using general search engines is that the original query log is not publicly available and the query trends may become noisy under the impact of news events. For example, as soon as a new product is announced by a major technology company, blogs will begin to report and speculate about the product. However, images of the product do not become widespread until the product is in the hands of the public (Jin, et al., 2010). Most social network and micro blog services already store profile information in the form of name, age, location and short summary of interests, but such information is often incomplete (e.g., a user may choose not to post bio details) or misleading (e.g., a user may choose to list an imaginary place - aka, "Wonderland", as her location) (Pennacchiotti & Popescu, 2011). Sociologists term the effect as "social influence" and point out that it will play a crucial role to assist users in reducing the uncertainty and amount of information that they must process to make a decision (Chen, 2010). It also highlights the non-monolithic nature of this youth demographic with a range of social networking services and the engagement of these services (Jansen, et al., 2011).

Social Networking Sites

One of the major aims of a social network is to enable participants to exchange ideas, experiences, and knowledge, as well as to create relationships for such purposes as entertainment, dating, blogging, or business. The rapid development of social media has challenged event managers to rethink how this trend will shape traditional marketing practices (W. Lee, et al., 2011). Social media sites such as blogs, Twitter and online discussion boards have been recognized as valuable sources of market intelligence for companies wishing to keep abreast of their customers' attitudes expressed online (Elsas & Glance, 2010).

Shopping behaviour and Social Media

Shopping has always been a social experience and social networking allows consumers to interact with individuals who are likely to be strangers (Pookulangara & Koesler, 2011). Consumers researching products for the purposes of making purchasing decisions frequently visit online shopping portal sites, such as Google Product Search, Bing Shopping or Yahoo! Shopping aggregate many types of content for the consumer: editorial and user reviews, buying guides, and price comparison tools (Elsas & Glance, 2010). Social networks have not only

transformed the research and purchase consideration phase, but also provide shoppers a platform to advocate for the products and stores they love (Pookulangara & Koesler, 2011). Shoppers doing research prior to making a purchase tap into many kinds of online information, in particular they may seek out editorials or user reviews of specific products, buying guides for categories of products or informal conversational product discussion, such as those found on message boards (Elsas & Glance, 2010).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) aims to be theoretically justified in predicting and explaining user behaviour across various information system contexts (Hossain & de Silva, 2009). TAM and its variants have been widely used to examine the decision of consumers to shop online (M. K. O. Lee, et al., 2011). According to Yanli, et al. (2010) the TAM model is more useful and easier to use for social networking sites and it will be perceived as more efficient. According to Yanli, et al. (2010), for future research, an integrated model that combines TAM variables, trust and perceived risk should be considered to test the impact of these variables. However, in the case of an information system that focuses on human relationship development, such as SNS, researchers have not examined whether the two perception constructs remain sufficient for explaining the intention to use or actual use (Kwon & Wen, 2010).

Perceived Usefulness (PU)

The Technology Acceptance Model originated from the Theory of Reasoned Action, and can be regarded as a special case of the Theory of Reasoned Action with only two salient beliefs: perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. The predictive power of perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness for users' technology acceptance has been empirically confirmed by numerous studies (Yanli, et al., 2010). PU is the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system enhances job performance (M. K. O. Lee, et al., 2011). Davis (1989) defined perceived usefulness as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system will enhance his or her job performance".

P1: There is a significant relationship between perceived usefulness and user acceptance of purchase search info via social networking sites.

Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)

TAM employs perceived playfulness as an anchor (general beliefs about computers and computer usage) and perceived enjoyment as an adjustment (beliefs that are shaped based on direct experiences with the target system) to argue that the role of perceived playfulness is expected to diminish over time as experience increases (W. Lee, et al., 2011). PEOU is the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system requires little effort, and, thus, affects user attitude and behaviour intent (M. K. O. Lee, et al., 2011). W. Lee, et al. (2011) defined perceived ease of use as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system will be free of effort." Both perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness have a strong positive influence on the acceptance of the technology.

P2: There is a significant relationship between perceived ease of use and user acceptance of purchase search info via social networking sites.

Perceived Risk

Given the perceived risk involved in online shopping, many believe that prospective online shoppers will ask the opinion of their friends or online consumer groups before they make an

online purchase decision (M. K. O. Lee, et al., 2011). Most web-based social networks are concerned with the privacy and security of their users, and through these operational features deal with trust and how the users create trusted relations (Sorensen, 2009).

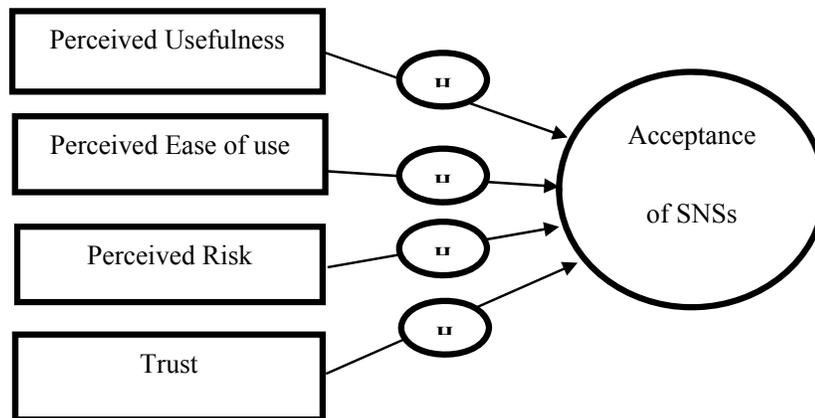
P3: There is a significant relationship between perceived risk and user acceptance of purchase search info via social networking sites.

Trust

Trust is a basic and essential element when it comes to creating relationships in any social setting, however, when it comes to the web-based social networks this ingredient is even more important (Sorensen, 2009). Trust plays an important role in a web-based social network. Given the open and dynamic nature of such an online virtual community, trust evaluation relies on transitive relationships among the direct and indirect neighbours of an evaluator (YanJun, Wen-chen, & O'Keefe, 2009). Trust is a complex concept, which has several interpretations. One operational definition of trust is resilience, which is the result of the belief in the integrity or authority of the party to be trusted (Sorensen, 2009). A social network is the highest growing web application in terms of users. Different surveys show that users are most concerned with their privacy in respect of web-based social networks (Sorensen, 2009). Accordingly, the reasons why people trust the recommendations on social shopping networks that other consumers provide merit further investigation (Marcela, Néstor, José, & Oscar, 2009). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H4: There is a significant relationship between trust and user acceptance of purchase search info via social networking sites.

Fig 1: An Integrated Model of User Acceptance of Social networking Sites (SNSs) for Purchase guide



PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

Target Population

In one study of college students, males and females were equally likely to have profiles on social networking sites and were found to spend about three hours each day on the sites (Correa, et al., 2010). Therefore, this study targets 300 students from two public universities (UPM and UTM) and one private university (MMU). Teenagers and young adults born between 1981 and 2000 are a critical demographic group economically and are one of the first demographics presented with an array of Internet social networking services just as their online habits are forming (Jansen, et al., 2011). Non-probability sampling using convenience techniques will be used in this study.

Questionnaire Development

To gain the objectives of this study the primary data were collected by email survey and online. There are three main sections in the questionnaire in which section A concerns the consumer demographics, and section B addresses the factors influencing the respondents' behaviour and attitude. A Likert Scale is an ordinal scale format that asks respondents to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with a series of mental belief or behavioural belief statements about a given object. This study adopted questioners from previous related studies. The table below shows the questionnaire items of study.

Table 1: Questionnaire items

	Variable Name	Item	Source
1	Perceived usefulness (PU)	PU1) Using the Social networking sites (SNSs) enables me acquire more information or meet more people PU2) Using the Social networking sites (SNSs) would improve my efficiency in sharing information and connecting with others PU3) The Social networking sites (SNSs) is a useful service for communication PU4) The Social networking sites (SNSs) is a useful service for interaction of members	(Hossain & de Silva, 2009; Kwon & Wen, 2010)
2	Perceived ease of use (PEOU)	PEOU1) Learning to use the SNSs is easy for me PEOU2) The process of using the SNSs is clear and understandable PEOU3) I find the SNSs easy to use	(Kwon & Wen, 2010)
3	Acceptance of SNSs	A1 I tend to use the SNSs frequently A2 I spend a lot of time on SNSs A3 I force myself to SNSs	(Kwon & Wen, 2010)
4	Perceived Risk	PR1 It is important to me to protect my identity information PR2 I am concerned with the consequences of sharing identity information PR3 I am likely to share my identity information online in the future PR4 I believe my identity information is well-protected online	(Fogel & Nehmad, 2009)
5	Trust	TRT1 I feel that the exchange of information on the SNW is safe TRS2 I think that the exchange of information on a SNW is truthful TRT3 I think that the information exchanged is dependable enough to help me in making a decision TRT4 If correct information is posted on a Social Network sites, I think it could be misused	(Monika, Israel, & Shailja, 2010)

CONCLUSION

Individuals communicate and form relationships through Internet social networking websites such as Facebook and MySpace. Online social networks are networks of relationships that evolve from computer mediated communication, connecting and enabling users to initiate

communication that spans time and space (Monika, et al., 2010). Owing to the rise of social shopping, online shops/auction managers are developing social shopping functions or launching social shopping networks on their websites (Marcela, et al., 2009). Social networking websites should inform potential users that risk taking and privacy concerns are potentially relevant and important concerns before individuals sign-up and create social networking websites (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009). Although marketing managers cannot control information disseminated through social media, ignoring the realities of the impact of information transmitted through these forums on consumer behaviour is tantamount to surrendering the communications process to the vagaries of the marketplace.

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