

Exploring consumers' impulse buying behavior on social commerce platform: The role of parasocial interaction



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ABSTRACT

Social commerce, a recent branch of e-commerce, has made the experience of consumers on social commerce platform (SCP) different from other contexts, as the consumers have social interactions with each other. Growing evidence also shows that consumers on these platforms are prone to impulse buying behavior owing to the social interactions. However, existing research on online impulse buying was limited when illustrating the behavior of consumers on SCPs as social relationship constructs were not included. New theoretical developments are needed in regard to fill the research gap. In this research, parasocial interaction (PSI) theory is introduced in this research to examine the influence of social relationship factors on the formation of impulse buying behavior. An empirical research has been conducted on Mogujie (www.mogujie.com), one of the most popular image-sharing SCPs in China. Results indicate that PSI exerts an impact on impulse buying tendency, the social-relevant features of the SCP determine PSI, and perceived usefulness and PSI both significantly affect perceived enjoyment. In addition, consumers' perceived enjoyment and impulse buying tendencies significantly affect their urge to buy impulsively. The implications, limitations, and discussions are provided.

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1. Introduction

With the rapid development of social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest, both consumers and companies are paying increased attention to social commerce. Social commerce is a combination of social media and e-commerce, and its essence is the conduct of all kinds of commercial activities by exploiting online social capital in social media (Liang, Ho, Li, & Turban, 2011). Consumers benefit from social commerce in which the online interactions and contributions of other consumers assist in the acquisition of products and services are supported by Web 2.0 social media technologies (Kim & Park, 2013; Liang & Turban, 2011). Companies also benefit from social commerce since they can develop closer relationships with consumers, and the high quality of relationships will increase sales and help consumers to form loyalty to the company (Hajli, 2014). Therefore, social commerce may be one of the most important areas of information systems and marketing research in the coming decade (Hajli, 2014).

Social commerce platforms (SCPs), which have emerged from Web 2.0, are online shopping services that connect consumers and allow them to discover, share, recommend, rate, and purchase products (Hajli, 2015). A new form of SCP that focuses on images sharing has emerged in 2006. Similar to most Web 2.0 applications, image-sharing SCPs focus on a specific segment of consumers, such as women, and on specific products, such as “soft goods” (e.g., fashion and lifestyle) (Turban, King, & Lang, 2011). Sharing pictures of products and lifestyle is the preponderant characteristic of these platforms. Examples of these SCPs include Pinterest, Instagram, and Polyvore in the US, Mogujie and Meilishuo in China.

Represented by Pinterest, image-sharing SCPs have obtained great success and have deeply influenced the consumption behavior of users. Although Pinterest has not reached the permeability of Facebook or Twitter, its users have higher purchasing power and consume about \$170 per quarter on average. By contrast, the average quarterly consumptions of users on Facebook and Twitter are only \$95 and \$70, respectively (Marsden, 2011). According to a study by User Interface Engineering (2001), about 40% of the money spent online is attributed to impulse purchases. These evidences show that, compared to users of other social media, users of image-sharing SCPs are prone to online impulse buying. In other words, users consider consumption information received from image-sharing SCPs valuable and their online impulse buying behavior is

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crucially affected by this information (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). Therefore, it is important for academics and practitioners to understand the factors on image-sharing SCPs that facilitate the impulse buying behavior of consumers, which is exactly the focus of this study.

A number of studies have made important contributions to the understanding of online impulse buying behavior in traditional e-commerce websites (e.g., Parboteeah, Valacich, & Wells, 2009; Wells, Parboteeah, & Valacich, 2011; Luo, 2005; Madhavaram & Laverie, 2004). One notable example is the research of Parboteeah et al. (2009). They found that the provision of high-quality task-relevant (TR) and mood-relevant (MR) features of websites can significantly influence the cognitive and affective reactions of users in the website, which determine the likelihood and magnitude of their online impulse buying behavior. Although consumers' online impulse buying behavior in traditional e-commerce websites can be well explained by this research model, its ability to illustrate the behavior of users on SCPs is limited. As an integration of social media and online commerce activities, social relationship constructs are key factors that influence users' behavior; however, they were not included in any prior model on impulse buying. Responding to the call of Hajli (2014), new issues and new development of new theories are demanded in social commerce area. It is necessary to understand consumers' impulse buying behavior on image-sharing SCPs by adopting new theories.

Different from traditional e-commerce websites, image-sharing SCPs attract consumers mainly because they can foster users' closer relationships with various other users (Olbrich & Holsing, 2011). In addition to ordinary users, several image-sharing SCPs invite experts and celebrities to engage in social commerce activities and also offered various features to help ordinary users to identify and interact with them. Previous research on media and communication has proposed an intimate relationship between media users and media personalities (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Auter, 1992; Grant, Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991). For instance, audiences may feel a close relationship with the hosts of TV shopping program, and these relationships induced their impulse buying behavior via TV (Park & Lennon, 2006). Unlike real social relationships, this feeling of intimacy with media personalities may be seen as a one-sided relationship called the parasocial interaction (PSI) relationship. Similarly, users may also develop PSI relationships with other users on SCPs, especially with these celebrities and experts who they can hardly communicate with off-site (Ballantine & Martin, 2005; Labrecque, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to examine the role of PSI relationship in triggering users' impulse buying behavior on image-sharing SCPs, though there are no existing studies exploring this issue. Hence, the focus of this study examines not only the impulse buying behavior but also the PSI relationship. To summarize, this study examines the following research questions:

- (1) What factors encourage users to form PSI relationships with others on image-sharing SCPs? and
- (2) Whether and how does the PSI relationship affect users' impulse buying behavior on image-sharing SCPs?

2. Theoretical background

The theoretical foundation of the current study has been derived from several sources, including media and communication, social commerce and social psychology. The conceptual model of the research is based on online impulse buying model of Parboteeah et al. (2009), and is further expanded by incorporating PSI theory (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Ballantine & Martin, 2005; Giles, 2002; Thorson & Rodgers, 2006). Specifically, the key constructs of the research model are from social commerce literatures (Olbrich & Holsing, 2011) and interpersonal interaction perspectives (Reinhard & Messner, 2009; Shen, Huang, Chu, & Liao, 2010).

2.1. Impulse buying

Impulse buying was first defined formally in the DuPont studies (1948–1965) as an unplanned purchase opposite actual purchases complying with intended shopping lists. Stern (1962) classified impulse buying into four distinct types, namely pure, reminder, suggestive, and planned impulse buying. This contribution is quite significant even nowadays, as most studies on impulse buying start with this classification (Beatty & Elizabeth Ferrell, 1998; Rook, 1987). Consistent with the definition of Stern's four types of impulse buying, most of users' buying behavior on SCPs can be viewed as impulse buying behavior. Browsing images of clothes on a SCP aimlessly and then decide to purchase a dress would be considered as a pure impulse buying behavior; seeing a picture of a cosmetic product on a SCP and realizing that he or she is running out of it and purchases it would be a reminder impulse buying; a suggestive impulse buying occurs when a user purchases a new shirt based on the recommendations of a SCP; finally, browsing pictures of products on a SCP with a shopping list but making purchases based on coupons or promotions would be a planned impulse buying. In current study, impulse buying is defined on the basis of its abundant definitions as "a purchase that is unplanned, the result of an exposure to a stimulus, and decided on the spot" (Piron, 1991, p. 512). Stimulus in the definition can be an actual product or the extrinsic attributes of the product and shopping context, such as the shopping environment, sales, and other buyers (Parboteeah et al., 2009). In the context of image-sharing SCPs, a plenty of pictures of products are impacting users' sense of vision, they are easily stimulated by the visual appeal and will buy products impulsively. Likewise, many interactive features are provided to users through which they can communicate with other users and even acquire

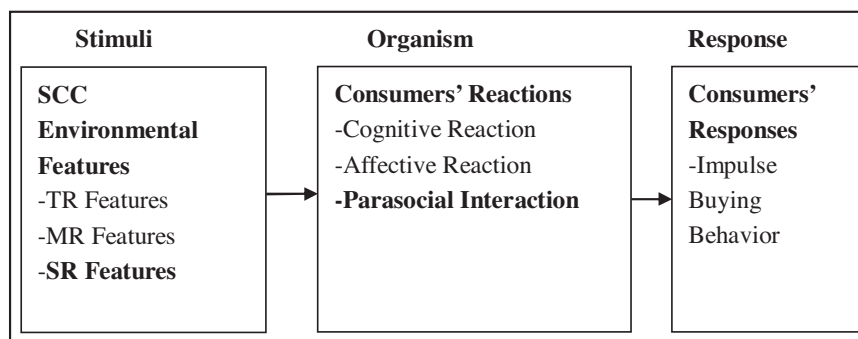


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework of present study.

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