

Online Persuasion Process: A critical literature review of prior research

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Abstract

In this paper, some of the limitations of prior research in terms of online persuasion process are highlighted. To do this, two main approaches which have been considered to study online persuasion process in context of social media are identified. Then, this study discusses the limitations and gaps of each approach. This paper is a part of author's PhD dissertation which is being conducted to examine how different online behaviours are persuaded in online brand communities. The research adopts Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion to reveal how different types of behaviour are persuaded through different routes. The study aims to develop the model of persuasion based on ELM and social influence theory in context of social media. The thesis explores the different factors related to routes of persuasion process and then tests them in OBC (Online Brand Community).

Keywords: Social Influence, ELM, Social Media, Web 2.0 , Online Brand Community, Persuasion.

Introduction

In December 2006, TIME magazine chose "YOU" as a person of the year. The reason behind this choice was related to contribution of millions of people in user-generated content (UGC) in context of social media (Grossman, 2006). It has been the revolutionary change in the field of marketing with the advance and rise of the Internet through people and businesses. Marketers and researchers have been faced with the new computer-mediated environment, in which the power is in consumers' hands. So, the communication model has been transformed in the complex and revolutionised marketing ecosystem. Web 2.0 technologies have blurred the geographical boundaries all over the world and the many-to-many communication model has been enabled for consumers and within companies. Social media such as social networking sites (SNSs) and online communities provide a space for people to produce and share information as well as for information consumption. Online communities are becoming the methods of consumer segmentation instead of conventional models such as postal address (Hart, 2013). So, companies have found themselves closer to their consumers through social media as a new communication channel and importantly they are using social media to build a bridge to find the potential consumers.

In particular, the Internet has become a venue for consumers to express their recommendations, to complain and to share their opinions (Chatterjee, 2001). Technological advancements make the Internet, particularly social media, a marketing tool to attract consumers. Online brand communities (OBCs) have developed with the rise of the Internet in parallel and facilitate communication with and among people (Brodie, Ilic et al., 2013). Ahonen and Moore (2005) state that "*Community activity is the biggest change in business in 100 years*". The content that is provided by OBC members is important for companies in terms of value creation and brand loyalty development. It is important to know how different users of community behave for community managers or moderators to develop their marketing strategies.

Studying about consumers' behaviour in online environment is the main part of information system research (Scaraboto, Rossi et al., 2012). The large body of studies are categorised in two areas: Interpersonal influence (Valck, Bruggen et al., 2009; Scaraboto, Rossi et al., 2012) and IT adoption (Bhattacharjee and Sanford, 2006). The existing studies have identified the sources that influence online users' decisions in context of virtual community and also explain the influence process toward IT adoption.

Critical literature Review

Consumer Behaviour in Online Environment

A new communication medium due to the emergence of the Internet has enabled people to gather online with shared interests. The advancements of Internet technology have enabled geographically-dispersed many-to-many communication models which connect people all over the world. The Internet not only connects individuals, but also companies and thus enables consumers to communicate via this medium and access online content.

Consumers are considerably active in interactive processes such as multiple feedback loops and real-time communication through virtual environments (Brodie, Ilic et al., 2013). Chat rooms, newsgroups, electronic discussion forums, bulletin boards, list servers, email, personal web pages, social networks and blogs are the examples of virtual interaction and communication tools (Valck, Bruggen et al., 2009). The new form of interactive consumers' experiences is enabled by these tools and importantly communication tools based on Web 2.0 technology facilitate customer engagement development and interaction with specific brands (Brodie, Ilic et al., 2013).

Persuasion process in context of virtual community

Past researchers have mainly explored consumers' persuasion process in online communities in two main areas:

Interpersonal Influence:

Studying interpersonal communication has become important due to rising number of users of social networks and virtual communities. Researchers can track consumers' interactions in online communities as communication in virtual communities is mainly based on text (Scaraboto, Rossi et al., 2012). The objective of studies which have been conducted in terms of interpersonal influence has been to find out the dynamic of online consumers' influence on each other. Different influential strategies have been identified that explain how users of virtual communities persuade each other. The impact of the interpersonal influence process has been explored in relation to information search as a part of consumer decision-making (Valck, Bruggen et al., 2009), attitude formation (Broderick and Lee, 2007) and online purchase decision (Andrews and Boyle, 2008). Two major elements of interpersonal influence theory have been addressed for analysing the influence process. Reference groups and WOM (word of mouth) have been identified as the sources of influence in context of virtual communities.

Influence process toward IS acceptance:

Prior studies in the area of Information System have largely sought to identify the factors that are important for users to accept a particular IS. TAM (Technology Acceptance Model) which is proposed by Davis (1989) is the applied model in such studies. According to this model, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are believed to influence potential users to accept a particular IS. Researchers have adopted this model to study why a user joins a community.

Limitations of Prior Research

Although IS acceptance as initial adoption is important, it does not necessarily mean that users will engage in virtual community after accepting it. Studying influential processes toward IT acceptance are the dominant body of research while there is lack of research regarding post adoption of IS. Also, the adopted model (TAM) only considers internal variables based on User's perception toward a particular Information System and external variables such as social influences are missing in this model. This model has a number of limitations such as the original study being conducted in a university context and not in the field (Chau and Hu, 2001). Researchers have confined their studies to virtual community of consumption (see for example Valck, Bruggen et al., 2009; Scaraboto, Rossi et al., 2012), which is only one type of online community. The results of these studies are based on text, which is generated by users, which means that the studies have not considered those who are not interested in contributing to UGC. In addition, the studies have not considered different types of online brand communities in the influencing process. In order to broaden the knowledge about interpersonal influence, exploring other types of community is required to compare with the findings of their research.

Conclusion

Social media has considerable impact on the way people behave online. Researchers turn their attention to Online Brand Community (OBC) among social media due to its practical advantages for both businesses and consumers. It is important to study users' behaviour in order to take advantage of OBC including customer relationship management, innovation management and consequently a successful online marketing strategy.

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