WHAT INFLUENCE USER GENERATED CONTENT ADOPTION BEHAVIOR IN A WEAK-TIE DOMINANT SOCIAL MEDIA CONTEXT: A THEORETICAL MODEL

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Abstract

The emergence of User Generated Content (UGC) and social media, enables common users to have great influence on other users adoption and decision making behavior. In current research, perceived information usefulness is always taken as the only antecedent of UGC adoption, which is not enough to explain the underlying mechanism, especially in new social media context. This study proposes a new theoretical model with new social factors. Different dimensions of tie strength are innovatively applied in the model to analyse the new context characterized by weak ties.

Key Words: User Generated Content, Information Adoption, Tie Strength, Social Media
INTRODUCTION

The emergence of User Generated Content (UGC) and social media (i.e., blogs, micro-blogs, wiki, online communities, etc.) has dramatically changed consumer behavior (Flavian & Guinaliu 2005) as well as firm’s marketing strategies online. UGC is a general term for any publicly-distributed digitized content originally created by users rather than professionals (Shim & Lee, 2009). With Web 2.0 technology, user has become the active creator rather than only the consumer of online information resources. The essence of social media is UGC. UGC has a greater effect than content generated by professionals, since peer users are perceived as more objective and credible information sources (Comscore 2007). Prior studies have investigated the impact of UGC on various marketing outcomes (Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006, Li and Hitt 2008, Arsal, Backman & Baldwin 2008, Moe and Trusov 2011, Ye, Law, Gu & Chen 2011). UGC has increasingly become the major source of information for many consumers in decision making, such as purchase decisions, travel planning, hotel choices, and etc (Gretzel, Yoo & Purifoy 2007, Arsal et al. 2008, Litvin, Goldsmith et al. 2008, Ye, Law Gu & Chen 2011).

Most of current studies have proved peer-user generated content effect on consumer decision (Sen & Lerman 2007, Vermeulen & Seegers 2009), the factors that determine adoption or acceptance of the content remain unclear. Especially the limitless variety and amount of UGC available online make information validity uncertain. Users need to devote substantial effort to searching for content that match their needs. How do they decide whether to adopt a certain UGC or not, and which to adopt? A thorough understanding of the determinants of users’ UGC adoption behavior is critical if firms are to maximize use of this emerging social media platform for their online marketing strategies. Therefore, there are both a theoretical and a managerial need for a more in-depth understanding of precursors of UGC adoption, especially on social media platforms which is characterized by weak ties. This paper proposes a theoretical model of influencing factors of UGC adoption behavior by introducing new elements on the basis of current research. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, a brief review of previous studies is provided. We then introduce theoretical models and factor categories used in current studies, on the basis of which we propose a new framework with explanation of newly involved constructs. The implications and conclusions are provided in the final session.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The concept of UGC

User Generated Content (UGC), also known as User Created Content (UCC) or Consumer Generated
Content (CGC) or Consumer Generated Media (CGM), refers to any contents created and uploaded to the Internet by non-professionals, which is the aggregation and leveraging of users’ contributions on the web (Poster, 2006). There exist different definitions and classifications of UGC in the literature (Lenhart & Fox 2006, Deshpande & Jadad 2006, Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent 2007, Cooke & Buckley, 2008, Stillman & McGrath 2008). In general, UGC needs to fulfill three basic criteria: firstly, it needs to be published publicly online, to distinguish from email or instant messengers with limited accessibility; secondly, it needs to reflect certain creative or innovative effort, excluding simple copy and paste; and finally it needs to be created by common Internet users, not professionals (Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery 2006, Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). With the emergence and development of new technology and platform, new elements may appear to the definition and characteristics of UGC.

UGC can take various forms including text, sounds, images videos, and etc. Over time, the social media platform have evolved to cover blogs, micro-blogs, social networks, online communities, wikis, photo sharing, video sharing websites. It’s necessary to emphasize that the difference of eWOM and UGC lies in the originality of the content (Cheong and Morrison 2008). eWOM information originally created by users fall into the scope of UGC. Customer’s reviews may be the dominant form of UGC and has attracted most research attention.

2.2 Theoretical background


TAM is one of the most prominent theories that has been widely used in Information System research (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000, Ryu et al., 2009). TAM focuses more on technology related usefulness and ease of use of user acceptance. While the essence of UGC is information not technology, IAM excels TAM and will be adapted as the basic structure for our framework in this study. In IAM model proposed by Sussman and Siegal (2003), argument quality (Information quality) and source credibility jointly influence perceived usefulness of information receiver, thus further influence his adoption behavior, as shown in figure1. This model is developed from ELM, the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo 1984), which posits that when a user accepts a message he usually follows two routes: central route and peripheral route. The former refers to the nature of information while the latter refers to issues not directly related to the subject matter of information (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Users who have the ability to process a message are more likely to use central route. Otherwise, people who lack motivation or ability are more likely to consult the advice of others using peripheral
routes. In IAM, information quality is regarded as central route and source credibility as the peripheral route.

**Figure 1. Information Adoption Model (IAM)** (Sussman & Siegal 2003)

IAM is widely adopted in the research of online community (Zhang & Watts 2003, Christy M.K. & Cheung et al. 2008), social networks (Jin et al. 2009) and eWOM (Chen, Chen & Hsu 2011, Christy, Matthew & Neil 2008). In IAM model, perceived usefulness is the only antecedent variable of adoption behavior. Prior research has proved that perceived usefulness is the basis of information adoption that influences the intention of use and significantly influence individual’s current and future self-evaluation system (Jin Li & Lingjing Zhan 2011, Guopeng Yin 2012). Most of current research also takes usefulness as the only influencing factor to predict user’s information adoption behavior. However there are also some debates on availability of other factors in addition to perceived usefulness. In Christy M.K. Cheung et al. (2008)’s empirical study, only 46 percent of the variance is explained by the four-construct theoretical model, which would indicate there are more factors than solely information usefulness in motivating information adoption. Very similar, usefulness only can explain 22% of the variance in information adoption. In Chien-Wen Chen et al. (2011)’s study, credibility, previous belief and recommendation consistency are introduced to IAM which has improved the variance to 54%. Therefore, a closer look should be taken at the effectiveness of some of the other motivational factors especially those emerged with new social media platforms.

2.3 The influencing factors of UGC adoption behavior

Communication theory (Hovland, Janis & Kelly 1953) indicates that during the process of information communication, the objective matter of information, source and characteristics of information receiver jointly influence the adoption and persuasive degree of information. Current research mainly includes three categories of antecedent variables: argument quality (information quality), source credibility and characteristics of information receiver.

2.3.1 Argument Quality (Information quality)

Argument quality refers to the persuasive strength of arguments embedded in an informational message (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006). It’s a multi-dimensional construct that could be measured in terms of information content, format, accuracy, timeliness (Doll & Torkzadeh 1988), understandability, reliability, usefulness (McKinney et al. 2002), relevance, elaboration (Christy M.K. Cheung et al. 2008), among which accuracy, relevance, understandability, completeness, currency,
dynamism, accuracy, relevance, understandability, completeness, currency, dynamism, personalization, and variety personalization, and variety (DeLone & McLean 2003) are used in recent e-Business research. Some researchers propose to use valence and forwarding number of information to evaluate its quality since dimensions as relevance and credibility are not easy to measure. Current research proved negative customer review has more influential power than positive review (Yang & Mai 2010, Lim & Chung 2011, Clemons et al.2006), while the probability of negative reviews is only 1/3 of positive ones (East et al.2007). There are far more positive and neutral contents than negative contents on UGC sites, which account for 95% of customer review (Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006). Therefore, in most of the circumstances, users need to choose from positive information to adopt the appropriate ones. Since the variable has been tested a lot, in this study we set it as one of the control variables.

### 2.3.2 Source Credibility

Source credibility in many cases refers to an information recipient’s perception of the credibility of a message source (Chaiken 1980). It is defined as the extent to which an information source is perceived to be believable, competent and trustworthy by information recipients (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). The role of credibility in informational influence has been found to most significantly alter a recipient’s opinion in the direction advocated by the communicator when the material was attributed to high-credibility source than when it was attributed to a low-credibility source (Hovland, 1951; Hovland et al., 1953). In addition, Eagly and Chaiken (1993) found that the persuasiveness of a message depends on the number of positive attributes the communicators possess. Information provided by highly credible sources is perceived to be useful and reliable, and thereby facilitates knowledge transfer (Ko et al., 2005).

In current research, source credibility is always measured by information creator’s expertise (Gilly et al.1998, Bansaland Voyer 2000, Wang 2004, Chen 2008, Christy M.K. Cheung et al. 2008), affinity, trustworthiness (Dichter 1966, Rogers 1983, Robertson et al.1984, Christy M.K. Cheung et al. 2008) and social background, among which expertise and trustworthiness are the two key dimensions used. Since there is consensus on this variable, it is set as a control variable in this study. The features of Internet as anonymity greatly diminish the persuasiveness and credibility of the real identity of content creator (Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006). Users perceived information from multi-sources, which could be categorized into two groups: information provider and publishing platform. Therefore, some researchers indicated that the credibility of UGC publishing site also should be included as one of the indicators of source credibility (rown, Broderick & Lee 2007, Guo, Chen 2009, Li, Yue 2009). The availability of website rating system (Park & Lee 2007) and interface design (Yi-Wen Fan, Yi-Feng Miao, Yu-Hsien Fang & Ruei-Yun Lin 2013) are variables use, which mostly focus on technology aspects of website, lack consideration of its social characteristics. Some recent work study how different types of websites, such as company site, commercial third-party site and non-commercial site, influence user behavior. Most researchers agree non-commercial third-party sites provide the highest perceived credibility (Henning & Walsh 2003, Senecal & Nantel 2004,
Dabholkar 2006, Sun, Xu 2007, Lee & Youn 2009, Mayzlin & Jiwoong 2011). Social media platforms all belong to non-commercial third-party platforms, while they differ in the degree of user information control, degree of interactivity, content presentation, etc., which requests further study on how these social dimensions will influence platform credibility.

2.3.3 Personal characteristics of information receipts

Information may exert different influences to different information recipients due to different perceptions and experiences of individuals. Therefore, personal characteristics becomes another factor that could be measured by the receipt’s knowledge structure, experience, attitude, involvement degree, personality, demographic variables, and etc (Petty et al.1983, Sussman & Siegal 2003, Park et al.2007), among which involvement degree and expertise are most widely tested. Personal characteristics is considered as moderating effect in many researches (Doh & Hwang(2009) rather than direct effect, which hasn’t been proved (Yi-Wen Fan et al.2013).

Most researchers agree that consumers with higher involvement have more motivation to understand others and are more likely to read and accept others’ opinions to gather more information. While, there is no consent on the influence of receipts’ expertise. In their work, Park & Kim(2008) and Bansal & Voyer (2000) proved users with more expertise is more easily influenced by eWOM, while Bone (1995)’s study got the opposite conclusion, as users with high expertise are able to evaluate information according to their experience and knowledge which enables them to have more confidence in making decisions and refer less to others’ opinions. Therefore, further research is necessary to reveal the influencing mechanism of receipts’ personal characteristics to their information adoption behavior, whether platform dependence exists.

3. THE THEORETICAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

In general, current information adoption behavior research mostly based on theories of TAM, IAM and etc. Three categories of influencing factors: argument characteristic, source characteristic and information recipient’s characteristic are discussed, among which the frist two are direct effect and the other one acts as the moderator. Current research concentrate more on static factors but discussion on social factors are not sufficient, which is especially important for social media platforms. Therefore, on the basis of prior research, this study introduced the following social elements to construct a new theoretical framework as shown in Fig.2. The explanations are provided.
Granovetter (1973) established the concept and importance of interpersonal ties. In his definition tie strength is “a combination of the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal services which characterize the tie”. Granovetter (1973) originally categorized interpersonal ties based on frequency of contact, to form strong tie or weak tie relationships. Early research emphasize on the effect of strong ties which promote trust building and strong emotional attachment to easily enable information sharing (Ray Reagans 2003, Bian Y.J. 1997, Hansen M.T. 1999). Granovetter (1973) with other researchers stress the effect of weak ties as weak ties can connect dispersed individuals to promote innovative information.

The theory of interpersonal ties has been applied to online social networks. Social media platforms increase the number of weak ties in an individual’s network as such sites allow weak ties to be maintained more easily and cheaply, and lower the barriers to participate (Haythornthwaite 2005, Ellison et al. 2007). Hence, it requires researchers to re-examine the role of weak ties in this new context to gain a better understanding of how users determine to adopt information from a weak tie on a social media platform.

Most of the existing research take tie strength as a first order construct and only test the different effect of strong tie versus weak tie. They oversimplified ties by addressing only quantity rather than the quality of tie strength. According to Shuoyang Zhang (2010), the overall tie strength is produced by combination of two sub-dimensions: temporal tie strength, indicated by interaction frequency, relationship duration, and activity diversity; and emotional tie strength, indicated by disclosure of feelings, goals, network, and physical intimacy. We take this multi-dimensional view of tie strength in our study and intend to test the effects of different aspects of tie strength on users’ UGC adoption behavior in a weak-tie network.
3.2 characteristics of UGC platform

Social media are characterized by social interaction, user integration, personalization and exchange of content (Wirtz et al. 2010), among which the last three aspects are implied in the construction of the research model. Here we concentrate on platform level elements related to social interaction, which are indispensable to induce trust hence information adoption behaviour, as discussed above. In the context of social media, the desired platform features with attractiveness can be understood as a shared aggregated positive valence of users (Bernd W. Wirtz 2013), which covers rational and affective aspects of usage scenarios. From the attitudinal level, it would affect individual perceptions and attitudes as trust. From the action-based level, it would also positively affect user behavior as information adoption. According to the literature review and successive analysis, three dimensions are included. ①Interaction orientation. Interaction is a crucial element of social media and the corresponding properties offered can be summarized as interaction orientation, which covers users’ need for interactive content and the corresponding expectations regarding the provider of these offers (Bernd W. Wirtz 2013). Such an interaction-related strategy is referred to as interaction orientation (Ramani & Kumar 2008). ②Interaction configuration, which refers to the perceived structure of interaction process on a certain platform (Chung & Austria 2010, Lee & Cho 2011). Companies continuously process integrated data from user interaction to serve as the orientation and configuration basis of added value. Langlois et al.(2000) indicated attractive platform features can affect users’ self-perception i.e. trust and usefulness. Therefore, there exist correlations between different dimensions of platform feature and the proposed mediators.

3.3 trust

Trust in a relationship is a crucial aspect to determine the intention to follow advice of the other party (McKnight, Choudhury & Kacmar 2002). Corritore, Kracher and Wiedenbeck (2003) propose that trust reflects an attitude of confident expectation in a situation of risk that one’s vulnerabilities will not be exploited. Therefore, trust has been considered a key element of success in the online environment (Corritore et al.2003, Flavian,Guinaliu & Gurrea 2006, Koufaris & Hampton-Sosa 2004) due to greater risk that consumers perceived in this channel (Harris & Goode 2004).

Many research show trust enables users to better evaluate their decisions, to gain more useful information (Pigg & Crank 2004). Trust is an important element in influencing and predicting of online consumer behavior (McKnight et al.2002, Gefen & Straub 2004, Awad & Ragowsky 2008, Cheung et al.2009, Fan & Miao 2012). In online community, trust is also prove to be essential in information exchange (Chu & Kim 2011, Jarvenpa, et al.1998). On social media platforms, trust could be regarded as user’s evaluation of information source and value, which helps to promote the dissemination and adoption of UGC.

3.4 Hypothesis development

From the above analysis, we can come to the following hypothesis:
H1: Interaction orientation of social media will positively influence usefulness of UGC.
H2: Interaction configuration of social media will positively influence usefulness of UGC.
H3: Interaction orientation of social media will positively influence trust of information recipient.
H4: Interaction configuration of social media will positively influence trust of information recipient.
H5: The temporal tie strength of social media will positively influence usefulness of UGC.
H6: The emotional tie of social media will positively influence usefulness of UGC.
H7: The temporal tie strength of social media will positively influence trust of information recipient.
H8: The emotional tie of social media will positively influence trust of information recipient.
H9: Trust of information recipient will positively influence usefulness of UGC.
H10: Trust of information recipient will positively influence information recipient’s UGC adoption behaviour.
H11: Usefulness of UGC will positively influence information recipient’s UGC adoption behaviour.

4. CONCLUSION

With the explosion of social media and UGC, the persuasiveness of information transfers from firms to users. Both the academia and industries recognize the significant impacts of UGC on consumer behavior and business marketing strategies. Existing research mainly take the view of perceived usefulness in analysis of UGC adoption behavior. This study contributes to the emerging research on UGC behavior by addressing two issues. First an IAM-based theoretical model is proposed by introducing new social influencing factors and platform related factors representing the characteristics of the research target. Second, different dimensions of tie strength are innovatively applied in the model to analyse the new context characterized by weak ties. Data collection and empirical study will be followed in our successive study.

References

