

# USER ACCEPTANCE OF SOCIAL SHOPPING SITES: A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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## Abstract

*With social networking and Web 2.0 technologies becoming increasingly popular, they pose great potentials and challenges for the future of E-commerce. Social shopping sites emerged as the latest developments to leverage the power of social networking with online shopping. Users on social shopping sites can post product recommendations, create wish lists, post photos, make purchases, and form social shopping communities. Despite enormous business interests and potentials, little is known about whether users will adopt such systems. This research-in-progress paper proposes to apply and extend the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to understand the adoption of social shopping sites, and the factors that lead to the adoption. TAM posits two factors, the perceived ease of use and the perceived usefulness, determine a person's intention to use a new IT. This study explores two additional antecedents in the context of social shopping adoption: an online shopper's tendency to social comparison, and trust in the website. The extended TAM model will be tested through surveys. This research is among the very first to systematically examine the merge of social networking with E-commerce technologies. With the increasing importance of Web 2.0 to E-commerce, this study is timely and important.*

*Keywords: Social shopping, social comparison, trust, TAM*

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Social networking and Web 2.0 technologies continue to gain popularity under the media spotlight. Seeking to tap into the potentials of such technologies for E-commerce, business managers begin to explore ways to combine the power of social networking with online shopping for better service and new business opportunities. For example, companies such as the Procter & Gamble are creating websites that allow consumers to share their experiences of products with other consumers online, and to create online shopping communities (Vranica, 2008). The popular social network website Facebook introduced a feature that allowed a user's purchases on a participating website, such as overstock.com, to show up as news feeds on the user's friends' Facebook pages, yet this feature was later modified due to privacy concerns (Vara, 2007). In three-dimensional virtual environments such as Second Life, an avatar (virtual representation of oneself) can shop together with other avatars for virtual or real goods (Hemp, 2006).

Social shopping emerges as the latest innovation in E-commerce by combining social networking with online shopping. Gathering people in an online place to exchange shopping ideas, social shopping sites offer features similar to social networking sites such as personal blog and profile webpage, and also E-commerce tools such as software to allow users to easily copy product pictures and post them on their web pages. Users can also post product recommendations, create wish lists, comment on items, and make purchases. The result is the emergence of social shopping communities. Examples of social shopping sites include Kaboodle.com, ShopStyle.com, ThisNext.com, and Wists.com, all launched between 2006 and 2007 (Tedeschi, 2006; Steel, 2007).

Social shopping addresses the fundamental nature of shopping as a social experience. In this study, social shopping is defined an extension of Business-to-Consumer E-commerce where consumers interact with each other as a main mechanism in conducting online shopping activities, such as discovering products, aggregating and sharing product information, and collaboratively making shopping decisions. Different from traditional e-commerce technology, social shopping emphasizes on providing a rich social context to encourage consumers to have an ongoing dialog with fellow consumers. Despite tremendous business interests and potentials, some central questions remain. Will users adopt social shopping technology? What are the factors that lead to the adoption? Such understanding will not only inform business managers in making strategic decisions regarding the integration of social networking and online commerce, but also system designers on the functionality, design, and use of such systems.

# 2 CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

To answer these central questions, this research adopts the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989). TAM has been recognized as one of the most powerful models in examining the acceptance of new IT. Adapted from the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) model, TAM posits that two beliefs – perceived ease of use (PEOU) and perceived usefulness (PU) - determine one's behavioral intention to use a technology. Additionally, TAM indicates that PU is influenced by PEOU. Subsequent studies have applied TAM to a wide range of IT (Davis and Venkatesh, 1996; Fang, Chan et al., 2006), including E-commerce (Gefen and Straub, 2003). These studies show that TAM holds across IT types. Figure 1 shows the original TAM model.

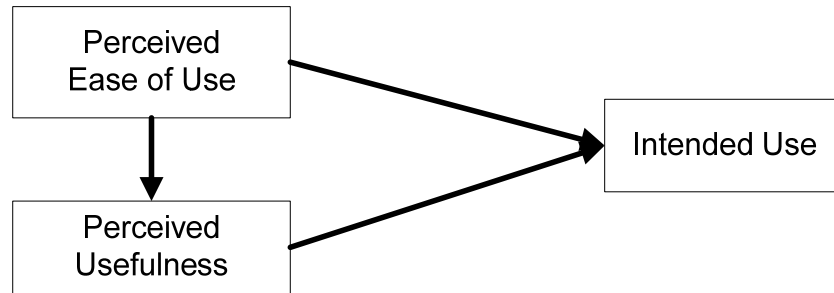


Figure 1. Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1987)

While the parsimony of TAM makes it easy to apply to a variety of situations, the leanness of the model is also considered as its key limitations. The model lacks the ability to help business managers or system designers to understand the factors that contribute to the adoption or abandonment of new IT. A number of studies have been conducted to examine additional antecedents to IT use, such as positive image (Moore and Benbasat, 1996), cultural dimensions (Straub, Keil et al., 1997; Mao and Palvia, 2006), and computer playfulness (Venkatesh, 2000).

Two additional constructs are proposed as key antecedents to the adoption of social shopping sites in this study. The first construct is termed *tendency to social comparison*. Social comparison is an essential social phenomenon where human beings compare themselves with others for self evaluation and information seeking. While the original theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954) treated social comparison as a secondary choice when objective information to evaluate oneself is not available, subsequent research suggests that social comparison is a central feature of human social life (Buunk and Gibbons, 2007). The theory has also been extended into different types of opinion comparison, including preference assessment, belief assessment, and preference prediction (Suls, Martin et al., 2000). The realm of social comparison theory is continuously expanding. such as into studying economic behavior (e.g., (Karlsson, Dellgran et al., 2004). In marketing, research has long demonstrated that consumers are influenced by other consumers in their decision making process, such as information seeking, alternative evaluation, and choice (Friedman and Fireworker, 1977; Duhan, Johnson et al., 1997). Furthermore, empirical studies of online shopping revealed that the provision of recommendations and consumer reviews increase the perceived usefulness of the website (Kumar and Benbasat, 2006).

Previous theories on technology adoption have examined constructs that are social in nature. As Davis et al (1989) pointed out, intentions are a combination of individual beliefs and social factors. The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) both have the *subjective norm* construct, which is included in the extended TAM or TAM2 (Venkatesh and Davis, 2000). Similarly, the Model of PC Utilization (MPCU) examined the *social factors* construct (Thompson, Higgins et al., 1991). Recent studies (Venkatesh, Morris et al., 2003) summarized these variables into a construct named *social influence*, which is defined as “the degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe he or she should use the new system”. Studies (Venkatesh, Morris et al., 2003) show that the social influence construct is significant only in mandated use settings, not in voluntary use, as in the case of online shopping.

This study explores the adoption of social shopping site from the social comparison perspective given the uniqueness of social shopping sites, which is centred on social interactions. Tendency to social comparison is defined as the degree to which an individual tends to compare his or her opinions with others, and be influenced by others. Recent studies have found that individuals differ quite a bit in their tendency to compare themselves with others (Gibbons and Buunk, 1999; Buunk and Gibbons, 2007). Few studies have examined technology acceptance from this perspective, yet the increasing interests in information systems that facilitate social interactions warrant such an investigation. One

study found that the users' tendency to compare their avatars with users' is a significant antecedent to users' adoption of the avatar-based virtual community system (Song and Kim, 2006).

The second construct is trust. Trust is crucial in many of the economic activities, and particularly so in E-commerce because of the limited human interactions between the shopper and vendor (Gefen, Karahanna et al., 2003). Studies have been conducted in incorporating trust into TAM in adoption of online shopping sites, and the results show trust is a significant antecedent to intended use (Suh and Han, 2002; Gefen, Karahanna et al., 2003; Gefen and Straub, 2003). Trust is included in this study not only because social shopping sites are examples of E-commerce sites, but also the potential danger of blurring the boundary between advertising and user-generated content on such sites. When it becomes hard to tell whether the comment is generated by an advertiser or a real consumer, online shoppers are likely to lose trust in the site and turn away. In fact, such concerns are appearing to be a stumbling block in the development of social shopping sites (Steel, 2007).

### 3 RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Based on TAM and the two additional variables described above, a research model is proposed with five variables: PEOU, PU, tendency to social comparison, trust, and intended use of social shopping sites. Figure 2 shows the research model.

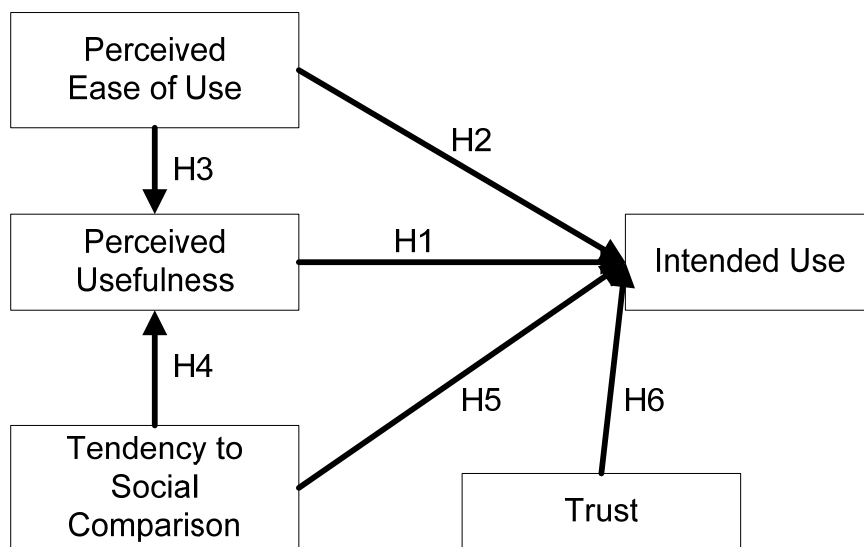


Figure 2. Research Model

According to TAM, the hypothesized relationship among PEOU, PU, and intended use are specified in H1-H3:

- H1. PU will positively affect intended use of social shopping websites.
- H2. PEOU will positively affect intended use of social shopping websites.
- H3. PEOU will positively affect PU of social shopping websites.

For tendency to social comparison, people who are more likely to compare and be influenced by others are more likely to find the social shopping sites useful (H4), and are more likely to use the site in online shopping (H5). Thus the hypotheses are:

- H4. Tendency to social comparison will positively affect PU of social shopping websites.
- H5. Tendency to social comparison will positively affect intended use of social shopping websites.

Based on previous studies on trust and the adoption of E-commerce systems (Gefen, Karahanna et al., 2002; Suh and Han, 2002; Gefen and Straub, 2003), it is hypothesized that increased level of trust with the social shopping site will be associated with increased level of intended use. Thus:

- H6. Trust in the sites will positively affect intended use of social shopping websites.

Survey scales will be adapted from TAM questionnaire to measure PEOU, PU, and behavioral intentions (Davis, 1986). The trust scale will be adapted from previous studies on trust in E-commerce sites (Gefen, Karahanna et al., 2003; Gefen and Straub, 2003). A new scale will be developed to measure tendency to social comparison.

## 4 STUDY PLAN AND POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The hypotheses will be tested through a field study using surveys. Subjects will be given tasks which involve creating an account on a specified social shopping site, and using some of the features on the site. An online survey will then be conducted to collect subjects' responses. A pilot study is planned for spring 2008.

Theoretically, this study contributes to IS research by applying and extending one of the most important models in IS research, TAM, to the latest development in E-commerce – social shopping sites. The validity of TAM will be examined again, and extended factors will provide additional insights on the adoption of the new system. Practically, this study examines a topic highly relevant to business managers worldwide in dealing with the challenge and opportunities of social networking and E-commerce. The understanding of the extended factors that lead to the adoption of social shopping sites will help business managers in make better decisions when managing social shopping technologies, and system designers in designing E-commerce systems.

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