

Social Media Information Search Behavior in Consumption Decisions: Consumer Segmentation and Discriminant Factors

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Easy access and efficiency of the internet and mobile technologies have led consumers to engage in diversified information search behaviors (Shaheen & Lodhi, 2016) characterized by ongoing information search throughout the pre-, in-, and post-purchase stages of consumption (Bugday et al., 2016). Social media play a particularly important role as a major information source for both targeted information search for purchase and ongoing exploratory information search (Moe, 2003). However, no existing literature has offered an empirical investigation or a theoretical discussion that integrates the diverse roles of consumer information search in social media, which is a gap addressed by this study.

Consumer segmentation is the process of dividing a population into manageable sub-groups according to shared characteristics (Tuten & Solomon, 2015) to offer an overview of the population from a specified perspective (depending on the segmentation base variable used). Social media information search behavior (SMISB) has been rarely employed as a segmentation base variable despite the usefulness of identifying information search patterns for understanding consumer decision-making behavior (Choi & Park, 2006). This study fills this literature gap, by 1) identifying distinctive consumer segments based on their SMISBs and 2) comparing the demographic and psychographic characteristics of identified SMISB-based consumer segments.

This study is grounded in Chang and Kwon's (2018) modified consumer decision-making (MCDM) model. Critiquing the over-simplified conceptualization by traditional consumer decision-making models (e.g., Cox et al., 1983) which view information search as just a step that comes between the need/problem recognition and alternative evaluation steps in a linear purchase decision-making process, the MCDM model postulates four information search stages (ISSs) depending on the goal and timing of information search. The four ISSs include the pre-market, pre-purchase ISS leading to need/problem recognition (ISS1); the in-market, pre-purchase ISS for identifying product attributes and alternatives (ISS2); the in-market, in-purchase ISS to inform purchase decisions (ISS3); and the post-market, post-purchase ISS for post-purchase evaluation (ISS4). This study identified and explained consumer segments based on the consumer's SMISBs, particularly the SMISB frequency and the variety of social media types used for SMISB in each of the four ISSs. The identified consumer segments were then described and compared in terms of psychographic descriptor variables (i.e., innovativeness, impulse buying tendency) and demographic descriptor variables (i.e., gender, age), which have been known to be associated with information search behavior.

Methods

Data were collected via an online survey with a national sample of 501 U.S. consumers (20-64 years old) recruited from a consumer panel of an online research firm. Participants were provided with a brief description of each of the four ISSs and rated *the frequency of SMISB* in each ISS as well as how often they used each of the five types of social media (social networking sites, media sharing sites, review sites, blogs/forums, social news sites) on a 5-point scale (1 = Never, 5 = Very Frequently). Responses to the latter were later re-coded as “yes” (if rated 3-5) or “no” (if rated 1 or 2), and the number of social media types with a yes code was computed as a measure of *the variety of social media types* used in each ISS. Participants also completed measures for the psychographic variables using existing scale items as well as demographic questions.

Results

A hierarchical clustering analysis using the Ward’s method was conducted with the eight base variables (SMISB frequency and social media variety for each of the four ISSs). Four consumer segments with distinctive SMISB emerged from this analysis, including *Maximizers*, *the Disinterested*, *Slackers*, and *Diggers* (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics^a and ANOVA Results

Variable	<i>Maximizers</i> (n = 158)	<i>The Disinterested</i> (n = 101)	<i>Slackers</i> (n = 123)	<i>Diggers</i> (n = 119)	F (3, 497)
ISS1 Frequency	3.74(0.98)	1.65(.64)	2.88(.81)	3.29(.90)	127.791***
Variety	4.27(1.13)	0.24(.47)	1.36(.99)	2.23(1.09)	394.711***
ISS2 Frequency	3.79(.98)	1.26(.46)	2.36(.81)	3.38(.84)	225.163***
Variety	4.38(1.10)	.15(.46)	.90(.74)	2.34(1.05)	604.808***
ISS3 Frequency	3.77(.89)	1.26(.50)	2.33(.80)	3.33(1.10)	202.025***
Variety	4.39(.94)	.04(.20)	.80(.90)	2.27(.93)	741.107***
ISS4 Frequency	3.83(.93)	1.16(.37)	1.74(.88)	2.76(1.13)	228.330***
Variety	4.39(.92)	.02(.14)	.39(.67)	1.35(1.23)	742.710***
Age (M)	35.96(11.29)	48.2(12.32)	42.05(13.18)	39.81(11.96)	21.730***
Age (Md)	34.0	51.0	41.5	40.0	
Gender (% male)	56.3	51.5	39.0	48.0	2.893*
Innovativeness	3.63(.89)	2.62(.76)	2.67(.69)	2.88(.71)	51.459***
Impulse buying	3.43(1.02)	2.50(.91)	2.52(.85)	2.59(.94)	32.289***

^a Mean (standard deviation), unless specified otherwise. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Maximizers are consumers who intensively search for information throughout all four ISSs. Many of them are in their 20s and male. This segment shows the highest innovativeness and impulse buying tendency among all four segments. *Diggers* are also heavy social media information seekers but differ from maximizers in that they use social media frequently for pre- and in-purchase stages (ISS1 through ISS3) but not as much for post-purchase evaluation (ISS4); further, this segment show a fairly even representation of all age groups and genders and are less

impulsive in buying and less innovative than maximizers. *The disinterested* comprise of consumers who hardly engage in social media information search in any of the four ISSs and tend to be relatively old (40 + years old = 75%); whereas *slackers* come between diggers and the disinterested in SMISB levels across all four ISSs and are mostly female. Slackers appear to conduct SMISB only when needed without habitual ongoing SMISB like maximizers or diggers. *The disinterested* and *slackers* are both the least innovative and the least impulsive among the four segments, but slackers tend to be younger than the disinterested.

Implications

To the researchers' best knowledge, this is the first study that utilizes SMISB as a basis for consumer segmentation, contributing a comprehensive overview of consumers' SMISB patterns. Further, by applying the four ISSs from the MCDM model to describe consumers' SMISB, this study provides evidence for the ecological validity of the ISS conceptualization of the MCDM model. Findings of this study also benefit business practitioners by helping them understand different consumer segments with diverse information search motivations and behavioral patterns. Additionally, the knowledge on psychographic and demographic characteristics of the four identified segments may help marketers design appropriate social media marketing strategies geared toward their target audiences' characteristics.

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