



What motivates customers to participate in social commerce? The impact of technological environments and virtual customer experiences



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ABSTRACT

Social commerce, as a relatively new phenomenon, has attracted little research attention. This study aims to provide initial insights into the dynamics of customer participation in social commerce. Based on the stimulus–organism–response paradigm, this study develops a model to investigate the effects of technological features (perceived interactivity, perceived personalization and perceived sociability) of social commerce on customers' virtual experiences (social support, social presence and flow) and subsequently their participation intention. The results indicate that social commerce intention is determined by social support, social presence and flow experiences. These experiences, in turn, are influenced by perceived interactivity, personalization and sociability features.

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1. Introduction

The increased popularity of social media as an efficient tool for socialization and information sharing has given rise to a new form of e-commerce called social commerce [40]. Social media, which combine user-generated content with social networking features, are used for creating, initiating, and circulating information within online social networks [57]. Examples include social networking sites (SNSs), blogs, micro-blogs, Wikipedia, social shopping sites and other content sharing sites, such as YouTube and Flickr [41]. Social commerce refers to the use of social media for commercial transactions and activities that are driven primarily by social interactions and user contributions [40,63].

The commercial impact of social commerce is now vividly obvious to various firms. According to Liang et al. [40], adding commercial features to SNSs and adding social networking

capabilities to e-commerce sites are two major trends in social commerce. The third trend in social commerce is the increase in use of social media by traditional offline firms for customer relationship management, brand communication, product promotion and social shopping. Booz and Co. [8] predicts that worldwide sales in social commerce would rise approximately six times from USD 5 billion in 2011 to USD 30 billion in 2015.

Undoubtedly, the success of businesses that aims at tapping the economic value of social commerce depends on customer participation [40,63]. An understanding of customer's motivation behind participation in social commerce can help businesses unleash its potential. Since social commerce is a sparsely researched area, this study examines the motivation that drives customer participation in social commerce [63]. Customers' participation behavior in social commerce includes both direct and indirect commercial transactions [17]. Direct transactions refer to the purchase behavior during the buying phase of a customer decision process. Indirect transactions include referral and e-WOM activities during the goal definition, information seeking, selection and after sales phases of the customer decision process and are characterized by requesting and sharing of commercial information on social media [40,63]. Given that

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customers' referral and e-WOM behavior may influence subsequent purchase behavior [33], our study focuses on customers' referral and e-WOM behavior, namely requesting and sharing of commercial information. This study draws upon the stimulus–organism–response (S–O–R) model to examine the influence of technological characteristics of social commerce on customers' virtual experiences and in turn their intention to request and share commercial information on social media.

This study makes important contributions to the extant literature. First, with the exception of Liang et al. [40], few studies have examined requesting and sharing of commercial content in e-commerce. The extant research on this topic has focused mainly on the drivers of user-generated content (UGC) from different perspectives. For instance, Daugherty et al. [18] investigated the determinants of consumer consumption and creation of UGC from the motivational perspective. Zhang and Zhu [69] examined the social effect of content contributions in Chinese Wikipedia from the social influence perspective. Our study, however, differs from the extant literature in significant ways. We focus on the goal definition, information seeking, selection and after sales phases of the customer decision process. We explain one kind of participation behavior in social commerce, namely requesting and sharing commercial information on social media, from a virtual customer experience perspective. Second, this study employs the S–O–R model to link the technological environments of social commerce to customers' participation behavior. Though the extant research has enriched our knowledge about the influence of human–computer interface on customer behavior [31,46], it has not examined the emerging social media in-depth. Based on previous studies, we identify three technological characteristics, namely perceived interactivity, perceived personalization and perceived sociability. These three characteristics capture key features of the social commerce environment and thus shed light on this new phenomenon. Third, we develop a framework of virtual customer experiences including social support, social presence and flow for the social commerce environment and examine the roles of these three virtual experiences in motivating customer participation in social commerce. We believe this framework would be useful for examining customers' experience and behavior in a social commerce context.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section presents the theoretical background of the paper. The third section proposes a research model based on the S–O–R paradigm. The research methodology is discussed in the fourth section, followed by the analysis of results in the fifth section. The final section concludes with a discussion of the results, the theoretical and practical implications, as well as limitations and future research directions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The S–O–R model

The S–O–R model from environmental psychology states that the various aspects of the environment act as stimuli (S) that together affect people's internal states (O), which in turn drive their behavioral responses (R) [42]. Baker et al. [4] adapted the model to the retail context and conceptualized stimuli as environmental cues, namely, ambient conditions, functional/esthetic design factors and social factors. Studies that have applied the S–O–R model to the retail context reveal that retail environmental stimuli influence consumers' internal states, which subsequently drive their behavior toward the store. In online retail, the stimuli pertain to the design features of the online environment that consumers interact with [20]. The internal states refer to emotional and cognitive states of consumers,

including their perceptions, experiences and evaluations [31]. The responses represent consumer behavior, such as purchase behavior, store exploration and online communication [51].

The use of the S–O–R model as an overarching theory is appropriate for this study for two reasons. First, the S–O–R model has been applied extensively in previous studies on online consumer behavior [20,46]. For example, using the S–O–R model, Parboteeah et al. [46] examined the effects of task- and mood-relevant cues in a website on consumers' cognitive and emotional experiences and subsequent online purchase behavior. Animesh et al. [2] also applied this S–O–R model to explore the impacts of technological features of virtual worlds on users' virtual experiences and purchase behavior. Their findings support the applicability of the model in explaining individuals' internal reactions and behavioral responses to environmental stimuli. Second, given the critical roles of technological environments and virtual experiences in influencing customer behavior in social commerce, the S–O–R model provides a parsimonious and structured manner to examine the effects of technological features as environmental stimuli on customers' virtual experiences and in turn their intention to request and share commercial information on social media.

2.2. Technological features as environmental stimuli (S)

Social commerce platforms, that is, social media, are artifacts with unique technological features [63]. Online customers interact with the social commerce environment via the enabled technological features and form their estimations of these features [46]. Therefore, the technological features of social commerce platforms not only reflect the objective properties independent of the customers, but also the subjective properties as perceived by the customers [31]. Since our study focuses on customers' perception, experience and behavior, the technological features here refer to the subjective properties of social commerce platforms as experienced by the customers [2]. Previous studies on social commerce have confirmed that technological features of social commerce platforms cluster around three crucial elements, namely, perceived interactivity [2], perceived personalization [44] and perceived sociability [2]. These three features capture various aspects of an individual's interactions with the social commerce environment that comprises people and the technology medium. Perceived interactivity and perceived personalization reflect the features that support interactions between customers and the technology, whereas perceived sociability reflects the feature that facilitates better interactions among customers using the technology. The present study focuses on these three crucial technological features, namely, perceived interactivity, perceived personalization and perceived sociability.

Interactivity of a medium is the degree to which one can control the medium in modifying its form and content in real time [54]. It focuses on the interaction between individuals and the technology [54]. As a key distinguishing design feature, interactivity has been found to influence customers' response to an online medium [30]. In this study, we focus on perceived interactivity and define it as customers' perception that the social commerce environment can facilitate the interaction between them and the technology.

Perceived personalization is defined here as customers' perception about the adaptability of the site to meet their preferences [56]. In social commerce, website personalization strategies focus mainly on providing an online customer with tailored content based on his/her needs, preferences, profiles, prior interactions and social networks. Therefore, personalization perception represents the fit between website content and one's preferences [56]. Due to information overload in social commerce,

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