INFORMATION SEARCH IN AN ERA OF CONNECTED CONSUMERS

Introduction

Interactive customers are rapidly altering the scene of marketing communications (Shankar and Malthouse 2007). Today, customers interact with one another (C2C) by creating, communicating, and delivering substantial amounts of information that influence other customers (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002; Barwise and Farley 2005; Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007; Chiou and Cheng 2003; Henning-Thurau et al. 2004; Shankar and Hollinger 2007; Smith, Menon, and Sivakumar 2005). Understanding how customers search for product information and why they choose certain types of media to conduct their search is critical in today's online world because information shared online by customers is instantly accessible by millions of other consumers and remains so almost indefinitely (Ward and Ostrom 2002). Moreover, customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions can also increase growth and profitability (Arndt 1967) of a business.

While corporate websites have served as an important source of information about products and services, over the past decade, customers have also started sharing products information and experiences with one another using the Internet through social networking sites and online communities (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Wuyts et al. 2010). This phenomenon has drawn the attention of marketers attempting to understand the various facets of C2C interactions (Libai et al 2010). These interactions are readily available to academics and practitioners through multiple sources, analyses of which can enhance decision making and business performance (Hill, Provost, and Volinsky 2006). However, there are still several unanswered questions in this prominent stream of research, which deserves further attention.

Recognizing the importance and prominence of C2C interactions in business, Libai et al. (2010) highlighted future research directions in this field and encouraged researchers to delve deeper into C2C interactions. Specifically, one important research question that deserves greater attention is how C2C exchanges vary across different media/channels. For example, C2C interaction over the Internet can happen in an entirely text based fashion (tweets, text blogs, emails, written product reviews), via images (image/photo blogs), or through richer media (audio, video, voice chat, etc.). The way in which consumers use these mediums to interact or exchange information with one another may differ. Additionally, the influence of the information presented through these different types of media may differ from individual to individual.

The purpose of this study is to address one such fundamental research question - what factors influence the intention to use a particular online medium (Text Blog vs. Photo Blog vs. Video Blog)[1] to seek product information. In order to achieve the goal of this research, we developed a C2C information search model that is theoretically rooted in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis 1989) and Kiousis' (2001, 2003) line of reasoning that source, medium, as well as message credibility influence an individual's attitude change.

Theoretical Background

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

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[1] In this research, a Blog is a website on which an individual or a group of users express or record opinions, information, etc. on a regular basis. Text Blogs (henceforth, Tlogs) are primarily textual, Photo blogs (henceforth, Plogs) contain images and/or text, whereas Video Blogs (henceforth, Vlogs) showcase information using videos.

The theoretical underpinnings of this research are rooted in TAM (Davis 1989; Davis, Bagozzi, and Warshaw 1989). TAM is based on the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980) and Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen 1985). According to TAM there exists a belief–attitude–intention–behavior causal relationship that explicates and predicts technology acceptance among potential users. TAM suggests that, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (two beliefs about a new technology - different types of blogs in case of this research) influence a person's attitude toward using that technology, which in turn predicts their intention to use it. Perceived usefulness is the extent to which one believes that using the technology will enhance his/her performance (Davis et al. 1989). Whereas, perceived ease of use is the degree to which one believes that using the technology will not involve a lot of effort. TAM also proposes that perceived ease of use explains some variance in perceived usefulness. Previous research has employed TAM to understand users' adoption of technology in a variety of contexts, such as M-commerce (Bruner and Kumar 2005; Sun 2009; Wu 2005; Yang and Zhou 2011), online games (Hsu and Lu, 2004), virtual stores (Chen and Tan 2004), email (Huang, Lu, and Wong 2003), banking technology (Aboelmaged 2013; Adamson and Shine 2003; Chau and Lai 2003; Lee 2009; Suh and Han 2002), and many more. In this information age of connected customers, technologies in the form of various types of blogs (created by customers) are becoming important C2C mediums for product information searches on the Internet. A robust and parsimonious framework like TAM serves as a strong and useful foundation for research examining factors influencing the intention to use these blogs for gathering product information online in a C2C context.

Credibility

Fraud, low quality information, privacy and security risks are an area of growing concern in the connected world. Due to this fact, considering usefulness and ease of use of a medium alone (as explained by TAM) are not enough; the credibility of the medium should also be considered because if the medium lacks credibility, consumers will not use it to fulfill their information needs. Kiousis (2001, 2003) argues that credibility can be classified into source, medium, and message paradigms. Each of these factors impact attitude changes in different ways in a variety of contexts. Thorson and Moore (1996) also highlight the significance of considering credibility in terms of source and medium whereas McDougall and Fry (1975) examined source and message credibility in the retail advertisements context. Thus, in this research, we expect that source, medium, as well as message credibility will have varying impacts on the attitude toward using a medium.

Source credibility is the believability of a communicator, as perceived by the recipient of the message. Early research on source credibility examined the influence of source characteristics on individuals' attitudes toward certain topics (e.g., Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953; Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield 1949; Hovland and Weiss 1951; Osgood, Suci, and Tanenbaum 1957, and so on). Thereafter, there have been ample research studies that provide evidence that a highly credible communication source is more effective than a less credible source in causing positive attitude change and behavioral intentions. Source credibility is multidimensional (Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz 1970; Goldsmith et al. 2000, 2001; 2002; Ohanian 1990, 1991; Sallam 2011), however the most commonly recognized elements are trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise of the source. Ohanian (1990) defines expertise as "the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions" and trustworthiness as "the degree of communicator's intent to communicate the assertions he

considers most valid". This research uses Ohanian (1990)'s conceptualization of source credibility in terms of trustworthiness and expertise of the source. In Business-to-Customer (B2C) communications, this source is generally a spokesperson or an organization and several researchers have examined the impact of source credibility in this context. However, there is dearth of research in the field of C2C interactions when the source is another customer.

"The medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964, p. 7). Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) acknowledged that "the impact of a message probably depends also upon the particular publication or channel through which it is transmitted" (p.19). Thereafter, Westley and Severin (1964) conducted the first comprehensive analysis of medium/channel credibility across media outlets. Several studies were then conducted that indicated that television news is more credible than newspapers (Abel and Wirth 1977; Carter and Greenberg 1965; Gaziano and McGrath 1986; Jacobson 1969). However, there is a lack of research that investigates the influence of medium/channel credibility on attitudes toward C2C online interaction media such as Blogs, Tlogs, Plogs, and Vlogs.

Additionally, what is being said is as important as the source of the information and the medium used to convey it. Thus message credibility is also an important aspect that influences attitude changes. Though it is less studied (e.g., Austin and Dong 1994; Kiousis 2003; Sundar and Nass 2001), the importance of message credibility is emphasized by Austin and Dong (1994, p. 979), who state that "an individual can believe that a highly reputable source can produce an unbelievable story".

Research Hypotheses

Based on the above literature about TAM and credibility, we developed a C2C information search model (Figure 1) and hypothesize:

H1: Perceived source credibility will have a positive effect on the attitude toward using a medium for product information search.

H2: Perceived medium credibility will have a positive effect on the attitude toward using a medium for product information search.

H3: Perceived message credibility will have a positive effect on the attitude toward using a medium for product information search.

H4: Perceived ease of use of the medium will have a positive effect on the attitude toward using a medium for product information search.

H5: Perceived usefulness of the medium will have a positive effect on the attitude toward using a medium for product information search.

H6: Perceived ease of use of the medium will have a positive effect on the perceived usefulness of the medium.

H7: Attitude toward using a medium for product information search will have a positive effect on the intention to use that medium for product information search.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Adult Internet users in the U.S. will represent the population of this study. The sample will be representative of the population with respect to demographics. A convenience sample of students and staff from a university, and a panel of respondents from a market research firm will be invited to a structured web-based survey. Respondents will be presented with a definition of a

blog and its various forms (Tlogs, Plogs, and Vlogs) at the beginning of the survey to ensure that each participant has the same understanding of the concept throughout the survey.

Each respondent will be asked to view a Tlog, a Plog, and a Vlog about a particular product and then respond to questions about each of these types of media followed by demographic information. Three products will be selected based on a pre-test; these products will then be featured in the different types of blogs (3 blog types X 3 products); these will be real blogs drawn from different blog websites. Then each respondent will be randomly assigned a Tlog, Plog, and Vlog about one particular product (within subjects). The order of occurrence of each of these media types in the survey flow will be randomized along with the sequence of questions in order to control for ordering effects and counterbalancing the carryover effects (if any) of a within subjects design (Greenwald 1976). The hypothesized model will be analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling with STATA SE 12.
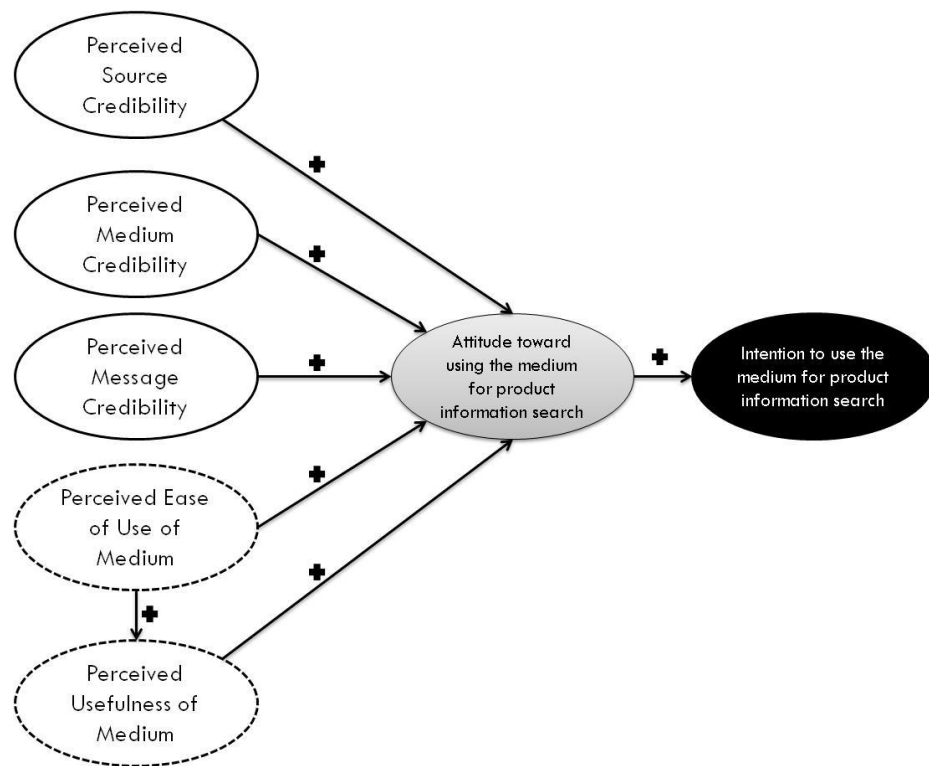

Figure 1: A C2C Information Search Model

Measures

All study measures are adapted from existing scales. Perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness will each be measured using the 10-item scales from Davis (1989). Additionally, respondents will be asked an open-ended question to comment on what in particular made the medium useful and easy to use; this will add depth to the understanding of the quantitative responses. Perceived source credibility will be measured using a 15-item seven-point semantic differential scale adapted from Ohanian (1990); it comprises adjectives such as, trustworthy-untrustworthy, attractive-unattractive, experienced-not experienced, and so on. Perceived message and media credibility each will be measured using a 4-item (believability, accuracy, fairness, and depth) 5-point scale ranging from 1 = "not at all" to 5 = "Very" adapted from

Johnson and Kaye (2000). Again following these questions, respondents will also be encouraged to comment on what in particular made the source, medium, and message credible or not credible. Attitude toward using each medium for product information search will be measured using a 3-item, 7-point semantic differential scale (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980), "Using a Vlog/Tlog/Plog for product information search is beneficial-not beneficial; favorable-unfavorable; foolish-wise". The intention to use each medium for product information search will be measured using a 3-item 5 point semantic differential scale (Spears and Singh 2004), "Would you use a Blog/Tlog/Plog to search for information about products? Never-Definitely; Probably not-Probably use it; Definitely do not intend to use-Definitely intend to use".

Potential Contribution and Implications

Theoretical Implications

In this research, we develop a C2C information search model that integrates the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis 1989) and Kiousis' (2001, 2003) theoretical argument that source, medium, as well as message credibility influence an individual's attitude change. This research is one of the few initial research endeavors in the field of C2C interactions that are rooted in a theory. The C2C information search model, which is the main contribution of this research, provides an answer to the question raised by Libai et al. (2010) that how does the nature of the channel/medium impact C2C interactions and behaviors. At the same time, it also opens several avenues for future research in this scantily researched field. For example, how do market characteristics (firm actions and competitors reactions) affect C2C interactions? Or what role do product characteristics play in C2C interactions and what are their impacts on the purchase behavior of consumers? Or what other factors influence the attitude toward and intention to use a particular medium in a particular context for a specific product category?

Practical Implications

Knowing more about how different types of mediums influence the attitude towards and intention to use one or more particular mediums for product information search provides a guideline to managers (especially in marketing communications) on where and how to encourage C2C interactions. For example, if consumers prefer to search for information about technology products through Vlogs as compared to Tlogs then managers should remain updated about that medium and the C2C interactions taking place in that medium. Also, understanding what factors impact the attitude toward using a particular medium to search for product information can enable firms to ensure that those factors are well-managed and enhance the medium where C2C interactions take place. Furthermore, if firms know which medium is considered more credible, it would be beneficial to direct marketing communications to that medium in a way that it facilitates C2C interactions and keep consumers well-informed. This might help the firm build a good image as well as be present with the right information in the right place at the right time. Given the drastic growth of C2C communications, and avenues that promote the proliferation of information amongst consumers, this research adds significant value to marketing knowledge.

References

References available upon request.