Attitudes Toward Product Messages on Social Media: An Examination of Online Shopping Perspectives Among Young Consumers

Christina Chung, Anisfield School of Business, Ramapo College of New Jersey, Mahwah, NJ, USA
Kristine P. Austria, Anisfield School of Business, Ramapo College of New Jersey, Mahwah, NJ, USA

ABSTRACT

This study investigates consumers’ motivations behind social media usage and attitudes toward product messages on social media sites and how the product messages affect consumer online shopping perspectives. An integrated conceptual model is proposed based on the Uses and Gratifications theory and the concepts of hedonic shopping value and impulsive shopping behavior. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is used to test the structural model and hypotheses. The proposed conceptual model shows a good model fit. The results and findings found from this study are explained in detail further in the article.

Keywords: Hedonic Shopping Value, Impulsive Shopping Behavior, Online Shopping, Product Messages on Social Media, Social Media Needs, Uses and Gratification, Young Consumers

INTRODUCTION

Social media has altered the way people communicate. People use social media for connecting, sharing, and exchanging information with their friends, as well as with companies. People are no longer passive information receivers. They are active information seekers and create content and disseminate their opinions through social media. Social media provides an arena where people can become content producers. According to the “2010 Social Media Report” from ForeSee results, 69% of online shoppers use social media. Fifty-six percent of shoppers indicate that they visit e-retail websites on social networking sites and that website visiting affects their purchase intentions.

For marketers, interactive communication environments on social media provide opportunities to enhance consumer relationships with real time content. According to Forrest Research, the expected growth of social media marketing in the U.S. will reach $3.1 billion in 2014. However, 52% of social marketers are operating without a specific plan, despite understanding the critical role of social media.

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integration into a company marketing plan is critical for its success (eMarketer, 2010). “Social media is no longer a trend for marketers. It is a reality” (Williamson, 2010). Even though social media has been recognized as the most potentially powerful media and an inevitable channel for consumer support (Jacobs, 2009), there is a lack of understanding of consumer perceptions and the effectiveness of product messages on social media. The purpose of this study is to provide an integrated model to examine the relationships between: (1) consumers’ social media needs and attitudes toward product messages on social media and (2) the attitudes and consumer shopping value and buying behavior.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social media has been defined as “the media that is published, created and shared by individuals on the Internet, such as blogs, images, video and more” (Stokes, 2008, p. 350) or “online tools and platforms that allow internet users to collaborate on content, share insights and experiences, and connect for business or pleasure” (Strauss & Frost, 2009, p. 326). Social media encompasses various platforms such as social networking sites, user-sponsored blogs, multimedia sites, Wikipedia, company-sponsored websites, collaborative websites, podcasts, etc.

A social network is “a type of web site model where individual members become part of a broader virtual community” (Stokes, p. 125) or “the practice of expanding the number of one’s business and social connects by making connections through individuals online” (Strauss & Frost, p. 183). Thus, “Social media can be called a strategy and an outlet for broadcasting, while social networking is a tool and a utility for connecting with others” (Cohen, 2011). A social network is a part of social media and includes sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace, etc.

Originally, social media and social networks were used for people to share their opinions. Social media has been growing phenomenally and there is no doubt the growth will continue. The power of communication on social media sites provides marketers a way to reach target markets. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are among the most popular forms of social media. Social media, however, takes many different forms and social media usage differs among individuals. Particularly, product messages are available on various websites such as company websites, online review sites, social networking sites, and other sites. Thus, this study focuses on social media in general in order to examine the effectiveness of product messages on social media and consumers’ online shopping perspectives.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory is utilized as a theoretical basis for investigating consumer motivations such as social media needs, which includes entertainment, interaction, and information needs. Uses and Gratifications research was developed based on the social and psychological origins of needs which, in turn, generates consumers’ expectations of the media. The U&G theory explains that people have different patterns of media exposure resulting in need gratifications (Katz, Bluner, & Gurevitch, 1974). U&G research takes a view that what people do with media as opposed to what media do to people. This theory suggests that people’s underlying needs drive media choices. Therefore, people are actively seeking information from media to satisfy their needs. McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972) examined television content and categorized the types of gratifications as escape, personal relationships, social utility, and surveillance.

The U&G theory has been applied to traditional media and evidence was limited in supporting the theory because of a lack of original conceptualization coherence. However, in a new technology environment, audience media choices are well supported by U&G theory.
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