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Study on Driving Forces of UGC Adoption Behavior in Service Industry: A Platform Feature Based Model

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Abstract. Nowadays, User Generated Content (UGC) influences consumers profoundly in their decision-making. UGC is more credible than advertising as common users generate it. The influencing power traditionally held by enterprises has shift to consumers dramatically. Current research mostly focus on the changes in consumer behavior after adoption of UGC, ignoring the source---factors that influence customers to choose and adopt certain UGC information, especially those related to social media platform features, emotion and attitude. Based on Information Adoption Model (IAM), this study introduces two types of trust and platform feature related factors to construct a new theoretical model, to comprehensively interpret information adoption behavior in service industry, aiming to provide theoretical contributions by extending IAM and according theory in new research settings.

Keywords: User Generated Content, User Created Content, UGC, UCC, information adoption, social media.

1 Introduction

Internet and Information Technology have led to technology fusion which triggers the explosive growth of various social media platforms as Blog, Micro-blog, social network, and etc. Social media is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, allowing the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC), which takes the form of online review, online post, blog/micro-blog content and etc. The explosive growth of UGC has been one of the most important developments in the areas of media and information systems over the past decade for its significant impact on consumer behavior as well as enterprise marketing strategies. UGC is increasingly becoming a major source of information for many consumers in decision-making. More than 90% consumers are expected to seek suggestions and opinions from UGC (eMarketer 2010). Meanwhile UGC provides first-hand user data to companies for service innovation. Social media platforms have become the popular marketing channel.

Existing research and practices recognize UGC has higher persuasiveness over advertising in affecting consumer behavior. Consumer adoption of UGC represents how it changes their attitude toward products or services, and may help them make purchase decisions. Thus, UGC adoption is an effective signal of consumers' future performance. While prior studies focus more on the result of UGC adoption such as impact on purchase decision, perceived value, loyalty and etc., ignoring the source—the factors that determine adoption or acceptance of the content, especially those related to social media platform feature, emotion and attitude. Some studies have also attempted to investigate the factors contributing to UGC adoption, most of which simply consider usefulness as the only antecedent of adoption behavior that may not be sufficient in the new era. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the determinants of users' UGC adoption behavior is critical if firms are to maximize use of users' power in their social marketing strategy. Therefore, there are both theoretical and managerial needs for a more in-depth understanding of precursors of UGC adoption.

Based on Information Adoption Model and current research, this paper proposes a theoretical model of influencing factors of UGC adoption behavior by introducing new elements. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review of related theories and variables is provided. We then develop a new theoretical model with explanation of newly introduced constructs. The implications and conclusions are provided in the final session.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social Media and UGC

User Generated Content (UGC), also known as User Create Content (UCC) or Consumer Generated Content (CGC) has been defined by different scholars from different angles [1,2]. In general, UGC refers to any content created and uploaded to the Internet outside of professional routines and practices, which is the aggregation and leveraging of users' contributions on the web [3], that can be seen as the sum of all ways in which people make use of social media [3]. While there is a lack of a formal definition, social media can be generally understood as a wide range of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content [3]. UGC represents the essence of social media. UGC is related to, but not identical with eWOM (electronic word of mouth). The difference lies in the originality of the content [4,5]. Online reviews may be the dominant form of UGC and has attracted most research attention.

There are abundant researches concentrating on the result of UGC adoption that is the impact on various marketing outcomes as purchase decision [6], sales [7], customer loyalty [8], knowledge sharing [9], trust, and etc. There are not sufficient studies on the source problem, such as what determine customers' choose and adoption of certain UGC information when facing numerous information on social media platforms. The influencing factors especially those related with platform features remain unclear.

2.2 Information Adoption Behavior Research

2.2.1 Information Adoption Model (IAM)

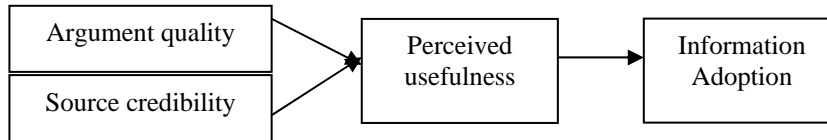


Figure. 1. IAM: Information Adoption Model, Sussman & Siegal 2003[10]

The nature of UGC is information, so IAM (Information Adoption Model) rather than TAM (Technology Adoption Model) is selected as the theoretic basis of this study. In IAM, argument quality, also called information quality and source (UGC creator) credibility positively affect perceived usefulness, which further affects information adoption behavior. IAM is widely applied in the research of online community [11], social network, eWOM [11]. Perceived usefulness is the only predictor of information adoption in IAM. Current research has approved that perceived usefulness has significant impact on users' self-evaluation system and behavior intention such as information adoption [12]. However, Cheung and Lee (2008) found that usefulness can only account for 46% of the variance of UGC adoption. Chen et al. (2011) got similar results. The authors proposed that some important variables may be missing. Oum and Han (2011) also indicated only usefulness is not enough to interpret and influence consumer behavior in new media context. Therefore, it's necessary to explore other important precursors based on prior research and the features of social media and service industry.

2.2.2 Influencing factors of information persuasiveness and information adoption

According to Communication Theory, the persuasiveness of information and according adoption behavior are influenced by three categories of factors as information quality, information source and characteristics of recipient. Current research has covered all the three categories while ignoring factors related to social media features.

(1) Argument quality (information quality)

Argument quality, also information quality refers to the persuasive strength of arguments embedded in an informational message [13]. Abundant researches have been conducted with multi-dimensions [11]. Accuracy, relevance, currency, variety, completeness, understandability, dynamism, and personalization are the measures used in recent commerce studies [14].

A prominent feature of UGC information on social media platform is the diversification of information presentation, which reflects the complexity and all involved costs in UGC creation and publication. Thus, the diversification of information presentation will affect user's perceived usefulness of information. Further study is needed to explore the impact of this information quality related factor.

(2) Source credibility (UGC creator)

Source credibility is defined as the extent to which an information source is perceived to be believable, competent and trustworthy by information recipients, affecting the persuasiveness of information [15]. Expertise and trustworthiness of UGC creator are the key measures widely accepted in existing research [11].

As for expertise, there is a debate. Only when recipient himself (herself) has enough expertise can he or she have the ability to evaluate creator's expertise, which is a demanding task. Meanwhile, the anonymity and weak tie between information creator and recipient make it difficult to distinguish the identity of UGC creator. Many researches show that credibility, trust and information persuasiveness will increase when more personal information of the creator is disclosed [16]. While Lee et al.'s [17] research achieved the opposite conclusion. Therefore, self-disclosure can promote user interaction, while its effect on UGC adoption behavior remains unclear, which requires further analysis.

(3) Characteristics of information recipient

Information may exert different influences to different information recipients due to different perceptions and experiences of individuals, especially in service decision for its higher subjectivity and potential risk. So personal characteristics of information recipient is included as another category in current research, measured by knowledge structure, experience, attitude, involvement degree, personality, demographic variables, and etc. [10], among which involvement degree and expertise enjoy most attention. All the factors mentioned are related to recipient's personal characteristics only. As social interaction is the prominent feature of social media, it's necessary to explore new elements relating to social or interpersonal interaction.

2.2.3 Platform feature related factors

This is the category ignored in current research. Due to the anonymity and weak tie connection of social media users, platforms are perceived as the major participants in UGC interaction, which indicates platform level factors are far more important. Existing website feature related researches mainly focus on technology aspects, such as rating system [18], layout and interface design [19], without consideration of social interaction related elements that can improve the attractiveness of websites. On the other hand, evidence shows that where social media content is posted is critical as different platforms are perceived differently in credibility and trustworthiness [20]. Therefore, platform features play a vital role in predicting users' adoption behavior.

2.2.4 Trust

Numerous studies have indicated that trust is indispensable for predicting the activity of online consumers [21]. The literature suggests that trust is essential when exchanging opinions in online communities. The higher the level of trust between individuals is, the higher the possibility of engaging in information seeking. Trust is considered a vital factor affecting online consumer activities, such as the acceptance of others' advices. In the context of social media, trust can be regarded as users' evaluation of information and its source, which help to promote the dissemination and adoption of UGC.

While most of prior researches focus on interpersonal trust from a more cognitive aspect, there are no discussions on different mechanisms and impact of different types

of trust classified by interaction subjects. And no consensus has been achieved as for the impact of dimensions of trust on user behavioral intention [22]. As mentioned before, social media platforms play an important role in UGC interaction. Therefore, user trust may stem both from UGC creator and from the platform. Hence, a thorough exploration of the classification of trust is necessary to fully uncover the different construction mechanism and impact of different types of trust.

2.3 Summary

In general, existing UGC adoption behavior researches mostly focus on the results, also are the marketing outcomes after adoption of UGC, with insufficient research on the source what influence users to choose and adopt certain information. And most of the closely related studies take usefulness as the only antecedent of adoption behavior, ignoring the typical emotional or attitudinal factors, which are important in service decision. Prior researches has covered three categories of influencing factors of information adoption behavior, without consideration of non-technological platform level elements that represent the social interaction feature of social media. As for the three categories of influencing factors, few researches have discussed the impact of diversification of UGC representation, and there exist no consensus on the impact of UGC creator's self-disclosure degree. Therefore, it's necessary to construct a new theoretical framework by introducing new elements, to comprehensively understand the driving forces of users' UGC adoption behavior on social media platforms in service context.

3. Research Model Development

On the basis of an intensive review of the literature, we propose a theoretical model of the influencing factors of UGC adoption behavior as shown in Fig.2, followed with the explanation of newly introduced elements.

3.1 Two types of trust

As discussed in the literature review, trust is a crucial aspect to determine the intention to follow advice of others that helps to promote the dissemination and adoption of UGC on social media platforms. In UGC interaction, platform is perceived as the other party involved. Therefore, trust may stem both from information creator and from the social media platform, with distinct mechanisms and effects. According to the interaction subjects, two types of trust are introduced.

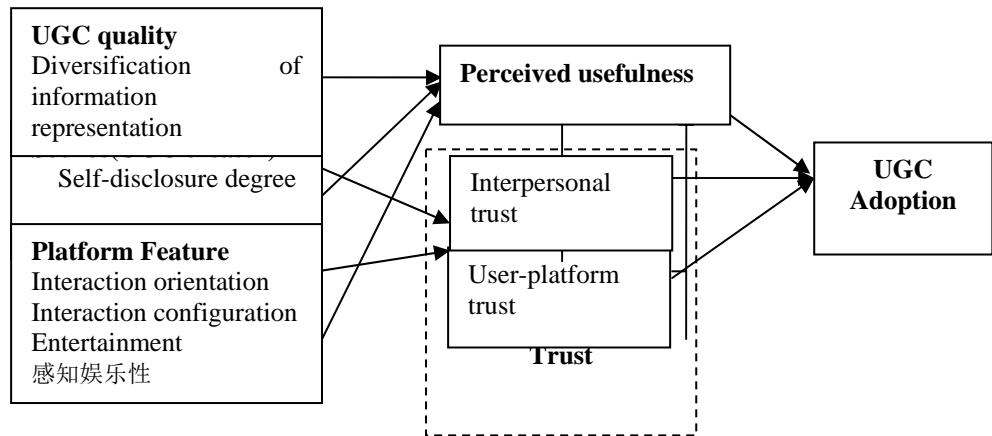


Figure2. research model

3.1.1 Interpersonal trust

As shown in the literature review, most of prior researches on trust concentrate on interpersonal trust, the trust between UGC creator and recipient. The consumer will have the intention to accept the other party's advice if they feel he or she honest, competent and benevolent. In online environments, some cues i.e. the perceived credibility of information creator lead to the emergence of interpersonal trust, which will further the interaction to influence consumer behavior and purchase intention [23]. That is, interpersonal trust can increase the persuasiveness of information, thus influence online consumers' attitude and behavior [6], as UGC adoption behavior.

3.1.2 user-platform trust

As face-to-face interaction is replaced by screen to face interaction, platforms are the intuitive party perceived by users. In practice, interaction platform is trusted as a whole since it's hard for consumers to evaluate source credibility [24]. The same information shown on different platforms receives different degrees of trustworthiness, indicating there is a type of trust related to platform feature. The researches of Senecal and Nantel (2004) and Burgess et al. (2009) support this argument with empirical study in online travel community, while only focusing on the host of the website not social interaction related classification. Therefore, interpersonal trust and user-platform trust are distinct concepts with different developing mechanisms and impact, which is of great value to study thoroughly and separately.

3.2 Platform Features

Social media are characterized by social interaction, user integration, personalization and exchange of content, 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 and information adoption behavior, 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 [24], 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 [24]. Such an interaction-related strategy is referred to as interaction orientation. ②Interaction configuration, which refers to the perceived structure of interaction process on a certain platform [25]. Companies continuously process integrated data from user interaction to serve as the orientation and configuration basis of added value. ③Entertainment. The attractive platform features should include both hedonic and/or cognitive aspects. Most of the services like travel purchases belong to the category of hedonic goods, in the decision process of which involved requirements for socio-emotional benefits and experiences such as fantasy, fun and pleasure. Hence perceived entertainment is a crucial element that can affect user decision, especially of greater importance in service decisions [26]. 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.

3.2.1. Diversification of information representation

The presentation of UGC information on social media platforms takes various forms as text, images, audios, videos and etc., which is defined as the diversification of information presentation. Since it reflects the complexity and all involved costs in UGC creation and publication, the diversification of information presentation will affect user's perceived usefulness of information. So this construct is especially included to present the measurement of information quality.

3.2.2. Self-disclosure degree

Self-disclosure refers to any personal information one shares with others, which can promote user interaction. As discussed before, high expertise is required for UGC recipients to accurately assess the creator's credibility, which is always a problem. Thus self-disclosure of personal information becomes a vital indicator of credibility of the creator. While some researches all recognized its correlations with both cognitive and attitudinal elements as perceived usefulness and interpersonal trust, there is no consensus on whether more or less personal information disclosed by UGC creator can positively affect source credibility, trust and information persuasiveness [16]. Therefore, the construct of self-disclosure degree is introduced to further test how it affects perceived usefulness and trust.

4. Conclusion

With the prosperity of UGC and social media, the power of persuasiveness shifts from companies to users. Both academia and industries recognize the significant impacts of UGC on consumer behavior and business marketing strategies. Most prior studies focus on the results rather than the source--driving forces of UGC adoption behavior, which requires more in-depth research especially when confronted with over-loaded information on social media platforms. Based on an intensive review of the literature and understanding of research context, this paper proposes a theoretical model by extending Information Adoption Model (IAM) with new elements as follows: the attitudinal elements two types of trust as the mediators, platform feature related elements with three dimensions as antecedents, diversification of information representation and creator's self-disclosure degree as the measurements of information quality and source credibility respectively. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the extension of information adoption theory in the research context of social media platform and service industry, which hopefully could provide some lights to the emerging research in UGC behavior field.

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