

Consumer behavior in social commerce: A literature review



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ABSTRACT

The emergence of social commerce has brought substantial changes to both businesses and consumers. Hence, understanding consumer behavior in the context of social commerce has become critical for companies that aim to better influence consumers and harness the power of their social ties. Given that research on this issue is new and largely fragmented, it will be theoretically important to evaluate what has been studied and derive meaningful insights through a structured review of the literature. In this study, we conduct a systematic review of social commerce studies to explicate how consumers behave on social networking sites. We classify these studies, discuss noteworthy theories, and identify important research methods. More importantly, we draw upon the stimulus–organism–response model and the five-stage consumer decision-making process to propose an integrative framework for understanding consumer behavior in this context. We believe that this framework can provide a useful basis for future social commerce research.

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1. Introduction

The concept of social commerce emerged in 2005 amid the growing commercial use of social networking sites and many other social media websites [15]. It ushers a new form of electronic commerce (e-commerce) [97]. Unlike traditional e-commerce where consumers usually interact with online shopping sites separately, social commerce involves online communities that support user interactions and user-generated content [55]. A recent survey points out that social commerce in the U.S. has already generated 5 billion dollars in sales, with 9 billion expected in 2014 and 15 billion in 2015 [71].

The significance of social commerce has made it the subject of various studies. For instance, prior research posits that online reviews in social media are an important source of information that assists consumers' decision-making [1,32]. Liang et al. [65] showed that social support from online friends is critical in driving consumers to adopt social commerce. Edelman [22] advocated that social media enables consumers to engage with brands in profoundly new ways; hence, companies should shift marketing strategies from attracting consumers' awareness (pre-purchase stage) to bonding with consumers after their purchases (post-purchase stage).

To harness the power of social commerce, it is important to study the process and uniqueness of how consumers behave in this setting [38].

Although we are witnessing an increase in the literature on this emerging issue, current research is rather fragmented, which makes it difficult to derive meaningful and conclusive implications from it. To this end, the purpose of this study is to conduct an extensive review of the literature on consumer behavior in social commerce. We first address important aspects such as research contexts, theories, and methods in this area. We then draw upon the stimulus–organism–response model [69] and the five-stage consumer decision-making process [23] to develop an integrative framework for better understanding consumer behavior in the context of social commerce. We argue that this framework can provide a useful foundation for future social commerce research.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss the definition and scope of social commerce in the present research. Second, we explain our review method of studies on consumer behavior in social commerce. Third, we review these studies and summarize findings in several aspects. Fourth, we propose a theoretical framework to understand consumer behavior in social commerce. Finally, we discuss our implications, opportunities for future research, as well as the limitations of our work.

2. What is social commerce?

Social commerce is often considered as a subset of e-commerce [16,67]. Prior research has broadly characterized it with two essential elements: social media and commercial activities [65,104]. However, a closer look at its definitions in the literature reveals that the social commerce concept is associated with many inconsistencies. For instance, Stephen and Toubia [92] defined social commerce as a form of Internet-based social media which enables individuals to engage in

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the selling and marketing of products and services in online communities and marketplaces. Such definition limits sellers to individuals, excluding companies. Dennison et al. [21] adopted a definition provided by IBM and explained it as the marriage of e-commerce and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Marsden and Chaney [68] conceptualized social commerce as the selling with social media websites, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and YouTube (the “Big Five”), which support user-generated content and social interaction.

The conceptual confusion in defining social commerce, to some extent, brings about different understandings of what social commerce websites are. Recent research identified two major types of social commerce: (1) social networking sites that incorporate commercial features to allow transactions and advertisements; and (2) traditional e-commerce websites that add social tools to facilitate social interaction and sharing [43,67]. The first social commerce type is the focus of a majority of previous studies (e.g., [7,8,26]). In contrast, Amblee and Bui [2] considered Amazon, a traditional e-commerce website, as practicing a form of social commerce because it contains a large amount of online consumer reviews. Group shopping websites were also recognized as a form of social commerce in which people form groups to purchase products with price advantages [54]. Indvik [45] summarized seven categories of social commerce websites, including social network-driven sales platforms (e.g., Facebook), peer recommendation websites (e.g., Amazon), group buying websites (e.g., Groupon), peer-to-peer sales platforms (e.g., eBay), user-curated shopping websites (e.g., Lyst), social shopping websites (e.g., Motilo), and participatory commerce websites (e.g., Kickstarter).

A recent study by Yadav et al. [104] defines *social commerce* as the “exchange-related activities that occur in, or are influenced by, an individual’s social network in computer-mediated social environments, where the activities correspond to the need recognition, pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages of a focal exchange” (p. 312). This definition explicates two building blocks of the concept: (1) *exchange-related activities*, which include various stages of consumers’ decision-making; and (2) *computer-mediated social environments*, where meaningful personal connections and sustained social interactions exist among network members. This definition clearly rules out websites such as Amazon and Groupon, which have no explicit social networks among their users.

In this study, we adopt Yadav et al.’s definition of social commerce, and we further restrict our discussion to *social networking sites* to better highlight the “social” nature of social commerce. Moreover, to obtain a holistic view of consumer behavior, we consider *various stages* in the decision-making process, instead of narrowly emphasizing the transaction stage.

3. Literature identification and collection

We employ a systematic approach to identify relevant articles for our literature review. We use two methods to collect academic and peer-reviewed journal articles in this process. First, we select a number of academic databases, including Web of Science, Business Source Premier, Science Direct, ABI/INFORM Global (ProQuest), Emerald, and Wiley Online Library. We search these databases using keywords like social commerce, Facebook commerce, social shopping, and social media marketing. Second, we check important journals to ensure that we do not miss relevant articles. This method is consistent with Cheung and Thadani’s [10] work on reviewing the literature of eWOM communication. We conduct a similar keyword search on information systems (IS) and e-commerce journals, such as *MIS Quarterly*, *Information Systems Research*, *Journal of Management Information Systems*, *Decision Support Systems*, *Information & Management*, and *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*; as well as marketing journals like *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, and *Journal of Consumer Research*.

We follow the conventional literature review approach to cross-check and validate the relevance of the initial set of articles [100]. To select relevant articles, we examine the title, abstract, or the content of the articles manually by referring to three criteria: (1) *empirical research*, (2) *focusing on consumer behavior*, and (3) *examining the context of social networking sites*. This literature selection process allows us to reflect on significant peer-reviewed journal articles with empirical evidence regarding consumer behavior on social networking sites.

Finally, a total of 77 articles are collected for our literature review. As shown in Fig. 1, the number of articles about consumer behavior on social networking sites has increased each year since 2010. The increase suggests that this is a new research area that is increasingly attracting the interest of academics. Note that six articles have already been published in early 2015, and we expect that more studies are likely to appear in the upcoming years.

Table 1 shows a list of 19 journals with more than one article, suggesting that they have an interest in publishing in such area. *Computers in Human Behavior* ($n = 6$) and *Journal of Interactive Marketing* ($n = 5$) are the two journals with the highest numbers of published articles. In addition, we observe that some articles appeared in social commerce-related special issues of a few journals. These special issues include (1) *Decision Support Systems*, Volume 65, September 2014, pages 59–68: “Crowdsourcing and Social Networks Analysis”; (2) *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, Volume 12, Issue 4, July–August 2013, pages 224–235: “Social Commerce”; (3) *Information Systems Research*, Volume 24, Issue 1, March 2013: “Social Media and Business Transformation”; and (4) *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, Volume 16, Issue 2, 2011: “Social Commerce”. This is perhaps an indication that these journals are pioneers in showing an interest in social commerce research. Note that not all articles in the special issues were part of our studied sample. As mentioned earlier, we only selected those that focus on *consumer behavior on social networking sites using empirical methods*.

4. Review of the studies

To guide our review of the studies, we consider four major questions: (1) what research contexts were studied? (2) What theories were adopted? (3) What research methods were used? And (4) what important factors were studied to understand consumer behavior in social commerce? These questions are consistent with previous literature review studies [39,91] and can help us synthesize the research findings of various articles. We discuss the first three questions in this section. The fourth question is addressed in the next section with the discussion of an integrative framework.

4.1. Research contexts

While all the social commerce studies in our sample emphasize social networking sites, a further examination reveals two different

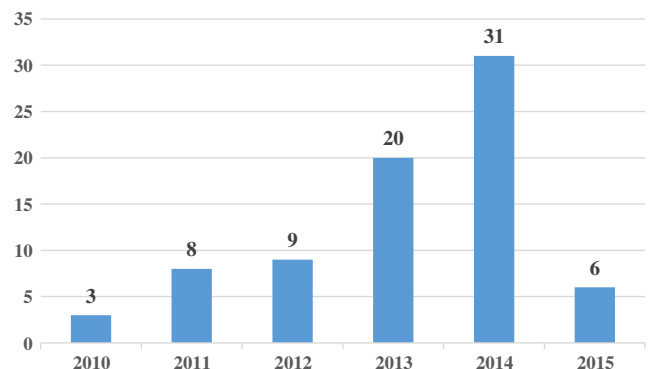


Fig. 1. Publication timeline of the literature.

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