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Self-Awareness or Context-Awareness? The Role of Awareness in Herd Behavior

Short Paper

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Abstract

Online consumers are increasingly using social commerce platforms to engage in various social interactions and conduct commercial activities. Drawing on latent state-trait (LST) theory, this study investigates how self-awareness (i.e., private and public self-awareness) and context-awareness (i.e., perceived expertise, similarity and familiarity) influence herd behavior (i.e., discounting own information and imitating other). In addition, we examine the interplay between self-awareness and context-awareness. Furthermore, we posit that herd behavior contributes positively to purchase intention, which in turn influences purchase behavior. To test the proposed model, we will collect longitudinal data from actual social commerce users. The theoretical and practical implication will be discussed

Keywords: social commerce, self-awareness, context-awareness, herd behavior, purchase behavior

Introduction

By integrating social media and e-commerce, social commerce has become increasingly prevalent among online consumers (Hu et al. 2019; Wu et al. 2018). Chen et al. (2018) indicated that half of online consumers rely on social media to gain product recommendations. However, although more and more individuals are using social commerce, most social commerce platforms are facing a profit dilemma due to the low purchase conversion rate (Wang et al. 2015). Thus, understanding what factors facilitate individuals to make purchases in social commerce is an important concern for both academia and practice.

Prior research indicated that individuals' decision-making process may be influenced by herding to a large extent (Devenow and Welch 1996). This is because individuals' decision making is dependent on observing information of others during herding (Walden and Browne 2009). Herd behavior has been widely examined in the financial (Al-Hasan 2018) and political arenas (Battaglini 2005). Although some IS researchers have considered herding to explain information adaptation, software downloading and online auctions in recent years (Duan et al. 2009; Shen et al. 2016), the context of social commerce tends to be overlooked. Herding can occur in the social commerce context because individuals try to make purchase decisions based on the opinions and evaluations of products of other consumers (Cheung et al. 2014). Thus, peer consumer purchase can provide an informative cue of quality that promotes consumers to follow behaviors of their predecessors (Cheung et al. 2014), thereby increasing purchase conversation rate. However, the relative impact of two herd factors (i.e., discounting own information and imitating others) on consumer purchase behavior remains unclear.

Indeed, herd behavior has been investigated from two perspectives: either awareness of context (Li and Wu 2018; Shen et al. 2016) or awareness of self (Darban and Amirkhiz 2015; Fiol and O'Connor 2003). For example, background and attitude homophily have been demonstrated to positively affect herd behavior (Shen et al. 2016). Alternatively, other studies have examined the effect of investors' feeling on mutual fund herding (Liao et al. 2011). These two perspectives have advanced our knowledge of herd behavior, with the former offering empirical evidence that context-awareness (i.e. environment characteristics) can contribute to herd behavior and the latter research suggesting that self-awareness (i.e., personal characteristics inherent to the individual) can influence herd behavior. However, these studies have not simultaneously considered the respective influence of context-awareness and self-awareness on herd behavior in one study.

Some researchers have also noted that investigating any human behavior using the above dichotomy of state (i.e., context-awareness) versus trait (i.e., self-awareness) may lead to an oversimplification of the phenomenon (Wells et al. 2011). Mischel (1973) explained that personal traits cannot always predict individuals' behavior because individuals' behavior also relies on how individuals respond to specific environments within a given context. Therefore, we should consider the interaction between self- and context-awareness to comprehensively understand herd behavior in social commerce. However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has yet simultaneously investigated the relative roles of self- and context-awareness in herd behavior. Thus, the objective of this research is to address this gap in the herd behavior literature by investigating (1) the respective effect of self- and context-awareness on an individual's herd behavior, and (2) the interplay between self- and context-awareness on herd behavior.

Literature Review

Herd Behavior

Sun (2013) indicated that we may all be witness to and participate in situations where what people around us do has a strong influence on our decisions. Consistent with previous herd literature, we define herding in purchase behavior as the phenomenon that an individual imitates others when purchasing products. Although it can be treated as a means to make a decision about which product to purchase, herding should also comprise making a choice between the purchase and not to purchase of a particular product. Sun (2013) recognized two herd factors, namely, discounting one's own information and imitating others. Discounting own information refers to the extent to which an individual discounts his/her own beliefs when making a decision. Imitating others is defined as the extent to which an individual follows others' behaviors when making a decision. The reasons for classifying herd behavior as "discounting own information" and "imitating others" are as follows. First, some disparate signals sent by predecessors (to

buy or not to buy in our case) may facilitate an individual to question the value of the product by depending on his/her information (Banerjee 1992). Second, individuals may contend that predecessors' decisions are less relevant (Sun 2013). The fact that many people have bought this product indicates that this product is popular and useful, while an individual's own information suggests how this product satisfies his/her needs.

Herd behavior is more salient in online contexts because: (1) information asymmetry and uncertainty are more serious than in offline environments. When individuals are faced with uncertain environments or have incomplete and asymmetric information, they are more likely to herd (Walden and Browne 2009). (2) it is easy for individuals to observe the information of others' purchase decisions on the Internet (Duan et al. 2009). However, little research has empirically examined herd behavior in social commerce, despite recent researchers pointing out the importance of considering herding and social media word-of-mouth in Groupon (one type of social commerce) (Li and Wu 2018).

Prior research investigated herd behavior by considering either environment characteristics (Sun 2013) or personal characteristics (Liao et al. 2011), thereby revealing only a one-sided view of herd behavior. The latent state-trait (LST) theory, developed by Steyer et al. (1999), indicates that individuals' behaviors are affected by personal characteristics (traits), environment cues or situations (states), and the interplay between states and traits. Building on the LST theory, we operationalize state as context-awareness and trait as self-awareness.

Self-Awareness and Context-Awareness

Self-Awareness

Prior research has classified self-awareness as private and public self-awareness (Buss 2001). Trafimow et al. (1991) noted that "the private self includes cognitions that involve traits, states, or behaviors (e.g., I am honest) [...] the public self includes cognitions about how some generalized other views of the person (e.g., people think I am honest)" (p. 649). Private self-awareness is defined as the attention to internal feelings and standards of one's self (Govern and Marsch 2001). Public self-awareness is defined as the focus of oneself as a social object (Govern and Marsch 2001).

Both private and public self-awareness can control human behavior (Spears and Lea 1994). On the one hand, an individual depends on internal values and standards (the private self) to evaluate his/her current behavior. If discrepancies exist between the internal values and behavior, individuals may change their behavior to achieve a new balance. On the other hand, unlike public self-consciousness and the dispositional tendency, public self-awareness is a relatively transient state (Uhrich and Tombs 2014). Public self-awareness may lead to behavior inhibition because individuals' feelings of responsibilities to obey the norms of their social environment (Baumeister 1982; Uhrich and Tombs 2014). Previous researchers have argued that private and public self-awareness can act independently or concurrently to influence human behavior (Kim et al. 2019).

However, self-awareness only reflects one side of the story. Consistent with LST theory, we review the literature regarding characteristics of online circumstances, namely, context-awareness.

Context-Awareness

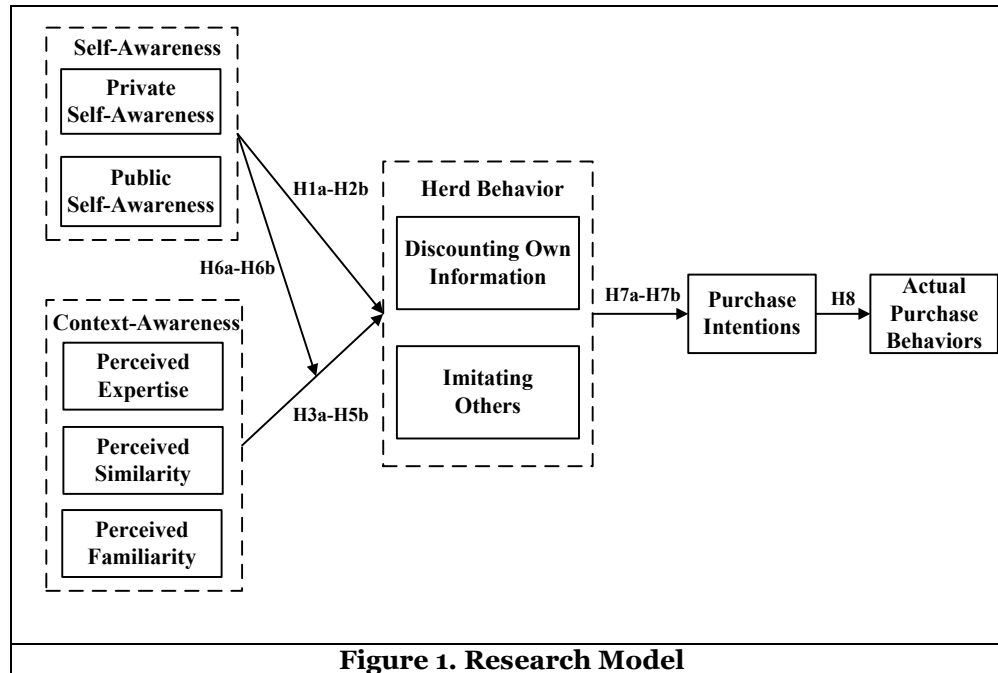
Awareness of context has also been found to affect herd behavior (Cheung et al. 2014; Shen et al. 2016). For example, Sun (2013) argued that observation of others' action is positively associated with herd behavior, such that individuals may follow a group of people who are experts or leaders. Shen et al. (2016) proposed that similar social background, values, preferences and attitudes can lead to herd behavior. Hence, context-awareness means individuals' feelings outward toward the peer members in social commerce.

In this study, following Shen et al. (2010), we contend that context-awareness includes three dimensions: perceived expertise, similarity and familiarity. Perceived expertise refers to individuals' perception of the amount of knowledge that other people have (Liu et al. 2016; Shen et al. 2010). Perceived similarity is defined as individuals' perceptions of similar characteristics (e.g., value, interest and preference) with other people (Shen et al. 2010; Zhang et al. 2018b). Perceived familiarity refers to individuals' knowledge about other members and their activities as well as the amount of interaction among members (Shen et al.

2010). Recent evidence confirmed that individuals can be aware of expertise, similarity and familiarity in social commerce contexts (Hu et al. 2016). Although individuals in social commerce cannot see each other in person, they can form impressions and judgments through cues provided during the social interaction process.

Research Model and Hypotheses

The research model is depicted in Figure 1, which is justified in the following section.



The Effect of Self-Awareness on Herd Behavior

In a state of private self-awareness, individuals focus more on their private self, and use their internal standards rather than social standards to guide their behavior (Froming et al. 1982). Thus, individuals are more certain about their decisions and do not need to observe others' actions. The private self is relatively stable and exists outside the social structures (Oyserman et al. 2012). This means that a private self-awareness individual always ignores group norms (Kim et al. 2019). Being in a private self-awareness condition, an individual may actively search for more information to make a careful consideration. By evaluating product-relevant information, individuals may discriminate information quality. Hence, the individuals might be more certain about the products, and thereby not easily question their own information about products and imitate others on social commerce platforms even if it conflicts with others' information.

H1a: Private self-awareness is negatively related to discounting own information.

H1b: Private self-awareness is negatively related to imitating others.

In a state of public self-awareness, individuals worry about the impressions they make on others (Uhrich and Tombs 2014). Impression management occurs at any time an individual is in the presence of other people (Goffman 2017). In social commerce, people are also motivated to engage in making a good impression on others in order to gain social benefits, such as social support and assistance. When individuals pay attention to their public self, they might adjust their behavior to be consistent with the standards accepted by other members (Froming et al. 1982). In other words, individuals tend to follow others' behavior in a high condition of public self-awareness because of feeling the need to maintain a state of conformity. In addition, being aware of oneself as a public self also promotes an individual to be identified to a social group (Uhrich and Tombs 2014). Prior research indicated that identification facilitates individuals to participate in activities in the social group (Casaló et al. 2010). As a result,

individuals may discount their own information and imitate others, buy what others have bought in order to become a member of a social group.

H2a: Public self-awareness is positively related to discounting own information.

H2b: Public self-awareness is positively related to imitating others.

The Effect of Context-Awareness on Herd Behavior

Yi et al. (2013) indicated that individuals view information from experts as being of higher quality. Individuals may perceive that experts can provide more useful and accurate advice (Constant et al. 1996). Thus, they are more likely to agree with an expert while being less responsive to their own information. Individuals even change their own opinions in order to conformity with the expert's viewpoint (Shen et al. 2016). The opinions of experts are often considered more reliable and credible than others (Petty et al. 1981). If an individual perceives the expertise of other consumers on the social commerce platform, then that individual is more likely to follow the behavior of those other consumers. Bandura (1986) also proposed that individuals may imitate or learn from a group of people, such as experts, believing that they may possess more accurate information than others.

H3a: Perceived expertise is positively related to discounting own information.

H3b: Perceived expertise is positively related to imitating others.

Previous researchers noted that similar individuals tend to perceive a high level of trust with each other (Levin and Cross 2004). As such, individuals are more likely to trust other consumers' information and be less reliant on their own information. In addition, individuals with similar values, preferences and tastes are more likely to perceive information from others as being more useful (Zhang et al. 2018b). In this case, individuals may have positive expectations with respect to the quality of the products and thus discount their own information. Prior research pointed out that imitation occurs when individuals are in a network with similar preferences (Banerjee 1992). Goeree et al. (2006) also argued that individuals may follow others' behavior in the condition of high common preferences. Thus, we propose that if individuals perceived similarity with others, they may infer others have made the right decisions and thus can be imitated.

H4a: Perceived similarity is positively related to discounting own information.

H4b: Perceived similarity is positively related to imitating others.

Members of a social commerce platform are likely to build a close relationship with each other, which may attribute to the fact that they have frequent interactions (i.e. familiarity). Familiarity can strengthen trust and has a positive effect on the social interaction process (Kang et al. 2016). Accordingly, individuals tend to trust other consumers who are familiar with them. The individuals prefer to rely on familiar people's information to make decisions while giving up their own beliefs. Furthermore, high familiarity also leads to individuals' identity-based attachment to a group (Ren et al. 2012). Individuals may imitate the general choice of a group of people because of the wisdom of the crowd (Sun 2013). Individuals who treat themselves as a member of a social group are more likely to follow the behavior of other members (Cheung and Lee 2010).

H5a: Perceived familiarity is positively related to discounting own information.

H5b: Perceived familiarity is positively related to imitating others.

Interaction of Self-Awareness and Context-Awareness on Herd Behavior

We argue that highly private self-awareness persons are less likely to react to context cues (i.e., perceived expertise, similarity and familiarity) that induce herd behavior. Private self-awareness is relatively stable and exists outside particular social contexts (Kim et al. 2019). In particular, Kim et al. (2019) noted that an individual's ability to self-regulate via private self-awareness can be reduced by heightened reaction to context cues. In other words, the context cues attenuate herd behavior induced by internal self-focus. Thus, individuals scoring high on the private self-awareness scale will be less responsive to context-awareness (i.e., perceived expertise, similarity and familiarity), indicating that these individuals will be less inclined to engage in herd behavior.

By contrast, individuals who score high in public self-awareness are more sensitive to be aware of the context around them, suggesting that they are more likely to engage in herd behavior. Wells et al. (2011)

indicated that exposure to certain environmental cues can cause a variety of affective responses. Public self-awareness represents a transient state that is influenced by accountability cues (Uhrich and Tombs 2014). The valence of an individual's response to context cues may result in more magnified reaction to herd or non-herd behavior. Therefore, we assume that when interacting with environments with varied expertise, similarity and familiarity, individuals' herd behavior will also be influenced by their level of public self-awareness.

H6a: The interaction between private self-awareness and context-awareness is negatively associated with herd behavior.

H6b: The interaction between public self-awareness and context-awareness is positively associated with herd behavior.

The Effect of Herd Behavior on Purchase Intentions

Discounting one's own information may have a positive influence on purchase intention. Discounting one's own information means that an individual becomes less sensitive to his/her own information when making decisions (Banerjee 1992). This also suggests that when individuals purchase products, they bypass their own beliefs about the products and instead depend on the observations of the behaviors of others. Even though the individuals' beliefs are not consistent with the observation of others' behavior, they still tend to purchase the products. Thus, the impact of external behavior or information may exert a stronger effect than their own information.

We argue that imitating others has a significant effect on the individual's own decision. Prior research indicated that consumers usually have imperfect information regarding the quality of a product, thereby they are inclined to imitate others' purchasing behavior (Cheung et al. 2014). Meanwhile, other consumers' purchase behavior may convey a reliable signal that promotes individuals to follow predecessors' actions and make decisions (Simpson et al. 2008). Thus, an individual who tends to imitate others can use the cues of the number of product sales and online reviews to infer the quality of the products (Huang and Chen 2006). Previous literature also demonstrated the positive significant relationship between imitating others and behavior adoption (Shen et al. 2016).

H7a: Discounting own information is positively related to purchase intentions.

H7b: Imitating others is positively related to purchase intentions.

The Effect of Purchase Intentions on Purchase Behaviors

Numerous previous studies have demonstrated that intentions can lead to actual behaviors (Pavlou and Gefen 2004). Thus, we propose that:

H8: Purchase intentions are positively related to purchase behaviors.

Research Methodology

Research Setting

In this study, Xiaohongshu is chosen as the research setting. First, Xiaohongshu is one of the most popular social commerce platforms in China (Zhang et al. 2018a). By the end of January 2019, the number of users of Xiaohongshu exceeded 200 million (www.xiaohongshu.com). Second, Xiaohongshu, which is based on common interests and social connections, allows users to create their own content. Xiaohongshu enables users to seek advice from other peers, share comments on purchased products and purchase products (Zhang et al. 2018a). The target samples of this research are people who have usage experience of Xiaohongshu.

Measurement Development

The measurement items used in this study will be adapted from previously valid established scales. Specifically, private and public self-awareness will be measured with items adapted from Kim et al. (2019).

Perceived expertise, similarity, familiarity will be assessed using four items each adapted from Shen et al. (2010). Discounting own information and imitating others will be measured using three items each adapted from Sun (2013). Purchase intentions will be tested using three items adapted from Pavlou and Gefen (2004). These items will be phrased on a seven-point Likert scale, anchoring from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Actual purchase behaviors will be measured by asking the buyers to report how many times they buy from Xiaohongshu during the four-week time period. We will also include control variables, namely, gender, age, and education level in the research model.

Research Design and Data Collection

We will use a two-stage longitudinal online survey to collect the data. The questionnaire will be distributed through a market research firm to Xiaohongshu users. The participants will be recruited by the research panels in the firm and all participants will be rewarded by the firm. The participants will be asked to recall a most recent purchase experience on Xiaohongshu.

Expected Contributions

This study has several important theoretical implications. First, prior research has mainly focused on context characteristics when investigating herd behavior (Li and Wu 2018). However, the role of individual characteristics is also an important consideration yet has received very limited attention from previous studies. Indeed, Sun (2013) indicated that not everyone is willing to join a herd, and different people may exhibit different extent of herd behavior. Sun (2013) thus called for further examinations of individual characteristics on herd behavior. Our study is among the first to address this assertion and the findings of this study also enhance our scholarly understanding of the critical role of self- and context-awareness in influencing herd behavior and subsequent purchase behavior.

Second, our study provides a more enlightened understanding of herd behavior by highlighting the significance of considering the interplay between self- and context-awareness on herd behavior. To the best of our knowledge, this study is only one that has systematically investigated the interplay between self- and context-awareness within the herd behavior context. Such an approach emphasizes the coexistences of both personal and context characteristics in herd behavior and recognizes that self- and context-awareness do not operate in isolation, but interact with each other. This approach advances beyond the “either-or”, relatively prescriptive nature of early human awareness research (Hu et al. 2016; Uhrich and Tombs 2014).

Another significant contribution is that this study offers new insight into self-awareness. Existing research on human behavior is inconclusive, mainly attributing to partial aspects of self-concepts (Kim et al. 2019). These studies focus on either private self-awareness (Goukens et al. 2009) or public self-awareness (Uhrich and Tombs 2014). People might have multiple self-concepts, therefore a holistic view of self-concepts is preferred compared with a fragmented picture of the self (Kim et al. 2019).

This study also has some important practical implications. First, for social commerce platforms, this study recommends that herd behavior exerts a positive effect on individuals' purchase intentions. Second, for online consumers, this study suggests that imitation is a useful strategy for choosing a product. Imitation can help reduce negative uncertainty when purchasing a product. So if the consumers do not want to spend so much time or effort to search a product, imitation is a useful strategy. However, if consumers aim to buy a product that satisfies their own needs, they should avoid imitation.

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