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IT Affordances and Consumption Values Perspective for the Use of Social Commerce

Emergent Research Forum (ERF) Papers

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Abstract

Social commerce is growing throughout the world. This paper develops a framework based on affordance theory and theory of consumption values to understand which consumption values motivate feature-enabled affordances to satisfy buyers and sellers and how that impacts the overall transactional experience on the platform. Additionally, the paper also fills the gap in the literature regarding seller's selling behavior which is relatively understudied. The study focuses on Facebook Marketplace as the online social commerce platform (OSC). This research will help system designers to design better social commerce platforms and identify features that need improvement or changes. Additionally, the findings from this research will create a better understanding of buyer and seller behavior and their motivations of using social commerce platforms.

Keywords

Online social commerce, theory of consumer choice value, affordance theory.

Introduction

Social commerce is growing worldwide (Hu et al. 2019; Shen et al. 2019). Many researchers and studies have focused on eCommerce, but online social commerce (OSC) is relatively understudied in various aspects. Social commerce exists in various forms, and various platforms are considered social commerce platforms. This research paper will focus on social commerce platforms with a fully functional social media platform such as Facebook Marketplace and focus on preowned products sold in local communities by local sellers rather than professional sellers.

Facebook marketplace is operated in around 70 countries and in 2021 has around 1 billion users worldwide (Al-Heeti 2018; Bearn 2021). Many people use Facebook to buy and sell used products online. This involves users looking for a product, negotiating a price, and then agreeing on a place for the transaction. There are various incidents of these transactions not going smoothly. There have been incidents of privacy invasion, scams, fraud, theft, and burglary (Hogg 2020; North 2022; Vasile 2022). This has made buyers and sellers more careful about their interactions and transactions on such platforms. This change in behavior and the information availability on both buyer and seller, which was not available in the traditional commerce platforms, has triggered changes in buyer-seller behavior in ways that have not been studied before. Through the lens of IT affordance and the theory of consumption value, we want to see what changes have occurred in both buyer and seller behaviors when they make buying and selling choices while using such platforms, and, how that impacts their overall transactional experience on the platform.

This study would focus on seller behavior in tandem with buyer behavior which has not been investigated in the literature before. This is partly because the seller on an OSC platform differs from traditional sellers and has autonomy of choosing a buyer. That is, the seller is enabled by the technology and chooses customers based on seller's preferences and values rather than sell to whoever agrees to pay the asked price. One practical example will be that of a marketplace seller who might not sell the item to a buyer with a generic display picture as they might consider the profile fake.

Theoretical Background

Theory of consumption value

Sheth et al. (1991) developed a theory of consumption choice value to explain consumer choices. They identified five values that influence consumer behavior: 1) functional value, 2) conditional value, 3) social value, 4) emotional value, and 5) epistemic value. According to Sheth et al. (1991), the five values are independent and may not occur at once, but all five values positively impact consumer choice. There has been criticism that the values might not be independent, therefore, for the purpose of our study, the values are allowed to be interrelated (Sweeney and Soutar 2001). All values might not be equally met, and users might accept certain values over other values (Sheth et al. 1991). The values can be both negative and positive depending on the individual consumer. Both seller and buyers are consumers of the platform. The theory has been influenced by theories from various disciplines such as economics (utility theory), sociology (social stratification), clinical psychology (Freudian), consumer behavior (comprehensive models), social psychology (attitude models) and experimental psychology (learning theory) (Sheth et al. 1991). This theory has been used in IS to understand user behavior such as user acceptance and technology adoption (Turel et al. 2010).

The theory helps understand the choice between two options. For our study, we want to see based on what values and features the user chooses to buy or not to buy an item and similarly the seller chooses to sell or not to sell to a particular buyer. The study will only consider values related to the platform and not individual products.

Affordance theory

The concept of affordance was first introduced by Gibson (1979) in the field of ecology. Gibson wanted to understand how the perception of the environment played a role in how the animals interacted with the environment. Recently, the theory of affordance has been adopted by various scholars in information systems (IS) (Anderson 2021; Karahanna et al. 2018; Leonardi 2011). In IS, affordances are understood as action possibilities enabled by the platform's features (Karahanna et al. 2018). The features of the platform enable the affordances of the platform. The affordance is based on the relation between the object and the actor, although affordance exists even if the actor does not perceive it (Volkoff and Strong 2013). If the perception is not clear to the user, the user limits the use of that given feature. As a result, the user exhibits only specific behavior as the observer does not realize other behavior/interaction opportunities; thus, not all affordances might be actualized (Strong et al. 2014). The platform has an exhaustive list of affordances based on its features, but only certain affordances are realized for a given user based on user abilities, user goal, and environment (Strong et al. 2014). Some features might hurt the user and create negative affordance (Gibson 1979). E.g., the Facebook marketplace shows the year the seller made the account which might create negative affordance for a new seller who just came to the platform, and the buyer might consider their profile illegitimate.

We have identified relevant affordances from the literature and adopted them for our study: 1) Visibility (Treem and Leonardi 2013), 2) Metavoicing (Majchrzak et al. 2013), 3) Sharing (Kietzmann et al. 2011), 4) Personalization (Rice et al. 2017), 5) Persistence and Editability (Treem and Leonardi 2013), 6) Searchability (Rice et al. 2017), 7) Triggered attending (Majchrzak et al. 2013), 8) Social validation (Dong et al. 2016) and 8) Trade facilitation (Dong et al. 2016). The study will consider both general and actionable affordances.

Research Model and Hypotheses Development

Based on the affordance theory and the theory of consumption value, the model in figure 1 is developed. As figure 1 shows, the consumer values motivate the affordance of the OSC platform. The features of the platform enable these affordances.

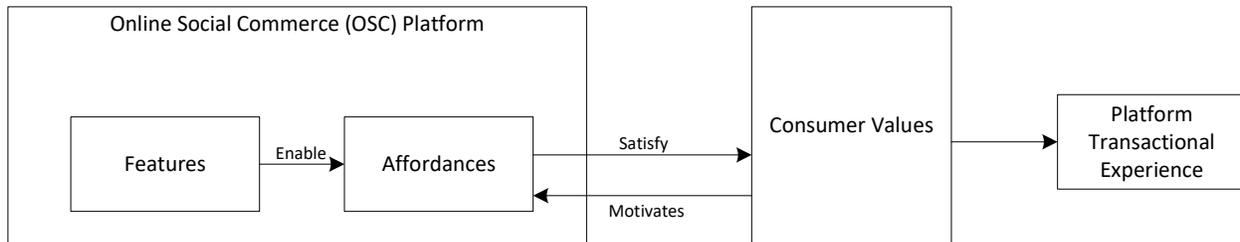


Figure 1. Research Model

The actualized affordances satisfy the consumption values both positively and negatively, which determines the overall transactional experience on the platform. We expect certain affordances will be related to each user value. For instance, "sharing" affordance is likely to fulfill the user's functional and social value. Similarly, we developed the following hypotheses:

H1: *User's functional value motivates the use of OSC platforms that have these affordances: visibility, metavoicing, sharing, personalization, persistence and editability, searchability, triggered attending, social validation, and trade facilitation.*

The functional value focuses on the function of the product in our research context OSC platform functions are enabled by its features. The users use features to meet their goals. All the affordances will directly or indirectly satisfy a functional value.

H2: *User's conditional value motivates the use of OSC platforms that have these affordances: visibility, metavoicing, persistence and editability, social validation, and trade facilitation.*

Certain changes in the environment can influence choice and create conditional value. These changes can be brought about by certain features. Thus, what these features will show will satisfy the conditional value. For example, the photos of the product can help users determine if the listing is a scam or a genuine listing, which will determine user choice.

H3: *User's social value motivates the use of OSC platforms that have these affordances: metavoicing, sharing, and personalization.*

User's social value is derived by social norms and their own perception, believes and stereotypes. Platform features which show information in line with societal approval or confirm their believes or stereotypes such as seller reviews and community comments on the listing will enable affordances to satisfy the user's social value.

H4: *User's emotional value motivates the use of OSC platforms that have these affordances: personalization, persistence and editability, triggered attending, and social validation.*

The buying and selling process involves user's emotions. Various features can trigger emotions that create emotional value through affordances. A good description, profile details, and affiliation will create a feeling of trust.

H5: *User's epistemic value motivates the use of OSC platforms that have these affordances: searchability, and triggered attending.*

Epistemic value is derived from something which provides curiosity, newness, or unfamiliarity. Features like notification for price change enable triggered attending affordance which can satisfy epistemic needs.

H6a: *Positively met values will create a positive platform transactional experience.*

H6b: *Negatively met values will create a negative platform transactional experience.*

Based on consumption value theory, depending on whether the perceived values of the users are met positively or negatively, the user will make a choice. The extend of how well the values are met, the transactional experience will be determined accordingly. If more values are met, the transactional experience will be more positive.

Methodology

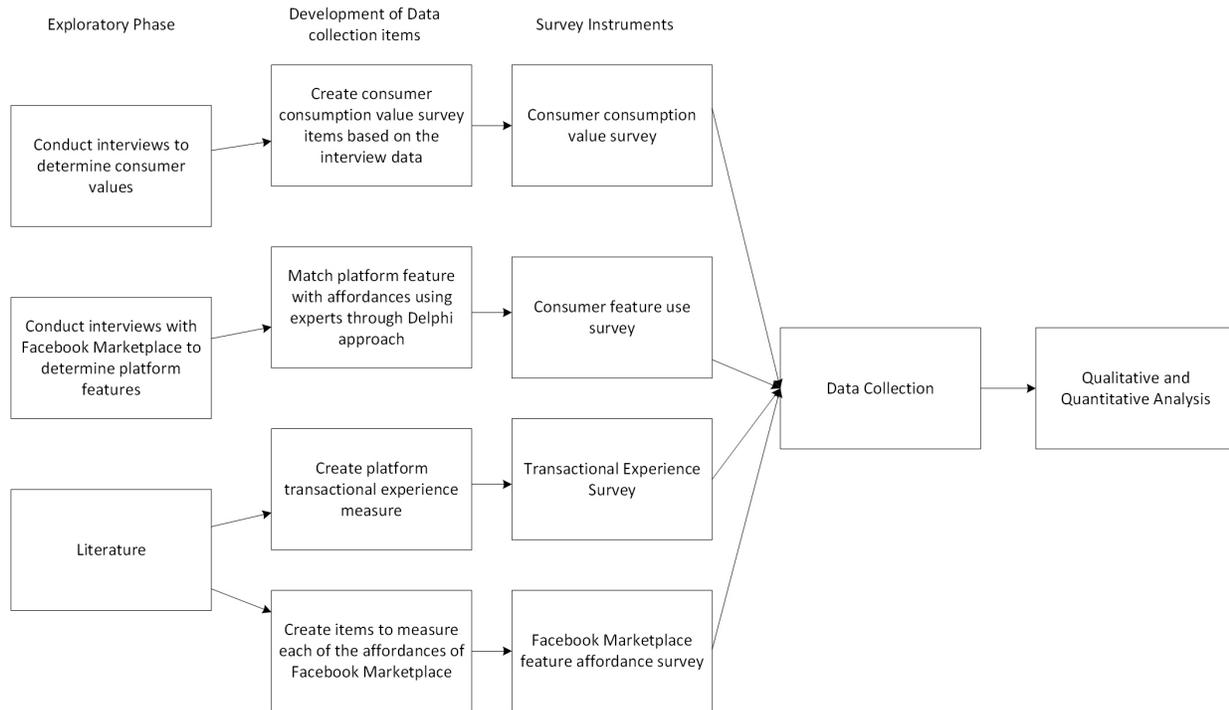


Figure 2. Research Methodology

Figure 2 summarizes our methodology. We will conduct interviews in the exploratory phase with consumers of Facebook Marketplace to determine consumer values, features of the platform. The interviews will focus on collected data about users' consumption values and how they interact with the platform. Additionally, we will also try to understand the context of use of the OSC platforms and identify controls for our study as well.

In the next phase, we will create survey items based on data collected through interviews as recommended by Sheth et al. (1991). After the survey items have been created, we will conduct surveys to collect data and analyze it with appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods.

Implications and Conclusion

The study will create a better understanding of the OSC platform and how users interact with the platform and make buying and selling decisions. Our study has several implications. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study studying the seller decision process in social commerce. The framework designed in this study can be used to understand other OSC platforms in future studies. The study will increase the general understanding of how Online Social Commerce is used by users based on user values. System designers can better understand the importance and use of OSC platform features and recognize areas where the feature can be improved. Lastly, system designers can understand the gaps in users' values that are not being met and get in-depth insights into users' value-driven decision-making process.

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