



Enhancing the flow experience of consumers in China through interpersonal interaction in social commerce



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ABSTRACT

Although research on flow experience has recently received much attention, few studies have been published on the perceived interpersonal interaction factors of consumers and their influence in social commerce. In addition, few studies have focused on the impact of interpersonal interaction factors on flow experience. Drawing on the stimulus-organism-response framework, this study examines the impact of interpersonal interaction factors (perceived expertise, similarity, and familiarity) on the formation of flow experience and its subsequent effects on purchase intention in the context of social commerce. We investigate whether the impact of the three interpersonal interaction factors on flow experience differs between young and old users. We conduct a survey and collect 349 responses from users of a social shopping site in China. Our results indicate that interpersonal interaction factors positively relate to flow experience and subsequently influence purchase intention. We also find differences between young and old users in this area.

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1. Introduction

Social commerce is an emerging business trend that is growing rapidly in China. According to the 2015 McKinsey report, consumers in China spend 78 min per day on social commerce. Approximately 50% of customers in China make their purchase decisions according to recommendations from relatives and friends. In recent years, the virtual experiences of customers in the social commerce context have gained importance. Providing consumers with unforgettable experiences has emerged as an important issue in driving customer participation and developing favorable consumer behavior responses in social commerce (Huang & Benyoucef, 2014; Zhang, Lu, Gupta, & Zhao, 2014).

When considering the provision of online consumption experiences, scholars have highlighted the importance of flow (Chang, 2013; Faiola, Newlon, Pfaff, & Smyslova, 2013). Flow is a state of concentration in which people are so involved that nothing else matters (Gao & Bai, 2014). Specifically, flow refers to a temporarily unaware experience in which an individual engages in a social shopping activity in a social shopping website with total

concentration, control, and enjoyment (Gao & Bai, 2014). In emphasizing the importance of flow and the formation of compelling experiences, Hoffman and Novak (1996) went as far as declaring that “creating a commercially compelling website depends on facilitating a state of flow for consumers [and that] ... an important objective for marketers is to provide these opportunities” (Hoffman & Novak, 1996, p. 66). Zhang et al. (2014) argued that enhancing the flow experience is essential for the survival of social commerce. Despite the understanding of the contribution of flow to the creation of compelling experiences, investigating the drivers of customer flow experiences is important for the success of social shopping sites, however, little effort has been devoted to studying the factors contributing to flow experience in social commerce. In order to fill this gap, the present study is trying to explore the formation drivers of flow in social commerce.

With the growing competition, online vendors rely on web atmospherics to create an environment that can produce positive emotional and cognitive states of online shoppers (Gao & Bai, 2014; Zhang et al., 2014). Chang (2013) suggested that social interaction among members in social networking sites would yield a state of flow. In the social commerce context, interpersonal interaction factors have received much attention (Hsiao, Lin, Wang, Lu, & Yu, 2010; Liao, Chu, Huang, & Shen, 2010; Lu, Zhao, & Wang, 2010). Social commerce involves using social media to support social interaction, and its unique characteristics provide opportunities for

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consumers to make better buying decisions (Ng, 2013). Carlson and O’Cass (2011) posited that future studies should explore the effects of consumer-based variables on the formation of flow experience. However, to our knowledge, little is known about the interpersonal interaction factors that promote the flow experience for customers in social commerce.

Drawing from the above literature review, we infer that investigating the impact of interpersonal interaction factors on the creation of flow experience should be a promising research area in social commerce. On the basis of Liao et al. (2010) study, three interpersonal interaction factors are investigated, namely, perceived expertise of group members, similarity of group members, and familiarity of group members. As the context of our research is similar to the virtual community context, we focus on these three interpersonal interaction factors. Therefore, this study draws on the stimulus–organism–response (SOR) model to investigate the impact of the three interpersonal attraction factors on the flow experience and the relationship between flow experience and purchase intention.

This research makes important contributions to the extant literature. First, we extend the extant literature by testing and validating a model by incorporating interpersonal drivers of flow experience in social commerce. Second, our data analysis reveals significant differences between young and old users. Third, the present study advances the understanding that interpersonal interaction factors remain important in the context of social commerce. Fourth, our research provides empirical evidence to the deduction that interpersonal interaction factors positively affect purchase intention through flow experience in social commerce.

2. Theoretical background and research hypotheses

2.1. SOR framework

The SOR model is extensively used in studies that measure the impact of perceived website features on consumer responses (Gao & Bai, 2014; Zhang et al., 2014). According to the SOR model, environmental stimuli (S) influence consumer internal states (O) and correspondingly affect consumers’ overall responses (R). Donovan and Rossiter (1982) proposed a model that is adapted to the retail context. The model treats atmospheric cues as stimuli, two major emotional states as organism, and shopping behaviors within the store as response. We can learn from the application of the SOR model in the retailing context that environmental stimuli influence consumer internal states, which in turn drive their behavioral intention toward the store. Fiore and Kim (2007) developed an integrated SOR model for the brick-and-mortar context. In the framework, the stimuli include ambient, design, and social cues.

In the online shopping environment, some researchers use actual stimuli (Animesh, Pinsonneault, Yang, & Oh, 2011; Kim & Lennon, 2010; Wang, Hernandez, & Minor, 2010), and others use customer assessments of the stimuli to denote the stimulus segment of the model (Koo & Ju, 2010; Manganari, Siomkos, Rigopoulou, & Vrechopoulos, 2011; Nath, 2009). Research on the social factors of online shopping environment is growing in the context of virtual community and social shopping sites (Hsiao et al., 2010; Lu et al., 2010). The present study adopts the SOR model using interpersonal interaction factors as the environmental stimulus (S). The organism pertains to emotional and cognitive states and includes experiences (Jiang, Chan, Tan, & Chua, 2010). In the current study, adapting from the research of Gao and Bai (2014), the organism is the customer’s cognitive judgment of the online consumers’ experience, which is presented in the form of flow experience. The responses refer to website patronage intention

(Jeong, Fiore, Niehm, & Lorenz, 2009), purchase intention (Hsu, Chang, & Chen, 2011), and intention to use and buy (Huang, 2013). In our study, we follow Hsu et al. (2011) and treat consumer purchase intention as consumer behavioral outcomes.

The application of the SOR paradigm as a holistic theory is appropriate for this study for two reasons. First, the SOR paradigm was extensively used in previous research on online customer behavior (Chang, Chih, Liou, & Hwang, 2014; Hsieh, Hsieh, Chiu, & Yang, 2014; Parboteeah, Valacich, & Wells, 2009). For example, using the SOR paradigm, Zhang et al. (2014) examined the effects of three technological stimuli (perceived interactivity, personalization, and sociability) on consumers’ virtual experiences and subsequent social commerce intention. Parboteeah et al. (2009) applied the SOR paradigm to explore the impact of task-relevant cues and mood-relevant cues on perceived usefulness and perceived enjoyment, and then online purchase intention. The findings of these studies support the use of the SOR paradigm in accounting for consumer internal reactions and behavioral outcomes to the stimuli. Second, the SOR paradigm provides a strict and structured manner to examine the impact of interpersonal interaction factors as environmental stimuli on consumer online experiences (e.g., flow) and their subsequent intention to purchase from social commerce sites.

2.2. Social influence factors as environmental stimuli (S)

Social commerce involves the application of social media to support social interaction, communication, and user-generated content for assisting consumers in online buying. One of its unique characteristics is that it provides an opportunity for consumers to make better buying decisions and improve their future shopping experience (Ng, 2013). Therefore, social commerce sites need to facilitate member interaction. Frequent member interaction will enhance the interpersonal attraction of websites (Liao et al., 2010). As our research focuses on interpersonal interaction factors, flow experience, and online buying behavior, we consider three interpersonal interaction factors proposed by Liao et al. (2010), namely, perceived similarity, expertise, and familiarity. Perceived similarity refers to the commonness shared by customers in taste, preference, and liking toward products. Perceived expertise refers to other consumers’ ability to recommend products based on their knowledge and experience. Perceived familiarity relates to the frequency of interactions and relationships with other shoppers in social shopping sites (Liao et al., 2010).

2.3. Flow experience as customer internal states (O)

The SOR paradigm suggests that the impact of environmental stimuli on consumer behavior is mediated by virtual experiences (Animesh et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2014). Generally, studies show that the effects of web atmospherics can be studied from two major perspectives. The first perspective includes cognitive reactions from the stimulus such as perceived usefulness (Parboteeah et al., 2009). The second perspective refers to affective reactions from the stimulus such as perceived enjoyment (Floh & Madlberger, 2013). According to Gao and Bai (2014), focusing on the cognitive aspects is significant. Furthermore, there is a lack of investigations focus only on the cognitive responses of consumers, such as flow experience, especially in social commerce.

According to Ding, Hu, Verma, and Wardell (2010), flow experience has been treated as a basis to facilitate the creation of a compelling experience. Flow is a psychological state in which people become completely involved within a stimulus, and it can be described as the whole experience that individuals feel when they are fully absorbed (Gao & Bai, 2014). Some scholars highlight the

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