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Social commerce research: Definition, research themes and the trends

Xiaolin Lin^{a,*}, Yibai Li^b, Xuequn Wang^c

^a Department of Decision Sciences and Economics, College of Business, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, TX 78412-5808, USA

^b Operations & Information Management Department, Kania School of Management, The University of Scranton, Brennan Hall 322, Scranton, PA 18510-4602, United States

^c School of Engineering and Information Technology, Murdoch University, 90 South St., Perth, Western Australia 6150, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Social commerce, an emerging phenomenon rooted in social media and Web 2.0 technologies, has attracted the attention of many researchers. The number of publications on social commerce has grown exponentially in the past 10 years. Now, social commerce has become a significant emerging research area. In this paper, we first define the boundary of social commerce research and then attempt to review the extant literature in this area comprehensively and systematically. Based on the definition, this study surveyed 1369 peer-reviewed academic publications in the social media, Web 2.0, and other related areas. Following the survey, 418 of the publications were identified as social commerce research. Then, latent semantic analysis (LSA), a text mining approach, was applied to summarize the current state of social commerce research. LSA results show that there are three major research themes in the current social commerce research: organization, advertisement, and word-of-mouth. Each theme discusses topics such as innovation, user-generated content, and reputation, among others. In addition, we identify some interesting trends. The first main trend is that innovation, corporate reputation, and user-generated content remain the major research topics, although they are experiencing a slight decline. The second main trend is that online reviews, trust, and e-word-of-mouth are attracting more attention from researchers.

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1. Introduction

Social commerce is a phenomenon rooted in social media practice and Web 2.0 technologies, which have become popular consumer tools to socialize and share commercial-related information. Due to the popularity and growth of social media tools, consumers are now able to interact actively with consumer peers, which enhances their evaluations of products and leads to better-informed purchasing decisions (Wang & Zhang, 2012). Social media usage may be a good strategy for businesses to increase sales by retaining current customers and developing new customers (Hajli, 2015a). In today's challenging business environment, social media tools have been actively used for firms to present their business online and achieve marketing values (Stephen & Toubia, 2010). For example, firms may have a fan page on Facebook that allows management to interact directly with customers in order to improve and manage customer relationships. As such, social commerce has facilitated new channels that enhance communications between

business enterprises and customers, thus, providing an innovative approach for changing business practice. Further understanding of social commerce phenomenon is essential for firms to achieve their profitable marketing values in today's digital business environment.

Social commerce research can be traced back to the late 1990s, although the explosive growth of this research area started in 2004, the same year in which Facebook and many other social media sites were founded. Based on an extensive literature search, social commerce has always been a significant research topic in the broad social media research area. The earliest scholarly publication on social commerce that we found is in 1999, since then, it has grown proportionally with the social media research in terms of number of publications, as shown in Fig. 1.

There is no doubt that social commerce research has become a significant research area that could have a significant impact on business practices. In Information Systems (IS) discipline, academicians have paid good attention to this new research area with a focus on adoption and use of social commerce (e.g. Liang, Ho, Li, & Turban, 2011; Zhang, Lu, Gupta, & Zhao, 2014). The evolution of social commerce in practice combines people, management, technology, and information dimensions (Wang & Zhang, 2012), indicating that social commerce is a comprehensive research area.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: xiaolinphd@gmail.com (X. Lin), yibai.li@scranton.edu (Y. Li), xuequnwang1600@gmail.com (X. Wang).

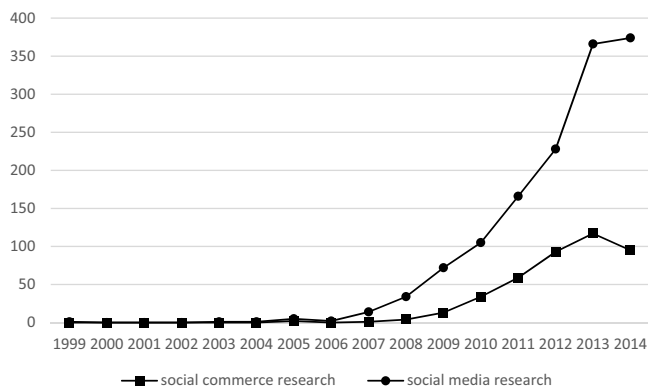


Fig. 1. The Number of Publications on Social Commerce from 1999 to 2014, Compared to the Broad Social Media Research.

There is a need to provide a comprehensive view of broad topics in related to social commerce research, providing guidance for future research directions. In the absence of such a comprehensive and systematic characterization of a research field, the field’s “progress is but a fortunate combination of circumstances, research is fumbling in the dark, and dissemination of knowledge is a cumbersome process” (Vatter, 1947 p.31). Therefore, a road map is required for researchers to understand the salient topics of investigation within the field. In this paper, we attempt to bring some clarity to the field by synthesizing and summarizing the extant literature of social commerce research. More specifically, we attempt to answer the following question: what are the major themes and topics of current social commerce research?

To answer the aforementioned question, this study examined previous literature to identify the major themes and topics of social commerce research. Latent semantic analysis (LSA) was applied to analyze the abstracts of previous social commerce studies. Results from the LSA showed that previous literature on social commerce has predominantly focused on three themes: social commerce and organization, social commerce and advertisement, and social commerce and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Additional LSAs were conducted for each theme. The results revealed prominent topics in each theme. We also found some interesting trends in social commerce research topics including: (a) innovation, corporate reputation, and user-generated content remain the major research topics, although they are experiencing a slight decline; (b) the online review, trust, and e-WOM are attracting the attention of more researchers. This study contributes to social commerce literature by providing a comprehensive review of current social commerce studies and identifying its primary research themes, which provides guidance for future studies. This study provides a big picture of social commerce research and has potential to serve as a research map for future social commerce studies.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we provide some background about social commerce. Next, we introduce the method and describe the operationalization of LSA in this study. Lastly, we discuss the results of the LSA and discuss their implications.

2. Social commerce background

Social commerce can be classified into three primary trends: adding commercial features to social media tools (e.g. SNSs), adding social media features to e-commerce sites (e.g. Amazon), and the increasing use of social media by traditional offline firms to improve business performance (e.g. customer service) (Liang et al., 2011; Ng, 2013). Social media is the platform where social commerce activities occur, and focuses on users’ online collaborative shopping via

information sharing, with an emphasis on improving WOM and brand loyalty (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009; Wang & Zhang, 2012).

Social media empowers users to share their shopping experiences and knowledge about products with consumer peers in a social commerce environment. Peer consumer-generated content provides a background for people’s evaluation of products, which influences their online purchasing decisions and shopping experiences (Cecere & Owyang, 2010; Dennison, Bourdage-Braun, & Chetuparambil, 2009). Furthermore, the unique characteristics of social commerce provide enterprises with opportunities to strengthen relationships with customers in order to achieve desirable economic boosts such as increased sales and successful marketing (Amblee & Bui, 2011; Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011; Hajli & Sims, 2015). Via their information-sharing behaviors, social commerce users provide social support before and after their online shopping experience (Liang et al., 2011; Zhang, Lu et al., 2014; Hajli, 2014b).

Consumers’ shared information, such as ratings, reviews, recommendations, and referrals, has been demonstrated to influence their social commerce use (Hajli, 2015b; Wang, Hsiao, Yang, & Hajli, 2016). In a brief summary, social commerce involves a variety of commercial activities that are able to assist in consumers’ pre-purchase product evaluation, shopping decisions, and post-purchase behaviors. Social commerce can serve as a business strategy for enterprises to manage their business. In other words, social commerce involves a variety of commercial activities that can assist consumers in the pre-purchase product evaluation, shopping decisions, and post-purchase behaviors. Therefore, in our study, we refer social commerce to “any commercial activities facilitated by or conducted through the broad social media and Web 2.0 tools in consumers’ online shopping process or business’ interactions with their customers”. We refer social commerce research to the studies that investigate the aforementioned social commerce phenomenon.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection

In order to characterize the social commerce research landscape and identify the research themes, this study first searched for all available peer reviewed academic publications that contain the phrase “social commerce” in their titles, abstracts or author supplied key words in Business Source Elite database from the EBSCO host. This database provides a wide coverage of scholarly business, management and economics journals. The database also includes publications covering topics such as accounting, banking, finance, international business, marketing, sales and other related topics. This process yields 44 publications. This means that 44 publications specifically adopt the term “social commerce” in their titles, keywords, or abstracts. In addition; based on the definition provided previously; a wide range of studies; although do not use the specific term “social commerce,” should also be considered as social commerce research. This sub-set of social commerce research is embedded in the broad area of social media and related research. Therefore; we first search all the peer reviewed academic publications that contain “social media,” “social networking,” “online community,” “online forum,” “web 2.0” in Business Source Elite database from the EBSCO host. After eliminating duplicates; we finally collected 1349 unique publications. Using the definition of social commerce provided previously; three researchers read through the abstracts of these publications and collectively identified 418 publications that can be considered as social commerce research. The abstracts of these 418 abstracts were consolidated

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