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Social identity dimensions and consumer behavior in social media

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ABSTRACT

As technological advancements continue to evolve, consumer use and purchase behavior also change in response to the emergence of new tools such as social media. Given that more marketers have shifted their focus toward engaging customers in the development of their marketing mix via social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, finding important factors that drive consumer use and purchase behavior in this environment is of practical and academic importance. Use behavior contributes to fundamental user base, whereas purchase behavior generates firm revenue. For firms, finding a common factor that influences both behaviors would help increase marketing effectiveness. Based on a literature review, this study identifies social identity as the common factor in the social media context. Furthermore, existing research suggests that social identity has multiple dimensions including cognitive, affective, and evaluative. However, whether these three dimensions exert the same influences on these two important behaviors is not clear yet. The present study attempts to fill this research gap and examine the various effects of cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions on use and purchase behaviors. The result shows that these three dimensions have various effects on focal behaviors. The findings indicate that affective dimension has an effect on use behavior, while the cognitive and evaluative dimensions have an influence on purchase behavior. Evaluative identity has a stronger influence than its cognitive counterpart. The three dimensions are distinct and non-substitutable by other parts. Implications are elaborated in the discussion section.

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1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation and growing popularity of social media, such as online social networking sites (SNS), have been accompanied by rapid changes in consumer behavior (Lin & Lu, 2011). As of July 2012, people spend approximately 6.5 h a day on social media to socialize, share, and communicate with members of their social network (Popkin, 2012). This behavioral change toward dependence on social media has magnified dramatically. A recent study based on 170,000 Internet users in the United States revealed that an average user spends 1.72 h on social networking and another 0.81 h on microblogging each day, which respectively account for 28% and 13% of all online activities (Bennet, 2015). Such a phenomenon is more pronounced for members of “Generation Z,” who live in the digital era (Wallace, 2015). A study on this younger generation, aged between 8 and 18, shows that teens, on average,

spend more than 6.5 h on screen media, whereas tweens spend more than 4.5 h (Wallace, 2015). These studies show that social media has become an integral part of the lives of many people, both adults and children (Bennet, 2015; Robb, 2015). Approximately 45% of surveyed teens use social media everyday (Robb, 2015) and some even check for more than 100 times on a daily basis (Hadad, 2015). A report shows that teen girls spend 1 h and 32 min on social media, 40 min more than boys who on average spend 52 min (Robb, 2015). A similar pattern is also observed in Taiwan, a leading economy in Asia. According to a study by the Market Intelligence & Consulting Institute (MIC), 92% of the 2187 respondents of returned surveys from its online panel have used social media recently. Among the various online social media services, Facebook still dominates the local market followed by Google+ for social networking, while YouTube is on top as the leading online multimedia platform (MIC, 2014) for videos. Although consumers are used to incorporate social media into their daily lives to satisfy their need for networking and affiliation, majority fail to conduct consumption behavior through this new avenue (Yang, 2011).

This trend of consumer behavior change coupled with the novel

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potential of social media to stick users with the platform have been well recognized by marketers, who now embrace it as a tool to enhance customer acquisition and management to increase sales prospects. Moreover, equipped with analytical capability, social media service providers are able to provide highly sophisticated data for advertisers to effectively target customers and tailor their product and service offerings to individual preferences. The social media giant Facebook is reported to have advertising revenue as a massive portion of its sales (DiChristopher, 2015). Nonetheless, the dependence on advertising as primary revenue source shows that majority of users do not contribute directly to social media revenues through their purchase behavior. If managers of social media firms are able to identify a common factor that simultaneously influences social media use and consumer purchase behavior, they may cultivate their large customer base and convert users to purchasers. Investing in this common factor helps online service providers in the social media sector to generate additional value from active users. Thus, this approach also enhances marketing effectiveness and is of practical and academic significance.

Social media emerges and then significantly spreads exponentially because of its social networking ability, which satisfies the need of users to maintain their social identity. In a recent study, approximately 61%, 36%, and 21% of teens report that they frequently check their social media accounts to see whether their posts are getting likes, if they are left out by friends, and if their friends say negative things about them, respectively (Hadad, 2015). Prior research has recognized the social aspect of social media and empirically examined the role and effect of social identity in driving consumer online behavior. For example, Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004) examined online use intention and reported that virtual community members with a stronger sense of social identity are more likely to have a stronger desire to participate in an online community. Similarly, Lee, Kim, and Kim (2011) conducted another study and provided supporting evidence on the direct effect of social identification motivation on the intention to engage in online communities. This line of research supports the proposition that social identity encourages online use behavior.

The proliferation of social media also fosters a new form of commerce, namely, social commerce, which engages online social interactions and transactions through Web 2.0 social media technologies (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Liang & Turban, 2012). As social commerce represents a combination of social and commercial activities, theories that address social interaction and process can effectively detect the underlying mechanism of consumer consumption behavior in the social media context (Liang & Turban, 2012). Prior studies have shown that social identity theory contributes to purchase behavior in various consumption situations. Madrigal (2001) investigated the direct and indirect effects of social identity on purchase intentions in a corporate sponsorship context. In a broader commercial context, customer identification toward a company has been reported to contribute to a higher level of desired behavioral outcomes such as customer loyalty and willingness to purchase (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer, 2009; Huang, Phau, & Lin, 2010). Thus far, most studies on social identity examined purchase behavior in a physical, offline context. Although investigations on the direct effect of social identity on online consumer purchase behavior appear to be limited, the reported relationships between affective factors, including emotional support and commitments, as well as online social commerce intention, partially support our proposition that social identity plays a key role in driving the purchasing intention of online users (Gupta, Kim, & Shin, 2010; Liang, Ho, Li, & Turban, 2011). Jointly, these research efforts support our proposition that social identity has dual effects on both usage and consumption intentions.

On the basis of this research line, the present study intends to address a research gap by taking one step forward to explore and examine the dimensional effect of social identity on the two behavioral intentions, use and purchase. To the best of our knowledge, no study has been conducted on the direct effect of the various dimensions of social identity on consumer behavior in a social commerce context. Moreover, by investigating both behaviors simultaneously, this study is able to compare the direction and relative magnitude of the dimensional effect on outcome behaviors.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

2.1. Social identity and its dimensions

Social identity theory suggests that people define themselves based on personal and social aspects (Tajfel, 1982). Personal identity depicts a person's distinct characteristics, including personal traits and abilities. The social aspect (i.e., social identification) refers to the perception of belonging to a human group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Tajfel (1981) defined social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept, which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 255). This commonly accepted definition indicates the following three necessary components for an individual to develop identification with a group: (a) cognitive, (b) evaluative, and (c) affective dimension. Cognitive dimension of social identity refers to an individual's awareness of membership and involves a self-categorization process. The self-categorization process a person applies to identify groups might result in multiple group memberships and social identities. For example, people may classify themselves based on their work affiliation, nationality, and/or gender (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Prior literature suggests that the nature of one's group membership, assigned vs. self-selected membership, influences a member's in-group behavior. The value connotation related to this membership awareness represents the evaluative aspect of social identity (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999). This evaluative component represents the group self-esteem. The affective component involves emotional investment in this identification. Although prior study indicated that cognitive and evaluative components are considered more necessary than the affective component and that the affective element often co-varies with the evaluative component in the case of natural groups, the three dimensions are non-interchangeable and may exert different behavioral consequences (Ellemers et al., 1999; Lam, Ahearne, Hu, & Schillewaert, 2010). Despite the distinctions among these three dimensions, most existing literature failed to address this uniqueness, and social identification was commonly measured and treated as a unidimensional construct (Ellemers et al., 1999). The merit of this operationalization on social identification is that this research line on the overall effect of social identity generally supports positive associations with participation behavior, i.e., the intention to use social media in this study (Dholakia et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2011) and buying intention (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Homburg et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2010). Therefore, in light of the definition and spirit of the affective, cognitive, and evaluative dimension of social identity, this study proposes that each dimension exerts a positive effect on both use and purchase intention.

H1a. The affective dimension of social identity positively influences social media members' (a) use and (b) purchase behavior.

H1b. The cognitive dimension of social identity positively influences social media members' (a) use and (b) purchase behavior.

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