Do User–Generated Social Shopping Website Features Contribute to Website Aims?

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INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0 embraces recent evolutions in the digital networked environment. The social movement is a prominent aspect of this evolution, leading to a consumer-driven online sphere (Labrecque et al. 2013; Stehan & Toubia, 2010). Consumers use various methods to create and share online information, so called user-generated content (UGC), leading to the rapid growth of social media (Bucklin & Sismeiro, 2009; Goh et al., 2013; Moe & Schweidel, 2012). Correspondingly, researchers have addressed various types of social media such as blogs (e.g., Gopinath et al., 2013), microblogs (e.g., Tirunillai & Tellis, 2012), user-generated product rating and review websites (e.g., Moe & Schweidel, 2012; Phang et al., 2013), social networking sites (e.g., de Vries et al., 2012; Katona et al., 2011), and social shopping communities (Olbrich & Holsing, 2011).

Social shopping is a new form of e-commerce stemming from the linkage of online shopping and social networking and thus connecting the consumer voice and the shopping process (Stephen & Toubia, 2010). This is also the focus of a social shopping community (SSC). An SSC is an online-shopping service that connects consumers and lets them discover, share, recommend, rate, and purchase products (Olbrich & Holsing, 2011). Consumers have various motivations to participate in communities, e.g. belonging, entertainment, and prestige (Flavian & Guinaliu, 2005; Wang et al., 2009). In general, resources offered by virtual communities can foster shopping needs-satisfaction (Macaulay et al., 2007). For example, consumers can exchange opinions on products and help each other with specific problems (Ghose & Ipeirotis, 2009). The sharing of user-generated product reviews and giving and receiving advice can increase trust, thus reducing perceived risk when purchasing online, and this in turn increases consumption intention (Ng, 2013; Phang et al., 2013; Zhang et al. 2014) and companies' revenue (Moe & Trusov, 2011).

Consequently, in an increasingly competitive online market, measuring and managing key metrics, such as the number of users, view time, micro-conversion and conversion rates, have become crucial for website managers (Ayanso & Yoogalingam, 2009). However, only limited research has so far provided insights into the effects of user-generated features on purchasing behavior and conversions (Olbrich & Holsing, 2011). In this study, we analyze the micro-conversion of product-detail page views. The micro-conversion is vital for the operator of an SSC, because such a visit is the requirement for a subsequent click-out, for which the operator of the SSC receives a fee. Against this background, we study the following research question: What is the effect, if any, of user-generated website features on the micro-conversion product-detail page?

This research is based on our previous research (Holsing & Schultz 2013). The data set and results are equivalent, but we have re-examined the hypotheses with regard to current research and developments, and we have verified the implication section. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: in the next section, we derive the hypotheses according to the relevant literature. Afterwards, the data set of an existing SSC is presented and analyzed. The empirical results and limitations of our study are discussed and directions for future research outlined.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESES

In SSCs, users can browse offers. Product-detail pages provide information on the offered products. Accessing a product-detail page can be seen as a micro-conversion (Lee et al., 2001), because it precludes a click-out, i.e. whether or not the user visits a participating online-shop (Olbrich & Holsing 2011). Numerous accesses to product-detail pages represent a user who extensively browses and compares the offered products. A single product-detail page may inspire for example the inspection of additional products and potentially lead to the formation of the user's consideration set (Moe, 2006).

Previous research has focused primarily on the number of site visits rather than on access to product pages (Huang et al., 2009). The objective of this study is to address this issue and identify factors that lead to product-detail page visits. We propose three categories to study these on-site transactions: general, direct-shopping and social shopping.

The variable category general contains typical metrics. Consumer involvement, i.e. perceived personal relevance of an object (Jayawardhena & Wright, 2009), is identified as an important factor affecting information processing during search and purchase activities (Moe, 2006). Involvement can be measured, for example, by view time (Holsing & Olbrich, 2012). View time is an indicator for user search behavior, for instance, whether search is goal-directed or exploratory (Moe, 2006). The index page (home page) serves as a starting point for an explorative search or as an orientation in situations of information overload (Chen et al., 2009). Thus, a positive relationship between these two factors and the accessing of product-detail pages is hypothesized because of high involvement.

Hypothesis 1: *The more frequently the home page is accessed, the greater the number of product-detail page visits.*
Hypothesis 2: *The higher the view time, the greater the number of product-detail page visits.*

The variable category direct-shopping reflects the way a user embraces direct-shopping features. Previous research has shown that the use of search engines and shopbots can lower transaction costs (Liang et al., 2009; Smith & Brynjolfsson, 2001). With regard to SSCs, direct-shopping mechanisms can ease information processing and increase search efficiency (Jayawardhena & Wright, 2009). Users consider the benefits and costs of information search and will not search endlessly for information (Su, 2007). In this way, user searching behavior is rational, involving time constraints and cost-benefit trade-offs (Bucklin & Sismeiro, 2009). Using search features indicates a goal-directed search process. The goal then is either to acquire information during the pre-purchase phase or to conduct the purchase. Thus, these users have a high probability of accessing the product-detail page sought for. However, these users are also less likely to visit additional product-detail pages.

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