Effects of Pre-Purchase Search Motivation on User Attitudes toward Online Social Network Advertising: A Case of University Students

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Abstract

Since last few years, social media have profoundly changed the ways of social and business communication. Particularly, social network sites (SNSs) have rapidly grown in popularity and number of users globally. They have become the main place for social interaction, discussion and communication. Today, businesses of various types use SNSs for commercial communication. Banner advertising is one of the common methods of commercial communication on SNSs. Advertising is a key source of revenue for many SNSs firms such as Facebook. In fact, the existence of many SNSs owners and advertisers is contingent upon the success of social network advertising (SNA). Users demand free SNS services which makes SNA crucial for SNSs firms. SNA can be effective only if it is aligned with user motivations. Marketing literature identifies pre-purchase search as a primary consumer motivation for using media. The current study aims to identify the effects of pre-purchase search motivation (PSM) on user attitudes toward SNA. It also assesses the association between the attitudes toward SNA and users' banner ad-clicking behavior on SNSs. Data was gathered from 200 university students in Islamabad using offline survey. Results show positive effects of PSM on user attitudes toward SNA. They also show positive association between user attitudes toward SNA and their SNS banner ad-clicking behavior. The firms which promote their products through SNSs to the young South Asian consumers may benefit from the findings of the current study.

1. INTRODUCTION

Advancements in internet based technologies profoundly affected the ways of communication. Recently, social media remarkably changed the communication landscape (Edwards, 2011). It has become the main channel for social interaction and communication (Eagleman, 2013). Social media are internet based applications that empower users to interact with other users online. They also allow users to generate and exchange content online (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social media represents various online social communication platforms (e.g. SNSs, multimedia sharing sites, bookmarking sites, wikies etc.). Relatively, the popularity and user adoption of SNSs are promptly growing worldwide (Demerling, 2010; Kozel et al., 2013; Taylor, Lewin, and Strutton, 2011; Vasalou, Joinson, and Courvoisier, 2010). Their users are projected to be 1.73 billion in 2013. By 2017 SNSs users are estimated to be 2.55 billion globally (eMarketer.com, 2013).

There are 29 million internet users in Pakistan (Yusuf, 2013). Effective Measure (an analytics and audience profiling firm) report shows that most of the Pakistani internet users use SNSs (e.g. Facebook) almost daily (ProPakistani, 2012). SNSs are based on web 2.0 technologies which enable online user connectivity and interaction. They enable users to create personal profiles and invite other users to view them. These profiles contain descriptive information (e.g. age, gender and location) about the user (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Tim O'Reilly tossed the term web 2.0 during a brainstorming session of a conference in 2004 (Musser and O'Reilly, 2006). Various past studies (e.g. Chen, 2012; Joinson, 2008; Kim, Shim, and Ahn, 2011; Valenzuela, Park, and Kee, 2009) examined the user motivations for using SNSs. Most of these studies identified information and entertainment seeking most common user motivations for using SNSs. Nevertheless, least studies assessed the effects of these motivations on user attitudes toward social network advertising (SNA). Specifically, past studies did not examine the effects of pre-purchase search motivation (PSM) on user attitudes toward SNA. PSM is the primary consumer motivation for using media. Consumers search information on the media to make the quality purchase decisions (Punj and Staelin, 1983). For example, consumers use internet to find the information useful in purchase decisions (Cui and Roto, 2008). Similarly, many consumers use SNSs to gratify their pre-purchase information needs (Park, Kee and Valenzuela, 2009).

The current study aims to assess the effects of pre-purchase search motivation on SNSs users' attitudes toward SNA. Furthermore, it aims to assess the association between attitudes toward SNA and SNSs users' banner ad-clicking behavior. Information seeking is one of the key personal motives affecting user attitudes toward advertising (Chen and Wells', 1999; Petrovici and Marinov, 2007). Consumers attend advertising to receive the information useful in making risk free purchase decisions (Esfahani, Sardar, and Kashani, 2012). Advertising helps consumers in making the right product choices in market place (O'Donohoe, 1994). Taylor et al. (2011) suggested that researchers must assess the influence of motivations for participating in SNSs on user attitudes toward ads appearing on these sites. Today, almost all sizes of businesses are advertising their products on SNSs (Neti, 2011; Constantinides and Fountain, 2008; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Firms which advertise their products on SNSs to South Asian young can benefit from the findings of the current study. Particularly, these findings will be helpful in determining the result oriented SNS banner ad content.

2. PRE-PURCHASE SEARCH MOTIVATION

Consumers' desire to make a quality purchase decision is their main motivation for information search (Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard, 1995). They use media such as internet to fulfill their pre-purchase information needs (Cui and Roto, 2008; Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Ha, 2002). Pre-purchase information seeking is one of the key motivations for consumers to use the media (Punj and Staelin, 1983). Pre-purchase search is information seeking and processing activities in which consumers engage to simplify their purchase decisions Kelly (1968). Consumers read, watch or observe product related information on different media to produce a well-considered purchase decision (Muntinga, Moorman and Smit, 2011). Pre-purchase information gathering helps consumers in reducing the perceived risk involved in a purchase. It also helps them in making a sensible brand choice (Ha, 2002).

Consumers use internet to find the information helpful in purchase decision making (Cui and Roto, 2008). Consumers use SNSs to find the information which will help them in making right and risk free product choices (Park et al., 2009). Consumers seek other consumers' comments and recommendations on the internet to averse the perceived risk involved in a buying decision (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). Likewise, they gather other consumers' comments and suggestions on SNSs useful in gratifying informational deficit (Karlíček et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2009). Consumers also attend the advertising appearing on media (e.g. on SNSs) to gather the information useful in making risk free and better purchase decisions (Esfahani wt al., 2012; O'Donohoe, 1994). Advertising is a dominant commercial source of product information (Goldsmith, 2005).

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Motivations determine the users' actions with respect to web usage (Joines, Scherer and Scheufele, 2003). Therefore, understanding the users' motivations to use SNS would help in developing effective SNS banner advertisements. Motivations are reasons which influence individuals to act in order to satisfy their needs and wants (Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000). Motivations are categorized as intrinsic and extrinsic. Pre-purchase search is an extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is a drive that persuades an individual to act so that a specific goal is attained (Deci and Ryan, 1987). Information seeking is an important motivation for consumers to use SNSs (Chen, 2012; Joinson, 2008; Kim et al., 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2009). Consumers participate in SNSs and attend SNA to collect the pre-purchase information (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Karlíček et al., 2012; Park et al., 2009). The current study applies media uses and gratifications theory (UGT) Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch's (1973) to explain the association between exogenous and endogenous variables. UGT is a user centered theory which helps in understanding why and how people use media (Severin and Tankard, 1997). In other word, UGT explains consumer motivations for using media such as the internet (Jere and Davis, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011). By using UGT Taylor et al. (2011) found that motivations for using SNSs influence user attitudes toward SNA. The current study postulates that pre-purchase search motivation (PSM) for using SNSs (e.g. Facebook) influences users' attitude toward SNA (ATSNA). ATSNA in response influence them to click on the banner ads appearing on SNSs (see Fig. 1). Media uses and gratifications studies show that information seeking is one of the key user motives affecting their attitudes toward advertising (Petrovici and Marinov, 2007). Motivations for participating in SNSs positively influence user attitudes toward SNA (Chu, 2011; Taylor, 2011). Attitude reflects a person's favorable or unfavorable evaluations, perceptions and feelings of executing a specific behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). The current study postulates that SNSs users' positive attitudes toward SNA may influence them to click on the banner advertisements (ads) which appear on these sites. Consumer attitudes toward online and social media advertising have a positive effect on their ad-clicking behavior (Azeem and Haq, 2012; Mir, 2012; Wang and Sun, 2010). Ad-clicking is a user initiated action which takes him/her from the current web page to the advertiser's home page. Over there they have exposure to additional product information. In addition, they may buy a product or service on the advertiser's home page (Chatterjee, Hoffman, and Novak, 2003; Mir, 2012). Click through or ad-clicking behavior enhances the effectiveness of the banner ads (Hofacker and Murphy, 1998; Lohtia, Donthu, and Hershberger, 2003).
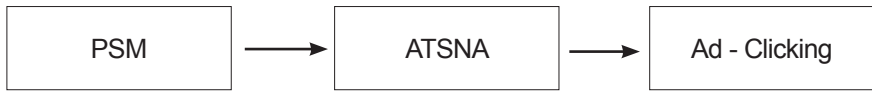
Fig. 1 – Attitudinal Model of SNA. Source: own.

Based on the theorization of influences of pre-purchase search motivation (PSM) on SNSs users' attitudes and behavior toward SNA following hypotheses are stated:

H1. Users' pre-purchase search motivation to use SNSs has a positive influence on their attitudes toward SNA.

H2. User attitudes toward SNA and their SNS banner ad-clicking behavior are associated positively.

4. METHOD

Data was gathered from a convenience sample (n = 200) of university students of Islamabad using offline survey. Students sample was used because they are the key and active users of SNSs (Chu, 2011; eMarketer, 2009). As compared to general population probably all college/university students have SNSs accounts and they spend ample time on these websites daily (Pelling and White, 2009). Thus, they are the prime targets for SNSs advertising campaigns (Chu, 2011). Respondents' demographic information was measured on gender, age and degree program. Degree program denotes the program in which respondents were enrolled at different universities of Islamabad. Categories were used to record the demographic information. Tab. 1 shows the demographic information in percentages. 38% respondents were Facebook users. 5.5 % were Google+ users. 1.0% were MySpace users. 41.5% were users of both Facebook and Google+. 4% were users of both Facebook and MySpace. 1.0% were users of both Google+ and MySpace. 8.5% were users of Facebook, Google+ and MySpace. 0.5 % were users of Hi5. 37.5% respondents were using SNSs more than once daily. 31.0%, 16.5%, 8.0%, 3.0%, and 4% were using SNSs once daily, several times a week, once a week, less than weekly, but more than once a month and once a month respectively. 24% respondents were spending less than half hour on SNSs per visit. 24%, 28%, 7.5%, 4.0% and 12.5% respondents were spending half hour, one hour , one and half hour, two hours and more than two hours on SNSs per visit respectively.

Tab. 1 – Demographic Information. Source: own.

Variable	Categories	Percentage
Gender	Male	63.0
	Female	37.0
Age	<20 but >18	27.0
	20-25	69.0
	25-30	3.0
	30-35	0.5
	35&above	0.5
Degree Program	Undergraduate	63.5
	Graduate	36.5

4.1 Measures and Scale Testing

To measure PSM construct 8 items were adapted from Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo, (2004), Flanagin and Metzger (2001), Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006), Grant (2005), Jere and Davis (2011), Lin, Wu and Hsu (2010).To measure user attitudes toward SNA 4 item were adapted from from Mir (2012), Taylor et al. (2011) and Wang and Sun (2010). To measure users' SNS banner ad-clicking behavior 2 items were adapted from Mir (2012). Responses of the participants were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale. This scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

To screen the measures of PSM principle component analysis (PCA) was performed on 8 items. Items were rotated using the varimax rotation method. PCA extracted one component of PSM consisting of 5 items. Items with commonalities less than .40 and loading less than .60 were deleted. The PCA values of PSM measures were as follows: eigenvalue = 2.813, the percentage of variance = 56.261, KMO= .822, Test of Sphericity by Bartlett = .000 < .05 and Cronbach's alpha = .805. Tab. 2 shows the item loadings of PSM. IM denotes information motivation in tab. 2 and 3.

Tab. 2 – PSM Scale. Source: own.

Item	Statement	Loading
IM1	I use SNSs to find the recommendations & advice to support my purchase decisions	.714
IM2	I use SNSs to get in-depth information about products &services	.786
IM3	I use SNSs to get the information to make informed buying decisions	.767
IM4	I use SNSs to learn how to solve problems involved in a purchase decision	.750
IM5	I use SNSs to find information to reduce the risk of making a bad product/service choice	.732

To assess the goodness of fit of the PSM measures confirmatory analysis (CFA) was performed. Results showed bad fit of the PSM measurement model to data as $\chi^2 = 11.916$, $df = 5$, p = .036 (p < .05). To evaluate the goodness of fit of the PSM measures the ratio of χ^2 to the degrees of freedom (df) was used. The ratio of χ^2 to df is an alternative method to assess the goodness of fit of the measures of the constructs (Joreskog and Sorbom, 1993). The value of χ^2/df equal to 3 or less than 3 indicates the goodness of fit of the construct measures (Kline, 1998). In the current study, $\chi^2/df = 2.383$ which indicated goodness fit of PSM measurement model to data. Besides χ^2 and χ^2/df goodness of fit of PSM measures was assessed on goodness of fit index (GFI), normed fit index (NFI), incremental fit index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). In the current study GFI = .97, NFI= .96, TLI= .95, TLI= .95, CFI = .97 and RMSEA = .08. These values indicate the good fit of PSM measures to data. For the goodness of fit of the measures of the constructs GFI, NFI, TLI, TLI, CFI should be ≥ .90 and RMSEA ≤ .08 (Bentler, 1983:1990; Marsh and Grayson, 1995; McDonald and Ho, 2002). Tab. 3 shows the CFA estimates of PSM measurement model.

Tab. 3 – PSM Scale CFA Estimates. Source: own.

Item		Construct	ß	S.E	C.R	P
IM1	←	PSM	.626			***
IM2	←	PSM	.731	.147	7.767	***
IM3	←	PSM	.702	.145	7.601	***
IM4	←	PSM	.665	.147	7.021	***
IM5	←	PSM	.641	.145	6.868	***

Usefulness and applicability of endogenous variables (i.e. attitude towards SNA/ATSNA and ad-clicking behavior) were evaluated by assessing their overall and item reliability. The overall reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of ATSNA was .771. The overall reliability (Guttman Split-Half Coefficient) of ad-clicking behavior was .762. Tab. 4 shows the item reliability of user attitudes toward SNA and ad-clicking behavior. A denotes attitude and C ad-clicking in tab.4.

Tab. 4 – Attitude and Ad-Clicking Scale. Source: own.

Item	Statement	Reliability
A1	I consider SNS advertising very essential	.744
A2	I would describe my overall attitude toward SNS banner advertising very favorably	.677
A3	My general opinion about SNS advertising is favorable	.716
A4	I like banner ads of products shown on SNSs	.726
C1	I often click on SNS banner ads	.762
C2	I often click on ads shown on my SNS profile	.762

4.2 Construct Validity

Construct validity is obtained by assessing the convergent and discriminant validity of construct measures. Convergent validity shows how strongly items of a scale measuring a particular construct are correlated (Gefen and Straub, 2005). In the current study item loadings and t-statistics were used to assess the convergent validity of PSM measures. Item loadings and their associated t-values indicate the convergent validity of the measures of a construct (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). In Amos text output file critical ratio (C.R) represents the t-statistics. A t-value < -1.96 and > + 1. 96 show the statistical significance (Byrne, 2001). Item loading higher than their associated standard error indicates the stronger association among the items of a measurement scale (Koufteros, 1999). In the current study each item underlying PSM loaded significantly. Standard estimates (ß) of each item ranged from .626 to .731. The t-statistics of each item ranged from 6.868 to 7.767 at the .001 level of significance. These values show convergent validity of scale measuring PSM (See Tab. 3).

In the current study discriminant validity was assessed by measuring correlations among PSM, ATSNA and ad-clicking behavior. When a measure of a construct weakly correlates with the measures of the other constructs discriminant validity is achieved (Gefen and Straub, 2005). Correlations between the measures of the constructs are used to examine the discriminant validity (Shore, T., Shore, L. and Thornton, 1992). Correlation between the measures of different constructs less than .70 indicates discriminant validity (Dimoka, 2010; Yang, Watkins, Marsick, 2004). In current study the correlation between PSM and ATSNA was .184. The correlations between PSM ad-clicking behavior was .135. Similarly, the correlation between ATSNA and ad-clicking behavior was .289. These facts show the discriminant validity. Tab. 5 shows the discriminant validity matrix.

Tab. 5 – Discriminant Validity Matrix. Source: own.

	1	2	3
1. PSM	1		
2. ATSNA	.184**	1	
3. Ad-Click	.135	.289**	1

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

5. THEORY TESTING

The proposed model (see Fig. 2) provided the good fit to the data with χ^2 = 1.527, df =1, p = .217, (p >.05) and χ^2/df = 1.527 (χ^2/df < 3). It also showed good fit to the data on GFI = .99, IFI = .98, CFI = .98, NFI = .94, TLI = .93 and RMSEA = .05. For goodness fit of the model values of GFI, IFI, CFI, NFI and TLI should be equal or greater than .9 while the value of RMSEA should be equal or less than .08 (Bentler, 1983:1990; Marsh and Grayson, 1995; McDonald and Ho, 2002).
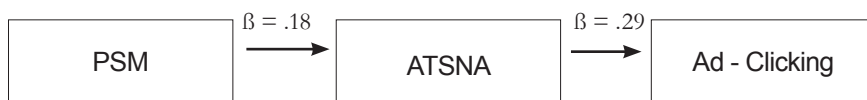
ß = .18   ß = .29

| PSM | → | ATSNA | → | Ad - Clicking |

Fig. 2 – Structural Model. Source: own.

The structural model (See Fig. 2) tested in the current study consisted of two paths. To test the relationship between paths standardized estimates (β), t-statistics and p-value were used. The path values between PSM and ATSNA were β = .18, t = 2.64, p < .01. These values showed positive and significant relationship between PSM and ATSNA. This relationship supported the hypothesis (H1). Similarly, the path values between ATSNA and Ad-Clicking were β = .18, t = 2.64, p < .001. These values showed positive and significant relationship between ATSNA and Ad-Clicking behavior. This relationship supported the hypothesis (H2).

6. DISCUSSION

Development of social media intensely transformed the ways of social dialogue and communication (Edwards, 2011). Social media enabled the users to interact with each other online. It empowered them to generate and exchange diverse content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Particularly, SNSs have attracted a vast number of users across the globe (Demerling, 2010; Taylor et al., 2011; Vasalou et al., 2010). The current study aimed to assess the influence of pre-purchase search motivation (PSM) for using SNSs (e.g. Facebook) on user attitudes toward SNA. It also assessed the association between users 'attitudes toward SNA and their ad-clicking behavior on SNSs. To meet the objectives of the current study UGT was used to theorize the relationship between PSM and SNSs users' attitudes toward SNA. Similarly, UGT was used to rationalize the relationship between SNSs users' attitudes toward SNA and their SNS banner ad-clicking behavior.

Various past studies (e.g. Cui and Roto, 2008) identified that consumers use the internet to seek out the information helpful in purchase decisions. Similarly, many users participate in SNSs to fulfill their pre-purchase information needs (Park et al., 2009). Motivations for using SNSs positively influence user attitudes toward advertising which appears on these sites (Chu, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011). In line with previous researches the current study identified that users' pre-purchase search motivation (PSM) influences their attitudes toward the advertising appearing on SNSs positively. The primary motivation for consumers to use different media is pre-purchase information search. Consumers seek information on media to make the quality purchase decisions (Punj and Staelin, 1983). Media uses and gratifications studies show that information seeking is a key personal reason which affects consumer attitudes toward advertising (Chen and Wells', 1999; Petrovici and Marinov, 2007). Consumers attend advertising to receive the information useful in making risk free purchase decisions (Esfahani et al., 2012). Advertising information helps consumers in making right product choices (O'Donohoe, 1994). The current study found a positive association between users' attitudes toward advertising which appears on SNSs and their behavior to click on SNS banner ads. This indicates that SNSs users' positive attitudes toward social network advertising influence them to click on the banner ads appearing on these sites.

Past studies support this finding. Consumer attitudes toward online and social media advertising have a positive effect on their ad-clicking behavior (Azeem and Haq, 2012; Mir, 2012; Wang and Sun, 2010). Ad-clicking behavior enhances the effectiveness of the banner ads (Hofacker and Murphy, 1998; Lohtia et al., 2003). Another outcome of ad-clicking behavior is online buying. Consumers who click on online and social media banner ads are likely to buy the products mentioned in those ads online (Mir, 2012).

7. CONCLUSION

The current study aimed to identify the influence of pre-purchase search motivation (PSM) on SNSs users' attitudes toward advertising which appears on SNSs. In addition, the current study aimed to identify how users' attitudes toward SNA and their SNS banner ad-clicking behavior associate. Analysis of the data revealed that pre-purchase search is a significant user motivation for using SNSs. PSM influences the SNSs users' attitudes toward SNA positively. The results also revealed that SNSs users' attitudes toward SNA and their behavior to click on SNS banner ads are associated positively.

8. CONTRIBUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

Information seeking prior to a product purchase is the consumers' prime motivation for using the media (Punj and Staelin, 1983). Several past studies verified this theory. For example, many users' participate in SNSs for the purpose of collecting product information. Product information available on SNSs enables them to make the quality purchase decisions (Park et al., 2009). The current study extended the pre-purchase search motivation (PSM) theory by conceptualizing its effect on consumer attitudes and behaviors (click through behavior) toward advertising which appears on social network sites. It showed that attitudes toward SNA mediate the relationship between the PSM and SNSs users' behavior to click on SNS banner ads.

Advertisers who promote their products through SNSs to the young users of South Asian markets such as Pakistan may benefit from the findings of the current study. Particularly, those advertisers who advertise their products on SNSs through banner ads can benefit from these findings. The findings of the current research suggest that SNS advertisers should use specific product information in banner ads. Products specific information helps consumers in simplifying their purchase decisions. Using product specific informational cues in SNS banner ads will enable advertisers to influence consumer attitudes. In other words, it would enhance the effectiveness of SNS banner ads.

9. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The current research examined the effect of PSM on user attitudes toward SNA. Future studies should also assess the effects of on-going search motivation on user attitudes toward SNA. The current research focused on conventional SNS banner ads. Future researches should also focus on non-conventional SNS banner ads (e.g. fanpages).

Although college and university students are the main users of SNSs (see Chu, 2011; eMarketer, 2009; Pelling and White, 2009), yet the findings of the current study should be generalized carefully since data was collected from a single university. Future studies should replicate theory and hypotheses presented in the current study in different cultural contexts. Particularly, future researches should use a broad sample size to generalize the findings of the current study.

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