A quality-facilitated socialization model of social commerce decisions

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ABSTRACT

Many businesses are faced with the challenge of understanding how to facilitate an individual consumer's purchasing decision in the new era of social media. Without effectively addressing this problem, businesses will not be able to seize valuable opportunities to enlarge their customers' base or optimize their social commerce decisions. This study argues that one way to deal with this important issue is through viewing social commerce as a series of engagement events facilitated by quality-augmented socialization process. More specifically, it proposes and empirically examines a new model that connects social commerce quality (perceptive and unperceptive) and social support quality to four interaction events of social commerce, namely initial attention, interaction experience, intuitive evaluation, and intention to buy. The findings of a PLS-SEM modeling of responses collected from a sample of active social media users reveal at least three worth noting findings. First, the present study confirmed that the social commerce process followed a causal path linking an individual consumer's initial attention to interaction experience to intuitive evaluation to intention to buy a product/service. Second, Social support quality was found to significantly influence only a consumer's initial attention, intuitive evaluation, and intention to buy. Third, social commerce quality (both unperceptive and perceptive) was found to significantly influence only a consumer's interaction experience and intention to buy. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

1. Introduction

Facilitating social commerce decisions (i.e., social e-shopping decisions or the process of exchanging commercial benefits through social technology platforms) has become one of the significant practical and research issues in the new era of social media (Aladwani, 2015b; Hajli, 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Liang & Turban, 2011; Stephen & Toubia, 2010). According to a recent report (Lazar, 2016), social commerce revenues are expected to reach $90 billion worldwide by 2020, up from $30 billion in 2015. For business companies interested in capitalizing on the social commerce boom, a good understanding of the interaction mechanisms through which individual users become social e-shoppers is crucial. With adequate understanding of these mechanisms, businesses can seize valuable opportunities to enlarge their customers' base and optimize their social commerce decisions.

Although numerous studies have examined social commerce adoption in general (Aladwani, 2015a; Chen & Shen, 2015; Hajli, 2014; Harris & Dennis, 2011; Kim & Park, 2013; Menon, Sigurdsson, Larsen, Fagerstrom, & Foxall, 2016; Shanmugam, Sun, Amidi, & Khani, 2016; Shen & Eder, 2009; Shi & Chow, 2015; Zheng, Zhu, & Lin, 2013), there is little understanding of the interaction mechanisms that facilitate purchasing decisions of social e-shoppers (Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016; Zhou, Zhang, & Zimmermann, 2013). More specifically, prior investigations have hardly ever viewed purchasing through social media as a series of interaction events or addressed the role of both social and technical quality factors plays in this process. The present study, therefore, tries to address this particular void in extant social commerce acceptance literature.

Towards that end, the current study develops and tests a research model of social commerce acceptance that depicts not only why consumers' engage in social commerce but also how to facilitate this interaction through quality-driven socialization activities. It builds on consumer socialization theory (Ward, 1974) and electronic commerce quality research to examine the social and technical quality features which change individual users into social commerce. Although this theory was developed in the context of mainstream commerce, it was found to be useful for guiding social commerce research (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). This study also draws on past research to conceptualize social commerce as a four-step engagement process consisting of: initial attention, interaction experience, intuitive evaluation, and intention to buy. It argues that during these phases, consumer socialization takes place when the consumer moves from one engagement stage to another due to learning effects induced by quality features of social commerce; we call this process quality-facilitated socialization.

Our study will be important for understanding why and how consumers' develop favorable responses toward this social service.

Learning from social media engagements represent a popular mechanism through which individuals' start, develop, and end exchanges on a given social issue. Therefore, quality-facilitated socialization characteristics are expected to drive consumers' adoption of the emergent technology and thus to offer a number of interesting practical and research insights into the problem.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 positions the paper by reviewing past research and then presenting the research model. Sections 3–5 describe the methods, findings, and conclusions of the study, respectively.

2. Theoretical background and model

2.1. Social commerce decisions as interaction events

The term social commerce (or purchasing through social media) means different things to different scholars. To some scholars, social commerce is simply a subtype of electronic commerce (e-commerce). Hajli (2015), for example, describes social commerce as "a new development in e-commerce" (p. 184). Liang and Turban (2011) defined it as "the delivery of e-commerce activities and transactions via the social media environment" (p. 6). Other scholars viewed social commerce as a marketing community phenomenon. Stephen and Toubia (2010), for instance, defined social commerce as social media "that allow people to participate actively in the marketing and selling of products and services in online marketplaces and communities" (p. 215). Yet to some other researchers, social commerce is a process built on two basic pillars (Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016, p. 96), "(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". The present study amalgamates these views and extends them to define social commerce as socially-driven interaction process pertinent to purchasing products or services using quality social media.

The main justification for studying consumer purchasing as a process in offline and online contexts is this: consumer purchasing is a complex decision making process rather than a simple or static choice (e.g., a consumer closes a deal). Early marketing research efforts to understand this process have been focused on developing normative decisional models, which were based on the assumption that offline customers pass through certain phases in their quest to swap commercial benefits with businesses. Many of the developed models bear a resemblance to Simon's (1960) intelligence-design-choice model. Howard and Sheth (1969), for example, suggested that customers make purchasing decisions through four main activities: searching for information, evaluating alternatives, developing attitudes toward products/services, and making a purchasing decision. Alternatively, Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell (1973) proposed a five-stage purchasing model including need recognition, search, evaluation, purchase, and post purchase. These popular models assume that consumers' chain forward certain amounts of information as they go through the different phases of the purchasing process.

Following the early research on offline purchasing models, some studies have suggested that the traditional consumer decision-making process goes well with the online environment. Liang and Lai (2002), for example, used the model of Engel et al. (1973) to inform their study of the influence of website design features on online purchasing decisions. More recently, some researchers have further modified the original consumer buying process to accommodate the complex process of social commerce, which signifies progressive purchasing events of products or services using social media. Zhang and Benyoucef (2016), for instance, used the Engel et al. (1973) model to guide a systematic review of the factors that influence consumer purchasing decisions in a social media setting.

However, some other studies have suggested that the traditional purchasing process could be modified to fit the online environment.

Aladwani (2002), for example, adopted a quality-driven e-commerce process that encompasses four main phases: recognition, navigation, information gathering, and purchasing. The recognition phase covers features related to the accessibility of the website to consumers, whilst navigation, information gathering, and purchasing cover attributes related to the movement between the different web pages/objects, collection of product-related information, and buying of products/services (i.e., placing, cancelling, and closure of transactions), respectively. The different phases in this process reflect website quality features serving the purchasing process rather than describing rational consumer purchasing motives and behaviors. Yadav, de Valck, Hennig-Thurau, Hoffman, and Spann (2013) proposed four generic steps of consumer purchasing in the context of social commerce that include need recognition, pre-purchase activities, purchase activities, and post-purchase activities. The model of Yadav et al. points to the unique context of social commerce, which necessitates considering atypical purchasing stages. Chen, Lu, and Wang (2017) examined such a process that includes learning elements as external variables, cognitive and affective appraisals as mediators, and purchasing intentions as outcome variable. Like Yadav et al., the study overlooked the role of quality factors in the purchasing process. In general, these studies draw our attention to the neglected role of quality engagements between business companies and their customers.

It is evident from the above brief discussion that the shopping environment is shifting from non-interactive to fully interactive. Indeed, social commerce is about engagement between businesses and consumers. Our view of social commerce thus reflects this particular understanding. Social commerce is by definition a complex engagement phenomenon; and employs social media channels as conduits for all commercial exchanges. Because consumers usually prefer to use socially rich features of the shopping medium to learn more about targeted products (Suh & Lee, 2005), the existence (or absence) of interactivity features of these channels can facilitate (or hinder) potential social commerce exchanges. Moreover, social commerce is a rich collective experience that permits the promotion of temporal interactions among buyers and sellers, allows businesses to benefit from a large base of social media customers, and taps into the way customers like to network and shop. Hence, both businesses and customers can benefit from these capabilities (Aladwani, 2014). Businesses, on the one hand, can exploit social commerce to reach, converse, and deal with literally billions of potential clients quickly and freely. Customers, on the other hand, can use social commerce to look for and obtain products/services; and during this process they share pertinent evaluations, purchasing choices, recommendations, and questions with family members, close friends, colleagues, and even anonymous social media users. Because social commerce adoption is not an inert process, consumers prefer to communicate with other parties (Koo, Wati, & Jung, 2011) and to make buying decisions accordingly (Shin, 2013). Like mainstream e-commerce consumers, social e-shoppers usually go through multiple forms of knowledge creation and interactions before making the purchasing decision. However, the density of the interactions between social e-shoppers and businesses is much higher and the velocity of the decision cycle of social e-shoppers is much faster. To understand the purchasing decisions of social e-shoppers, it would be intuitive to view them as engagement events (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Unfortunately, the previous review of offline and online purchasing processes suggests that no model was completely fitting the current investigation. Therefore, this study views social commerce as a series of four interaction events (I^4) pertinent of purchasing products or services revolving around social media including:

- Initial attention (initiation) or the extent to which a consumer initially considers the social commerce site for online shopping purposes.
- Interaction experience (interaction) or the extent to which a consumer seeks relevant information by involving in purposeful