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The Impacts of Environmental Cues and Browsing Experience on Impulse Buying on Social Shopping Website

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Abstract: Based on the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) paradigm, this study develops a model to theorize how environmental cues on social shopping website affect impulse buying behavior from the perspective of browsing experience. Social shopping websites bring a novel online browsing experience for customers. However, how browsing experience on this platform affect customers impulsively have received insufficient academic attention. The results reveal that the unique factors of social shopping website, namely the quality of user-generated content and social presence are critical for facilitating customers' browsing experiences. The results also show that both utilitarian browsing and hedonic browsing experience have a positive impact on customers' urge to buy impulsively. The theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: Social shopping website, Environmental cues, Utilitarian browsing experience, Hedonic browsing experience, Urge to buy impulsively

1. INTRODUCTION

Impulse buying is a sudden, powerful, and persistent urge to purchase something immediately when driven by stimuli encountered within the environment. Online impulse buying behavior has attracted considerable practical and academic attention because it occurs in about 40% of all online purchases^[1], that this proportion may have increased as the development of social commerce. Social commerce, a new trend in e-commerce in which e-commerce is integrated into social media, has enhanced social aspect of online shopping experience^[2]. Unlike tradition e-commerce, consumer can share product ratings, reviews, and recommendations and interact with others in social commerce context. These user-generated content and social interaction may stimulate consumers to buy product impulsively^[3, 4]. According to a report by Greenpeace, 72% of the respondents have a desire to buy the apparel and accessories when they see what others wear on social network sites. However, there are few studies have empirically investigated online impulse buying in social commerce context.

Previous researchers have shown that online browsing can spur online shoppers to purchase products they might not buy otherwise, that is, impulse buying^[1, 5-7]. As an important part of the shopping experience, online browsing is an act of looking around online websites with no intention to buy any specific product^[6, 7]. Social shopping websites (SSW), such as Xiaohongshu.com, Mogujie.com, Kaboodle.com, which are a result of integration of online shopping into a virtual community, are ideally suited for online browsing. On such sites, people can connect with like-minded individuals, exchange opinions on products and recommend the products they like to others. In addition, such sites support user-generated social shopping features, such as recommendation lists, ratings and styles to assist online shopping^[5, 8]. These sites help customers discover new products, brands and trends, which making online browsing more interesting for customers, as compared to simple sites where they purchase by simply clicking on a link^[5]. Given that SSW is much more suitable for browsing rather than directly buying and that may stimulate consumer online impulse buying, we examine customers' impulsive buying behavior on SSW from the perspective of browsing experience.

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Previous research on online browsing have identified factors that influence customer browsing experience, such as website atmosphere^[1], individual characteristics^[7]. However, these research did not consider the social factors on the website. SSW supports user generated content, facilitates social interaction among users and enables content sharing with peers, thus may improve customers' browsing experience on SSW. Therefore, we draw upon the stimulus–organism–response (S–O–R) model to theorize how environmental cues (social factors in particular) on SSW improve customers' browsing experience and how such experiences subsequently affect their impulse buying behavior. In doing so, this study offers insights into the role of browsing experience in impacting impulse buying on SSW. Also, this study makes practical contributions on how to enhance browsing experience and lead customers' impulse buying on SSW.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND, RESEARCH MODEL, AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 Stimulus-Organism-Response paradigm

For the analysis of stimulus-driven consumer impulse buying behavior, the S-O-R paradigm has been applied to a number of online impulse buying studies^[9]. The S–O–R paradigm states that a stimulus (S) influences an individual's internal organism states(O), which in turn lead to approaching or avoidance responses (R).

Various environmental cues have been observed to affect a consumer's state that can positively or negatively influence the urge to buy impulsively, such as traditional store atmospherics (e.g. lighting, music), online environment (e.g. website quality, information fit-to-task)^[9]. According to previous research, the following two website environmental cues as stimulus that may influence consumers' online browsing experiences: information quality and social presence. Information quality here refers to the extent to which customers perceive that the information provided by others on a SSW is of high quality. Social presence refers to the feelings obtained by interacting with others in a SSW. Previous research report that information quality of the social content and social presence are essential attributes of a SSW^[10-12]. First, SSW starts with the notion of user-generated content, which means that the majority of information in a SSW is generated by the user. Thus information quality has emerged as an important issue in SSW^[3, 10]. Information quality in SSW influences consumers' responses and experiences as well as motivation to participate in SSW. Second, previous research has shown that customers are able to experience higher levels of social presence on SSWs as compared to e-commerce sites^[11]. Social presence, which is considered as the social aspects of website, is little mentioned as environmental cues in previous research, especially in impulse buying literatures. Therefore, we choose information quality and social presence as the environmental factors that may influence customers' browsing experience and their impulse buying on SSW.

The organisms pertain to internal processes and structures intervening between the stimuli and individuals' final responses, which consist of perceptions, experiences, and evaluations. In this paper, the utilitarian browsing and hedonic browsing experience be viewed as organisms. Park et al. considered two kinds of web browsing experience, namely, utilitarian browsing and hedonic browsing^[6]. Utilitarian browsing is defined as *'acquisition of products through the use of heuristics, goal-oriented behavior, risk reduction strategies, and achievement of information search goals'*^[6]. Compared to utilitarian browsing, hedonic browsing is recreational and is focused on experiencing fun and entertainment. Both utilitarian browsing and hedonic browsing reflects the perceived value derived from browsing experience^[13]. We use Park et al.'s classification to understand browsing behavior in the context of SSW.

The response refers to consumers' final decisions. According to Parboteeah et al., it is problematic to measure actual impulse buying in controlled settings^[9]. Because participants' responses or behaviors are often

biased when they are asked to recall their impulse buying behavior, previous research on impulse buying has used "the urge to buy impulsively" as a surrogate measure for the actual impulse buying behavior^[9]. The urge to buy impulsively is "a state of desire that is experienced upon encountering an object in the environment"^[14]. Therefore, we use the urge to buy impulsively as the response to the stimuli in this study.

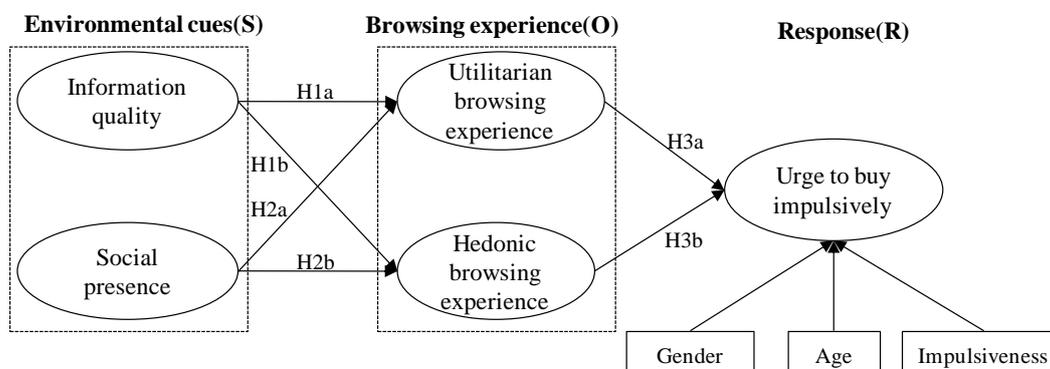


Figure 1. Research model

According to S-O-R paradigm, this paper puts up a theoretical analysis framework shown in Figure 1. The model indicates that information quality and social presence as the environmental cues have positive effects on browsing experience, which in turn lead to urge to buy impulsively. In addition, this study included some control variables that measured customers' characteristics, such as gender, age, and impulsivity trait. The impulsivity trait, which is the inherent impulsiveness of a consumer, defined as "both the tendencies (1) to experience spontaneous and sudden urges to make on-the-spot purchases and (2) to act on these felt urges with little deliberation or evaluation of consequence"^[14], can influence a consumer's propensity to engage in impulse buying. Individuals with high impulsiveness are more likely to experience a stronger urge to buy impulsively.

2.2 Information quality and browsing experience

As mentioned above, the essence of utilitarian browsing activities is obtaining the desired information, the quality of which can increase or decrease one's browsing experience on the website. Previous studies have found that information quality is related to goal-oriented decision making, which enhances users' understanding and decision-making^[10]. For example, Cheung et al. found that the relevance and comprehensiveness of electronic word-of-mouth influences information usefulness, and subsequently, the users' information adoption decisions in online communities^[15]. In the context of SSW, high quality of user generated contents in the website will help users gain a better understanding of social content, reduce the uncertainty associated with the decision making and facilitate goal-fulfillment. Given these arguments, we contend that the high-quality information may facilitate utilitarian browsing experience. Hence, we hypothesize:

H1a: Information quality is positively related to utilitarian browsing experience on social shopping website.

In addition, the quality of user generated content on the website is also entertaining for the users^[16]. Customers are likely to experience greater enjoyment if the quality of information in the website is high. For example, Ahn et al. reported that information quality enhances enjoyment among the users of online shopping sites^[16]. If the quality of information on SSW is low, browsers may feel uncomfortable and may not enjoy the same, whereas if the quality of information is good, users will enjoy surfing and interacting on the website. According to Hsu and Tsou, perceived reliability of blog content can enhance positive emotions in a readers' experiences of the blog^[17]. Hence, we hypothesize:

H1b: Information quality is positively related to hedonic browsing experience on social shopping website.

2.3 Social presence and browsing experience

The social presence of a medium influences perceived usefulness of online product assessments^[18], thus indicating that social presence is instrumental in shaping user's goal-oriented experience. Han et al. indicate that within corporate SNS accounts, social presence is characterized by a utilitarian dimension that has the potential to enhance SNS users' perceived effectiveness of information acquisition^[11]. In addition, previous research has indicated that the presence of a shopping companion in a retail environment significantly reduces the risk perceived by the shopper and enhances the shopping experience^[19]. Perceived social presence on the website may thus have an effect similar to the presence of others offline while shopping and hence would positively influence one's utilitarian web browsing experience in a SSW. Hence, we hypothesize:

H2a: Social presence is positively related to utilitarian browsing experience on social shopping website.

Perceived social presence results in greater enjoyment in the online shopping websites^[18]. Previous studies have demonstrated that companions play a prominent role in enhancing the feelings of fun and enjoyment while shopping^[20]. For example, Arnold and Reynolds suggested that shopping with others is enjoyable and a way to spend time^[20]. These findings may be the same in an online social shopping context. Accordingly, when customers perceive a high degree of social presence on a website, they will experience others as if they were co-present and socially engaged with them, which will in-turn make the shopping experience pleasurable. Therefore, while browsing a SSW, social presence enhances one's experience of fun and pleasure and makes them feel relaxed, thus having a positive effect on one's hedonic browsing experiences. Hence, we hypothesize:

H2b: Social presence is positively related to hedonic browsing experience on social shopping website.

2.4 Browsing experience and urge to buy impulsively

When customers engage in hedonic browsing, they might easily surrender to impulse buying^[1, 5-7]. In the context of e-stores, Floh and Madlberger argued that the enjoyable shopping experience makes customers spend more time browsing the website, which ultimately leads to impulse buying^[1]. This is because, if users browse the SSW for fun, they may be more receptive to environmental stimuli. While browsing they may encounter a trusted recommendation, shared experiences, or new products, which may in-turn trigger an impulse purchase^[3, 4]. Therefore, we propose that there is a positive relationship between hedonic browsing experience and impulsive buying.

H3a: Hedonic browsing experience is positively related to the urge to buy impulsively on social shopping website.

On the other hand, utilitarian browsing has been described by various scholars as rational, efficient and deliberate^[13]. Babin et al. states that hedonic factors impact unplanned shopping behavior, whereas utilitarian factors do not^[13]. In the context of online purchasing of apparel products, Park et al. confirmed that there is a positive relationship between hedonic browsing and impulse buying, while utilitarian browsing is negatively related to impulse buying^[6]. Given that utilitarian browsing serves the function of information acquisition, which is seen as more mission orientated, we propose that there is a negative relationship between utilitarian browsing and urge to buy impulsively. Hence, we hypothesize:

H3b: Utilitarian browsing experience is negatively related to the urge to buy impulsively on social shopping website.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Measurements

A questionnaire was developed for the survey used in this study. Huang and Benyoucef pointed that information quality in social commerce website contains relevancy, accuracy, completeness and update^[12]. In

this study, following Huang and Benyoucef, we propose information quality as a formative construct that includes four dimensions to be examined in the SSW context^[10]: reliability, completeness, timeliness and relevancy. Measures of these four dimensions were adapted from Cheung et al.^[15]. In addition, the measures of social presence were adopted from Gefen and Straub^[21]. Measures of utilitarian browsing and hedonic browsing were adapted from Park^[6] and Grange and Benbasat^[8]. Measures of impulsiveness and urge to buy impulsively were adapted from Parboteeah et al.^[9]. All constructs were measured on a 7-point scale. All items for measuring the constructs were adapted from previous studies to suit the context of SSW, see Appendix A. The scale was originally created in English and translated into Chinese using back-translation technique as the survey respondents were Chinese.

3.2 Data collection

The data was collected using an online survey through a well-known online survey platform Sojump (www.sojump.com) in China. We selected those people who visited the SSW during the last 3 months prior to the study as respondents for our study. In addition, because browsing is an ongoing search, which is independent of any specific purchase^[7]. Therefore, those respondents who came to the websites with the specific intention to purchase immediately were deleted. Thus, in total 276 people participated in this study out of which 32 respondents were deleted, resulting in 244 effective responses. Because the websites in this study mainly focus on apparel and accessory products, the main target customers are female. Of all the respondents, 75.4% were women, and only 24.6% were men. The majority of respondents were below 25 years old (55.3%), and most of them with a relatively high educational level. Table 1 shows the profile of respondents.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

Measure	Items	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	60	24.6%
	Female	184	75.4%
Age	Below25	135	55.3%
	26-30	73	29.9%
	31-40	34	13.9%
	Above40	2	0.8%
Education	High school or below	8	3.3%
	Junior college	53	21.7%
	University	178	73%
	Master or above	5	2%
SSW (respondents may visit multiple SSWs)	xiaoshongshu	138	56.6%
	aiguangjie	90	36.9%
	meilishuo	72	29.5%
	mogujie	80	32.8%
	huabanwang	34	13.9%

We followed Podsakoff and Organ's single factor test to examine the likelihood of common method bias in our study^[22]. The results of exploratory factor analysis showed that the variance explained by the largest factor was 39.8%, which is below the critical value of 50%. The results indicated that common method bias was unlikely to be an issue in our study.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Because our research model includes second-order formative constructs, we employed Partial Least Squares (PLS) to analyze the data. The PLS-based SEM technique is better suitable for theory development, and it is suggested to test models that include formative constructs and hence was used in this study.

4.1 Measurement model

First, we examined the reflective constructs for reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity. As shown in Table 2, Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.83 to 0.93, thus meeting the recommended minimum of 0.7

and demonstrating reliability of the measures. The average variance extracted (AVE) values for all constructs were larger than the suggested threshold value of 0.5, thus supporting the convergent validity of the measures.

Table 2 also presents the discriminant validity of the constructs. The AVE for each construct should be greater than the corresponding squared correlations between all latent constructs. As can be seen from Table 2, all AVE values meet this criterion, thus demonstrating discriminant validity.

Table 2. Reliability and validities correlation coefficient matrix and roots of the AVEs

Construct	AVE	Composite reliability	Cronbach's alpha	RL	CM	TM	RE	SP	UB	HB	UI	IM
RL	0.83	0.94	0.90	0.91								
CM	0.79	0.92	0.87	0.69	0.89							
TM	0.74	0.90	0.83	0.61	0.64	0.86						
RE	0.79	0.92	0.87	0.66	0.62	0.62	0.89					
SP	0.78	0.95	0.93	0.60	0.60	0.48	0.63	0.88				
UB	0.68	0.91	0.88	0.50	0.50	0.58	0.67	0.55	0.82			
HB	0.78	0.93	0.91	0.51	0.50	0.50	0.63	0.62	0.69	0.88		
UI	0.77	0.91	0.85	0.36	0.39	0.34	0.52	0.44	0.58	0.61	0.88	
IM	0.83	0.95	0.93	0.41	0.38	0.23	0.39	0.42	0.17	0.32	0.38	0.91

Second, we assessed the construct validity and the reliability of information quality, a second-order construct with formative indicators. As shown in Table 3, the weights of the four of the first-order constructs for information quality were significant, thus demonstrating construct validity. From Table 3, The variance inflation factors (VIF) for the first-order constructs were all below the recommended 10 threshold. Therefore, the formative constructs of information quality are reliable and valid.

Table 3. Weights of first-orders on information quality second-order construct

Second-order construct	First-order construct	Weight*	T value	VIF
Information quality	Reliability	0.30	24.99	2.32
	Completeness	0.28	27.71	2.03
	Timeliness	0.27	22.04	2.11
	Relevance	0.32	26.48	2.35

Note: *All weights were significant at $p < 0.001$.

4.2 Structural model

The resulting estimations of structural model testing are shown in Figure 2. Most of the hypotheses were supported excepted H3a, and most of the paths were positively significant at 0.001 level. Meanwhile, the results of control variable show that only impulsiveness have positive effect on browsers' urge to buy impulsively.

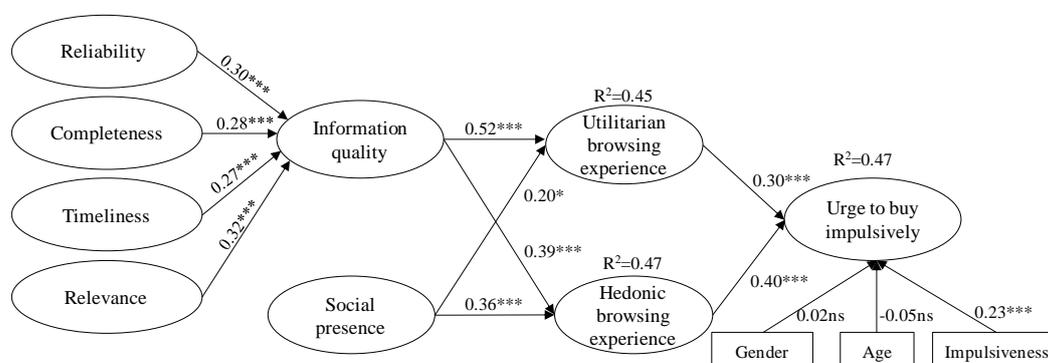


Figure 2. PLS results (Notes: * $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed))**

5. DISCUSSION, CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Our findings indicate that a SSW with high-quality user generated content enables users to access superior browsing experience. Information that is reliable, complete, timely and relevant facilitates information seeking and makes browsing more appealing. Apart from the factors of information quality, the results reveal that social presence also influences utilitarian browsing and hedonic browsing experience. As an important feature of SSW, social presence-the feeling of 'being there and warmth' - not only makes information seeking more efficient, but also stimulates and enhances the feeling of fun, pleasure, and enjoyment on a SSW. These findings are consistent with that of previous studies in offline environments that found significant influence on one's overall shopping experience due to other's presence^[19].

Our findings present that hedonic browsing experience positively influence browsers' urge to buy impulsively. This is consistent with previous studies which indicate that hedonic browsing experience has a positive influence on impulse buying behavior both in offline and online environment^[6]. However, contrary to our expectations, our study shows that utilitarian browsing experience is also positively related to the urge to buy impulsively. This may be attributed to social influence in the SSW. According to Xiang et al., due to social interactions, customer are prone to impulse buying behavior on the SSW^[4]. Chen et al. also found that the number of "likes" a post has could increase customers' urge to buy impulsively^[3]. This research shows that the social influence in a SSW can affect customers impulse buying behavior. Although previous studies have shown that utilitarian browsing experience is negatively related to the urge to buy impulsively^[6, 13], they are conducted in traditional e-commerce context and do not consider the influence of a socially interactive environment. Users' decision making is different in the context of social shopping^[2]. The circumstances of SSW are full of stimulus which are not only from website itself, but also from the social interaction and social content^[5]. Browsing on these websites, no matter for information or relaxation, will increase the opportunities for exposure to social stimuli, which may increases the possibility of impulse buying. Clearly, this would be an interesting area to examine in future research.

This study makes contributions for academia and practitioners. From the theoretical perspective, this study enriches the extant literature by providing insights into consumer browsing behavior in a new context, namely social commerce. The SSW presents unique characteristics(e.g. information quality of user-generated content and social presence) that are different from an e-commerce website and provides a customer better browsing experience, which lead to customers' impulsive buying behavior. Unlike Park et al.^[6], this study found that both utilitarian browsing and hedonic browsing experience are positively related to the urge to buy impulsively on SSW. The interesting finding of the positive significant effects of utilitarian browsing experience on impulse buying provide a better understanding and insight to researchers in the field of impulse purchase. The results of this study also provide guidelines for designers and managers of SSW. The designers and managers should give special attention to the value of browsing activity in a SSW. In China, when looking for a specific product, many customers may defer to major e-commerce sites such as Taobao and JD.com rather than the SSWs such as aiguangjie (guang.taobao.com). Thus, in order to attract customer to the website, a SSW can provide different browsing experience to their customers and pay special attention converting web browsers into impulse purchasers. Browsing activities on SSW increase the opportunities for exposure to social stimuli, which in-turn increases the possibility of impulse buying. In addition, website managers should focus on improving the quality of user generated content and pay more attention to social presence. The managers need to provide incentives (e.g. coupons and reputation) to encourage high quality user generated content and set up controlling and screening mechanisms to ensure the quality of content. Moreover, practitioners should take full advantage of social media to increase the feeling of social presence on the website.

The present study has several limitations and requires further examination in the future. First, this study

was conducted in China. Future study should further test the findings in different contexts and cultural environments to cross-validate our results. Second, the samples were primarily female, which may generate gender bias. In order to improve the generalizability, future studies should extend this study to other shopping websites and include gender neutral data sample for analysis. Finally, we only considered the most obvious characteristics of SSW. There may be other factors that would influence user's browsing experience^[7]. In this regard, future research may include more factors (such as visual appeal, consumer characteristics etc.) in the research model in order to enrich our understanding of browsing behavior on a SSW.

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