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Exploring the Business Potential of Social Media: *An Utilitarian and Hedonic Motivation Approach*

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Abstract

Adoption of Social Media (SM) has been growing in an incremental manner over the past few years. In their attempt to capitalize from the large user base present on such websites, business executives have been piloting different approaches in order to gain a competitive edge and promote their products and services to consumers. Research however, has been lagging in this direction. This study examines utilitarian and hedonic motivations of consumer engagement in the context of social media. Partial Least Squares (PLS) modelling techniques were applied on data obtained from 115 SM users to identify the impact that such sites have on commerce. Results indicate that specific aspects trigger Utilitarian (Convenience and Product Selection) and Hedonic (Idea and Adventure) motivations which in sequence impact user intention to browse products on such mediums.

Keywords: Social Media, Internet Shopping, e-Commerce, Utilitarian Motivation, Hedonic Motivation, Empirical Analysis

1 Introduction

The adoption of Social Media (SM) applications is expanding at an exceedingly rapid rate and revolutionizing the way we communicate and do business. To translate this adoption into numbers, Facebook has recorder over 800 million active users as of January 2012, while on YouTube more than 3 billion videos are viewed every day according to Forrester Research.

The spectrum of Social Media encompasses a wide range of applications such as social networking (Facebook, Orkut, Google +), media sharing (YouTube, Flickr, Jamendo), business and academia networking (LinkedIn, Academia), virtual worlds (Second Life), blogs, and many more. Given the success of many SM, an observer could be wondering how they manage to keep so many active users who are spending a considerable amount of their time (Giannakos et al., 2012); and even more importantly, how does this medium provide a means for enhancing e-commerce.

Despite being at an early stage regarding business use, the concept of Social Media has managed to attract the attention of business executives and marketers (Tancer, 2007; Li et al., 2007). Originally intended to enable internet users to communicate and publish personalized content, top executives quickly realized the business potential that these platforms may have. The richness of media supported by SM in conjunction with the large user base allows them to be used as a unique tool for attracting new customers. Reports from early business adopters indicate that 61% of companies are somewhat to very satisfied with the returns of their investment (McKinsey, 2007).

Regardless of these encouraging figures about SM use and their results, there is an apparent lack of academic research in the strategic management of such platforms in order to gain a competitive edge, especially in B2C commerce. In the present paper, an empirical study is performed using data from 115 SM users in order to explore the business potential that such sites may have. The research model derived is based on hedonic and utilitarian theory, designed to identify what factors influence user's intention to browse for products or services via SM platforms.

The rest of the study is structured as follows. In chapter two, an overview of literature is presented regarding the status of research on SM for business purposes. Chapter three includes the foundations for the conceptual model which is put to test and the research hypotheses are formulated. In the next chapter, the dataset along with the findings are presented. In closing, conclusions are drawn upon findings, and implications for business over SM are highlighted.

2 Literature Review

The motivation behind shopping behavior is not a novel research subject. As early as 1972, Tauber explored the process of shopping as a series of behaviors and the motivations which lead to the purchase of an item (Tauber, 1972). It is recognized that shoppers could be motivated in finding a product they desire. However, the socialization of the process, the satisfaction of a new purchase or simply the killing of time contributes to some extent in evoking people to purchase. The main finding from Tauber's research was that people do not only shop for the use of the purchased item but also for the satisfaction obtained during the process. This brought rise to the theory of utilitarian and hedonic motivation which tries to explain why people shop. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) extend this idea by including factors that are related

to the hedonic motivation such as aesthetics, emotion and enjoyment and compare them to utilitarian shopping motivations.

Utilitarian and hedonic shopping motivation differs fundamentally. Utilitarian motivation is defined as rational and goal oriented (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Batra and Ahtola, 1991) and applied to shopping shows that the benefit depends on the efficiency during the process of acquisition. Hedonic motivation contrarily refers to the search of emotions such as happiness, enjoyment and fantasy, experienced during the shopping procedure. Therefore, consumers with a strong hedonic motivation seek the enjoyment of the process rather than the utility of the purchased product. It is evident that much attention has been placed over the last years on hedonic motivation since it has become the extension of utilitarian motivation, both of which are necessary in order to sustain a competitive advantage for retailers (Parsons, 2002).

The combined effect of these two motivations was put to test by Babin et al. (1994), who verify the existence through their empirical study and pinpoint that hedonic factors impact unplanned shopping while utilitarian factors do not. Additionally, Chandon et al. (2000) found that hedonic products have higher premiums when promoted by hedonic promotional campaigns. However, a study by Dhar and Wertenbrosch (2000) indicates that when faced with the choice to give up a product for pleasure or for use; products for pleasure are the ones to be given up first.

Although the aforementioned studies have provided insight over the factors that impact consumer behavior, they do not study the contingencies that online shopping and advertising present. Over the past ten years attention has been shifted to the motivation for shopping through the internet. A number of recent studies have examined these types of motivations with respect to the design of such online environments (Kourouthanassis et al., 2008). Most such studies have identified utilitarian motivation factors as being the primary force for shopping online. Some of these hedonic factors include product diversity (Alba et al., 1997) convenience, information availability, customization (Ghosh, 1998) and time efficiency (Morganosky and Cude, 2000). Blake et al. (2005) compiled a list of several features for commercial sites that are important to internet shoppers with the majority being utilitarian factors.

Despite the attention that has been attributed to utilitarian factors, some studies have pointed out that hedonic motivation is as important in internet shopping as it is in traditional shopping. One of the first studies, conducted by Falk, (1997) states that the front end of an internet store is similar in terms of hedonic motivation to that of a storefront, with sensual simulation and the ability of search being the lead factors in purchase intention. Similarly to traditional means of shopping, the decision to buy through an e-shop is influenced by the aesthetics and enjoyment which it provides (Mathwick et al., 2001).

We can identify a change in perspective with the terms hedonic and utilitarian not only being applied to motivations, but to systems and aspects of experience (O'Brien, 2010). Despite the growing attention of shopper's motivation for internet shops, no research has been performed so far on the motivations for browsing products on SM platforms, and the impact that they have on consumers.

3 Research Model

The purpose of this study is twofold, to explore the influence of hedonic and utilitarian value on browsing products through Social Media websites and to identify what antecedents form this relationship. We therefore propose an integrated model by using hedonic and utilitarian motivation as mediating constructs in order to explain how they impact SM user's intention to browse products (Fig. 1).

From the utilitarian perspective of purchasing, a number of studies have identified such motivations (Babin et al., 1994; Keeney, 1999). In this study and in adherence with the medium of SM which is been put to test, we make use of Wolfinbanger and Gilly's categorization which distinguishes between convenience, information availability, product selection as well as the additional factor of customized advertisements. The importance of customized advertisements has been noted as one of the greatest advantages of internet shopping (Burke, 1997; Han and Han, 2001).

With regard to hedonic motivations we use the items identified by Arnold and Reynolds (2003) and Westbrook and Black (1985) which include trend discovery (keeping up with new trends and browsing new products), socializing (ability to socialize with friends and other shoppers), adventure (the stimulation felt during the browsing of products) and authority (the feeling of being able to control the medium in a way that suits the shoppers needs).

Hence, this model includes four utilitarian and four hedonic antecedents which are expected to affect the intention of a shopper to browse products through a social media platform. In order to capture the extent of these antecedents, two mediating constructs are developed (Utilitarian & Hedonic motivation) which are targeted in quantifying the use and enjoyment respectively that a SM user experiences when browsing products.

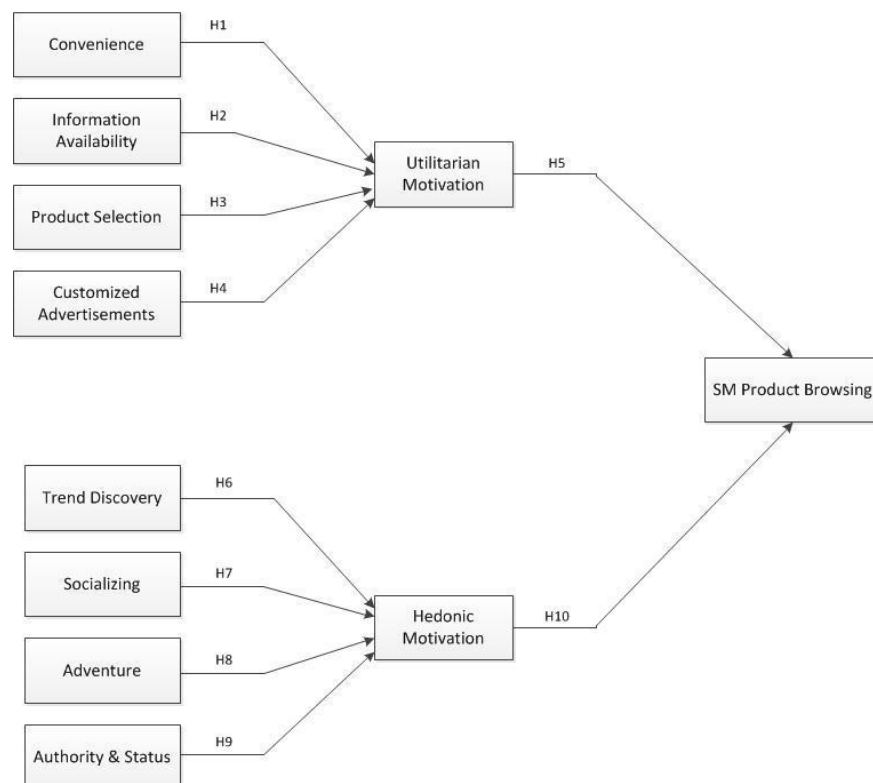


Figure 1: Research Model

Construct	Operational Definition	Representative references guiding our conceptualization
Convenience	<i>The degree of convenience which SM sites offer for product browsing</i>	Burke, 1997; Miller 2000; To et al., 2007
Information Availability	<i>The amount of available information regarding products or services on SM platforms</i>	To et al., 2007; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2001
Product Selection	<i>The selection of products found on company-hosted SM sites</i>	To et al., 2007; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2001
Customized Advertisements	<i>The compatibility of customized advertisements presented to users of SM based on their likings</i>	Burke, 1997; Han & Han, 2001; To et al., 2007; Feather, 2001
Trend Discovery	<i>The effectiveness of SM sites in providing latest information about new trends and fashions</i>	Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; To et al., 2007
Socializing	<i>The ability to engage in a conversation (synchronous or asynchronous) with fellow peers during the browsing of products on SM sites</i>	Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2001; Dawon et al., 1990; To et al., 2007
Adventure	<i>The degree to which a SM site provides a novel and interesting browsing experience towards users, and the sense of excitement which they get from using it</i>	Westbrook & Black, 1985; Sherry 1990
Authority & Status	<i>The sense of authority which users of SM obtain over the platform when browsing products</i>	Parsons 2002
SM Product Browsing	<i>The degree to which users of SM engage in the process of using such sites in order to browse for products</i>	Shim et al., 2001

Table 1: Operational Definitions of Constructs

3.1 Utilitarian motivation

3.1.1 Convenience

In a number of studies it has been found that shopping over the internet is convenient since shoppers can access a vast array of products at their own time avoiding in that way the transportation needed in traditional means of shopping. (Burke, 1997). Additionally, in contrast with conventional shops, online shops do not have working hours, thus allowing consumers to browse or shop at any time convenient to them. Wolfinbarger & Gilly (2001) supports this thought, stating that the space in which the browsing and purchasing of products, contributes to the convenience of shoppers. We extend on these findings and with regard to SM hypothesize the following:

H1. Convenience has a significant positive influence on the utilitarian motivation of browsing products via SM websites.

3.1.2 Information Availability

The Internet is undoubtedly the largest and most efficient source of information acquisition. This also applies to the case of shopping by which consumers can gather information about the product that they are interested in. Bakos (1997) states that the Internet allows users to easily find all necessary information they may need with only a few clicks therefore increasing the utilitarian motivation of consumers to use it for browsing products. Social media integrate information from a number of sources thus providing users with all necessary information about a product. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2. Information availability has a positive and significant impact on the utilitarian motivation of browsing products through SM platforms.

3.1.3 Product Selection

In comparison with traditional stores, online, consumers can find a greater range of products fitting their needs since more retailers exist and there is no need for large inventories (Alba et. al., 1997). Therefore, companies engaging in advertising over SM websites can present the full range of products without having to stock them in their inventory (Wolfenbarger & Gilly, 2001). Consequently, we hypothesize that:

H3. The selection of presented on SM websites has a positive and significant impact on the utilitarian motivation of consumers to browse products on these platforms.

3.1.4 Customized Advertisements

Han and Han (2001) point out that the internet is a unique medium in order to provide consumers with customized advertisements. Through profiling performed by social media websites, customized advertisements appear to users based on his or hers specific interests and likings. Such personalized advertising has been found to enhance user's intention to both, the intention to search for products and purchase them (Zhu et. al., 2004). Therefore, we can make the following hypothesis:

H4. Customized advertisements presented to users of SM will have a positive and significant impact on the utilitarian motivation of consumers in browsing products on such websites.

The aforementioned constructs are noted in literature as aspects of the utilitarian motivation of consumers to browse and purchase products, adapted to the context of SM. We contend that these constructs have an impact on the utilitarian motivation, which is defined as the utility experienced from using such a medium for product browsing purposes. Consequently, we hypothesize the following:

H5. Utilitarian motivation will have a significant positive impact on the decision of a consumer to browse through products on SM websites.

3.2 Hedonic motivation

3.2.1 Trend Discovery

The concept of Trend Discovery refers to the procedure which consumers undergo in order to learn about new fashions, products and brands. This process is found to give pleasure to consumers (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003). It has been discovered that one of the strongest motivations, especially of internet shoppers, is browsing and discovering new trends and fashions (Parsons, 2002). Social media allow for a large concentration of information from various sources, a lot of which are about commercial products. Therefore, we can set the following hypothesis:

H6. Trend Discovery will have a positive and significant impact on the hedonic motivation of internet users to browse products through social media websites.

3.2.2 Socializing

A great number of studies have identified that one of the main reasons why consumers go shopping is because of the enjoyment which the social interaction provides (Dawon et al., 1990). This aspect is particularly relevant to the hedonic motivation of consumers. Through the emergence of Web 2.0 applications and especially social media, users can transfer this experience in an online community. According to Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2001), engaging in online conversations during the browsing process could provide the users with pleasure. Consequently, we hypothesize that:

H7. Social interaction will have a positive and significant effect on hedonic motivation of browsing products through social media platforms.

3.2.3 Adventure

The main proposition lying behind the concept of adventure is that consumers will experience a novel and enjoying process when shopping. The hedonic shopper is in fact more interested in this aspect of shopping than any other utilitarian motivation. When considering this aspect with regard to human-computer interaction, Webster et al. (1993) argue that people should experience this sense during their time on a computer. Building on this claim, we hypothesize that for social media the following will stand:

H8. The feeling of adventure has a positive and significant impact on the intention for browsing products through social media websites as a hedonic motivation factor.

3.2.4 Authority & Status

Control over the shopping experience is noted as being an important hedonic motivation when considering online shopping (Parsons, 2002). Differing significantly from the authority which a consumer has in a physical store, online authority and status are derived by the sense of control over the technology used. With social media being one of the most widely adopted concepts of the past decade and the ease of use which they offer we can propose the hypothesis that:

H9. The sense of authority and status that internet users have over social media will have a significant and positive impact on their intention to browse products on such platforms.

The aforementioned factors are expected to influence the hedonic motivations of users to browse products on social media websites and therefore act as a mediating construct. Hence, for the construct of hedonic motivation we hypothesize that:

H10. Hedonic motivation will have a positive and significant effect on the intention of users to browse products by means of social media websites.

4 Measurements & Data

In order to meet the objectives of this research a survey study was designed to examine the hypotheses stated in the previous chapter. For each of the constructs described in the conceptual model a number of items were developed in order to measure them. The items used to measure these concepts were based on the study of To et. al. (2007) and O'Brien (2010) and were measured by applying a 7-point likert scale. The questions corresponding to each of these items were used in a custom built electronic questionnaire which was sent out to respondents, users of social media websites, to fill out. The questionnaire was divided into three parts, the first designed to gather information about the demographics of the sample, the second to measure the utilitarian and hedonic motivation constructs, while the third was targeted in measuring the impact that these motivations have on browsing intention, actual purchase and information sharing. Questionnaire links were e-mailed to respondents through a mailing list of over 600 respondents of an academic institution, and posted on 14 forum boards which ranged in subject (Fashion, computers, hobbies etc.). A period of one month was given to the respondents to fill out the questionnaire (December 2011) which consisted of a total of 55 questions. In total 115 responses were received and retained for further analysis with a valid response rate of 19,3% (from the mailing list).

From the dataset the percentage of male participants was 50,9% (55 participants) while the female population accounted for 49,1% (53 participants) making it a balanced sample. With regard to age, the majority of the participants (48,1%) were between 15-24, while for the other groups the percentages were as follows: 25-34 (37%), 35-44 (9,3%) and over 45 (5,6%). The vast majority of the respondents indicated that they check their social media accounts several times a day, while with regard to the amount spent on online shopping the cumulative percentage of 66,7 % stated that they spend between 1-50 euros on a monthly basis. Finally, with respect to their use of social media websites 79 % percent of users have a Facebook account, 74% use YouTube, 47% have a Twitter account, 34% use Wikipedia, and 15% have a LinkedIn page. A small percentage of users have Google Plus, MySpace, Blogger, DeviantArt, Flickr, LastFm and other social media accounts.

5 Data Analysis

Partial least squares path modeling was used in order to validate the causal relationships amongst variables as defined in the research model. Smart PLS was used in order to carry out the analysis.

The first step after defining the model and the accompanying items was to identify the validity and reliability of the item measures used. The descriptive statistics for each of the constructs built from the items in presented in Table 1.

Construct	Number of Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Utilitarian Motivation (UT)	5	3.853	1.770
Hedonic Motivation (HE)	5	3.135	1.892
Convenience (CNV)	3	4.685	2.056
Information Availability (IA)	3	4.808	1.803
Product Selection (PS)	3	4.262	1.925
Customized Advertisements (CA)	3	2.861	1.907
Trend Discovery (TD)	3	4.274	1.864
Socializing (SC)	3	3.910	1.970
Adventure (ADV)	3	2.407	1.659
Authority & Status (AUS)	3	3.317	1.819
SM Product Browsing (SMPB)	4	3.516	1.970

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for constructs

The validity and reliability of the items were tested first, checking for item reliability measures to be at acceptable levels and standardized items loadings (above 0.5). Consequently, since loadings were above 0.7 with a narrow range, we can be sure that convergent validity was attained.

Having evaluated all items, constructs were in turn examined to determine if they are reliable to work upon. Composite reliability values (Werts et. al., 1974), measuring the internal consistency of each construct, were all above 0.89, and are therefore considered reliable (Chin & Gopal, 1995). Additionally, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was greater than the squared correlation coefficients; hence, we can conclude that the discriminant validity is achieved.

Having performed all the prerequisite tests of validity and reliability, the PLS algorithm was applied to the proposed model in order to test the hypotheses. The results as presented in Fig. 2, depict the weights of the association along with their significance. With respect to the mediating value of utilitarian motivation, two constructs are found to be positive and significant determinants of hedonic motivation. Convenience (CNV) of social media along with product selection (PS) explain 73,6% of the utilitarian motivation ($R^2=0.736$), thus confirming hypotheses H1 and H3. Contrariwise, the information availability and the customized advertisements are not found to influence the utilitarian motivation of social media users when it comes to browsing products on such mediums.

When considering the factors that influence the hedonic motivation, results from the analysis indicate that the two of the proposed hedonic factors can be considered as significant predictors. Trend discovery and adventure present a highly significant positive relationship with the hedonic motivation of consumers, while the socializing aspect of social media and the authority over the medium do not exhibit an important relationship. The two constructs which are found to be significant predictors explain the hedonic motivation at a degree of 59% ($R^2=0.590$). Hence, hypotheses H6 and H8 are accepted.

The mediating constructs of utilitarian and hedonic motivation are found to impact the intention of users to browse products on social media platforms in a significantly positive manner. The impact of utilitarian motivation is found to be a stronger driver in making users browse for products on social media than the hedonic motivation. In combination, they explain 52,2% of the variance ($R^2=0.522$) with hypotheses H5 and H10 being adequately supported.

Composite Reliability		UT	HE	CNV	IA	PS	CA	TD	SC	ADV	AUS	SMPB
0.936	UT	0.747										
0.954	HE	0.762	0.807									
0.960	CNV	0.838	0.706	0.890								
0.928	IA	0.705	0.548	0.778	0.811							
0.965	PS	0.800	0.696	0.837	0.837	0.901						
0.902	CA	0.284	0.278	0.315	0.458	0.398	0.756					
0.919	TD	0.752	0.692	0.809	0.865	0.850	0.473	0.792				
0.892	SC	0.490	0.485	0.520	0.668	0.592	0.494	0.743	0.735			
0.907	ADV	0.547	0.655	0.472	0.437	0.509	0.454	0.552	0.411	0.764		
0.938	AUS	0.616	0.552	0.617	0.565	0.598	0.423	0.666	0.495	0.649	0.837	
0.954	SMPB	0.717	0.601	0.709	0.638	0.705	0.426	0.762	0.502	0.668	0.720	0.840

Table 3: Inter-construct correlations and reliability measures

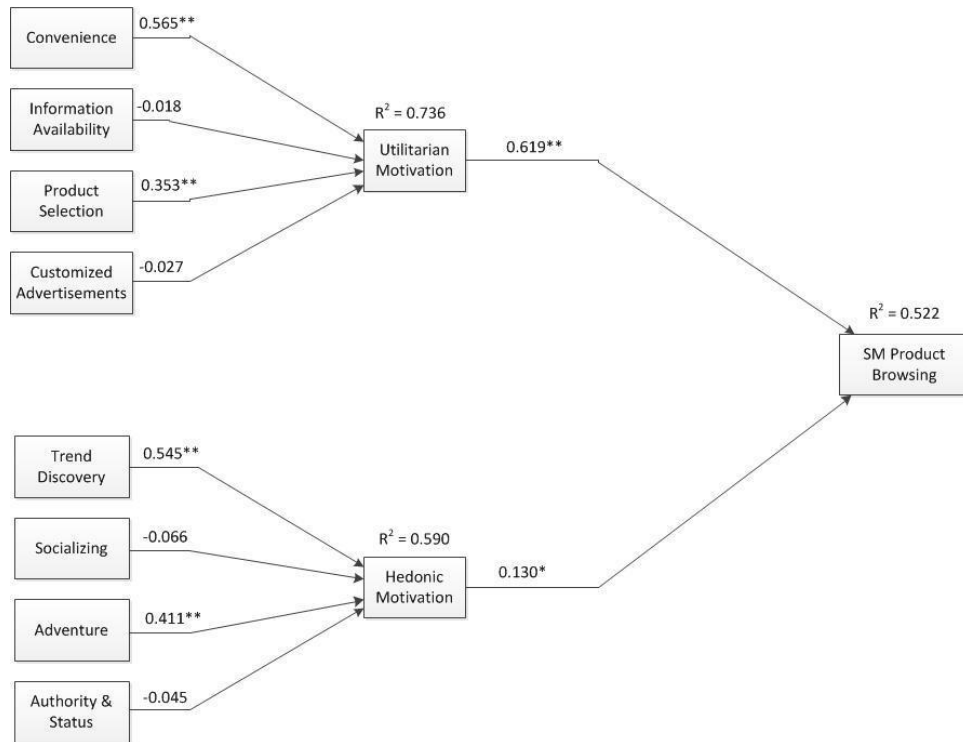


Figure 2: Structural model with path coefficients

6 Discussion & Conclusions

Utilitarian and Hedonic motivations have been applied extensively in research studies associated with shopping, both for physical and electronic shops. However, to our knowledge, very few studies up to date have applied this theory to company-hosted sites hosted over social media platforms. Social media present unique characteristics since they allow for user generated content facilitate synchronous and asynchronous communication between users and enable immediate content sharing with peers. Building on the potential that such websites have in providing a new medium for doing business, we apply the theory of utilitarian and hedonic motivations in order to determine what factors of such platforms encourage users to browse for products on them.

In order to actualize the objectives of this research, a quantitative analysis was performed on data gathered from 115 social media users. Results indicate that both utilitarian and hedonic motivations have a significantly positive impact on influencing a user to browse products over such websites with the prior being a stronger motivator than the latter. With respect to utilitarian factors, the convenience of using social media and the selection of products available on such websites are found to be the most important contributors in explaining why consumers browse products. In contrast, the information available regarding a product as well the existence of personalized advertisements does not impact the intention of a user to browse through SM. The finding that information availability does not impact browsing can be

attributed to the richness of the media present on social media sites which users seem to prefer rather than plain text. An alternative explanation may be due to the ease of finding information elsewhere over the internet, therefore reducing the importance of that aspect on SM. Additionally, due to the vast amount of content generated by fellow peers, personalized advertisements which are usually placed on side panes may not be viewed as expected, thus explaining the low impact on product browsing.

From the hedonic factors used in the present study, the constructs of trend discovery and adventure were found to impact user intention to browse products. The significantly positive association of trend discovery with product browsing can be justified by the continuous update of products on social media which can be updated with little effort, especially compared to conventional shopping, therefore providing users with the latest trends and fashions regarding products. Consequently, it is logical that this aspect of social media will facilitate as an attraction to users. The sense of adventure is also found to be a contributing factor in explaining why users use social media to browse for products. Constituting a novel means of browsing products and differing significantly from traditional shopping, the experience of navigating through a selection of products on a medium with numerous functionalities enhances user's hedonic motivation. Contrarily, the ability to socialize over social media websites and the sense of authority & status, do not promote the browsing of products by users. In differentiation with studies performed on traditional stores where socialization was found to positively influence hedonic motivation, over social media websites this construct does not seem to be of the greatest importance in explaining the hedonic motivation. This can be justified by the fact that users who browse products via SM, prefer to do so uninterrupted by others. The same applies to authority & status which is also insignificantly correlated with the hedonic motivation of consumers.

The results of this study add to our knowledge and open up new avenues of thinking about the impact of social media on B2C e-commerce. For merchants, the need for integrating their online shops on attractive social media arise, due to the phenomenal growth of social media and the strong connection of product browsing performed through SM sites is validated through the outcomes of this research. Additionally, by identifying what antecedents affect the browsing of products on such sites, business executives can focus on them without placing unnecessary emphasis on aspects which are proven to be less important.

However, additional research must be performed in the context of such mediums. Users, ability to generate content, and act as indirect advertisers, attracting in that way more consumers to corporate social media websites is a very interesting area. This view, that regards social media not only as a set of tools and applications that enable users to engage in communication with fellow users, but as an integral part of their shopping activity, can be an indicative element of a relation between a successful social media website and a satisfied customer. This aspect of social media is of great importance, since firms place marketing and advertising as a top priority on their concern lists.

Research of conducting business over social media websites is still in its infancy. We encourage future researchers to investigate more detailed aspects of social media commerce, especially means by which firms can engage users to promote their products and services to fellow peers. It is our firm belief that this aspect of social media is revolutionary in comparison with traditional means of shopping and even electronic shopping.

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