Designing for Social Commerce Experience as Cultural Consumption

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Abstract. Social commerce websites are facing a challenge of how to use social media effectively in reaching their users in this globalization age. In this paper I look at two successful cases of social commerce websites, TaoBao of China and Etsy of the U.S. and argue that the design of a social commerce website should implement effective local SNS features to connect with and engage its users, mediate their identities, and empower them in this rising participatory culture.

Keywords: social commerce, social shopping, culturally localized user experience, cultural consumption, genre, affordance.

1 Social Commerce and Social Shopping

With the global popularity of Social Networking Service (SNS) websites such as Facebook and Twitter, e-commerce websites have rapidly embraced the concepts of "social commerce" and "social shopping" to reach their targeted customers and accomplish business goals. Forrester Research estimates that social media marketing will reach 3.1 billion by 2014 [1].

Both "social commerce" and "social shopping" suggest integrating SNS features into the core functions of e-commerce websites—using Internet-based social media to "allow people to actively participate in the marketing and selling of products and services in online marketplaces and communities" [8]; however, researchers have not agreed on their definitions. While a small group of researchers distinguish social commerce (as collaborative networks of online sellers) from social shopping (as collaborative networks of online shoppers) [8], most people use them in an interchangeable way, which is followed in this paper. Generally social commerce websites rely on the wisdom of crowds in the form of user-generated content such as lists of friends, lists of favorite products, product reviews and recommendations, groups and communities, voting, and discussion to engage new and old users—including sellers or shoppers—into a collaborative e-commerce experience, and therefore online communities of consumption are formed.

The emerging trend of social commerce has brought the following benefits to online shopping websites. First, the various social activities users are engaged in those social commerce websites make those websites more "sticky." SNS features such as games, chats, and rewards systems prolong users' visiting time and encourage them to come more often. As a result, the stickiness usually leads to the increase of sales.

Second, social shopping features help online shopping websites more effectively reach a type of online shoppers that were hardly to serve well before, recreational shoppers who do not have particular shopping goals. Window-shoppers are a common scene in the bricks-and-mortar shopping centers, but traditional online marketplaces lack an effective way of attracting and retaining them as most people do online shopping for its efficiency and convenience. Indeed a majority of online shoppers are utilitarian shoppers. The social shopping atmosphere glowed from the e-commerce websites now gives recreational shoppers more reasons to visit shopping websites for fun and for other hedonic motives [2].

However, as Forrest analyzes, social media marketing gets much tougher as social media is adopted by more companies [7]. E-commerce websites are facing a challenge of how to "cut through the noise, reach an audience and make an impression," particularly in this globalization age. In this paper I look at two successful cases of social commerce websites, TaoBao of China and Etsy of the U.S. and argue the design of a social commerce website should implement effective local SNS features to connect with and engage its users, mediate their identities, and empower them in this rising participatory culture.

2 Designing a Dialogic Genre of Social Commerce for Cultural Consumption

Here I use the lens of cultural consumption [3, 6, 9] and a dialogic genre view [10, 11] to examine the use practices of social media on the social commerce websites and to explore ways of designing for better local user experience.

I argue that the huge amount of user-generated content found from social commerce websites shows that online sellers and shoppers are not passively consuming the technology, but energetically engaged in cultural consumption, a productive activity in which consumers apply creative strategies to attach meanings to the objects they consume and make sense of their everyday practices [11]. Through cultural consumption, users turn a usable technology into a meaningful one—a technology they are related to. As a result, they consummate their experiences with the technology into Culturally Localized User Experience, an experience in which users creatively use and consume a technology in their local contexts to fit into their ways of life and to mediate and construct their identities, an experience that integrates the "situatedness" and the "constructiveness" of technology use in local contexts.

A dialogic view of genre considers a genre as both a behavioral construct and a structural construct [11]. As a behavioral construct, the generic features of a genre represent social responses to recurrent situations [4]. As a structural construct, a genre enacts an emergent structure of technology use [5], as a stabilized assemblage of articulations, for the time being, in an ongoing process of structuration [11].

The integration of two aspects is important in technology design as this dialogic view of genre offers us a better vision to examine technology affordance and distinguish instrumental affordance from social affordances. Here instrumental affordance refers to affordances emerging from use interactions in the material context, while social affordances are the affordances on the activity level that emerge from use interactions in the sociocultural and historical context. For example, the

instrumental affordances of a social commerce website include accessing product reviews, finding interesting products through friend's recommendations, rating recent purchase, and so on. Its social affordances could include sharing clothing style information, having fun, and etc.

In the case of social commerce websites, if designers only focus on design features and instrumental affordances such as the ability of rating products and generating a favorite list, the created social commerce website will not bring a lot of extra values to the online marketplace. More sophisticated designers will look at what social affordance a website could nurture, aiming to consummate user's experience into cultural consumption, an active form of consumption practice when social meanings are generated, identities are created, and agency is reinforced.

3   The Cases of Taobao and Etsy

Taobao and Etsy are two successful social commerce websites in its local contexts. Taobao.com, a Chinese C2C (consumer-to-consumer) giant with online shopping and auction services, was ranked as the 4th most visited website in China and the 15th globally as of March 2011, higher than Amazon.com and eBay.com, according to Alexa.com. Etsy.com is a New York-based online marketplace for handmade goods around the world and boasts sales in excess of $300 million in 2010 [13].

The competitive edges of Taobao and Etsy in the arena of social commerce can be attributed to the following factors: Both websites are targeted to both sellers and shoppers at the same time, providing a full spectrum of social commerce experience; both put a lot of efforts in helping small sellers succeed in their online marketplaces; both focus on developing user communities with various SNS features. More important, both successfully nurture a distinctive online culture of consumption that blends well with their SNS features, and it is these cultural consumption practices surrounding online shopping activities that make them succeed.

In the case of Taobao, while eBay (China) or Amazon (China) are just a place for doing business or shopping to Chinese users, TaoBao provides a world of Jianghu, a peculiar culture based on the popular Chinese Wuxia (Martial artists) novels and movies. Jianghu, which can be translated literally as "rivers and lakes," refers to a fictional universe, world, and milieu where the adventurers, rebels, wanderers, unemployed laborers, gangsters, and outcasts of society gather. In that world, everyone has a dream of becoming a hero in the end, even the most-powerful one who governs the world of Jianghu, with superb martial arts skills honed from years of earnest practice and undertaking demanding trials, all the while earning love. The SNS platform TaoJianghu combines shopping and social networking with fun games, which matches the imagination of many ordinary Chinese people who dream of quickly becoming rich through adventure and luck. Indeed TaoBao means "searching for treasures" in Chinese.

In comparison, Etsy follows the tradition of the American DIY (Do-It-Yourself) movement that started from home improvement projects in the 1950s and advocates an attitude of "live the handmade life." This slogan touches many people, who aspire to live a greener life by supporting locally produced grocery and goods. It is also part

of the "culturally sustainable product development" worldwide [12], which explains the popularity of Etsy outside of the U.S.

Resonating with their unique social commerce cultures, both websites utilize and localize the SNS features in different ways. On the website of TaoJiangHu, a subsite of Taobao, gaming experience is a highlight for this scene of social commerce. Various third-party applications of games are embedded in Web pages with complicated rewarding systems to entice social shoppers to come more often and stay longer. Online communities are directly labeled as bangpai (gang) to create the atmosphere of Jianghu. While bolstering shopping business is the ultimate goal, Taobao puts more energy in engaging users into its immersive shopping experience subtly and prioritizes on developing long-term relationship over other business goals. In contrast with relationship-oriented SNS design on Taobao, the SNS features on Etsy are more task-oriented, i.e., to get a user involved into assorted crafting activities for living a handmade life. For example, the features of Virtual Labs and Livestream are used to hosting crafting workshops as people would see from Etsy's bricks-and-mortar competitors such as Michael's or Hobby Lobby.

As online shoppers participate in "the work of cultural consumption" [3, 6, 9] on a social commerce website like Taobao or Etsy, they conduct identity performance and display who and what they are, accomplishing their dreams of Jianghu or living a handmade life. At the same time, they are empowered to become more active participants in these communities of consumption because both websites support an easy transition from a shopper to a seller: With a link away, a veteran shopper could open his/her online store easily.

4   Conclusion

Studying the cultural consumption out of social shopping practices on social commerce websites opens up new avenues for culturally sensitive design in this glocalization age. It shows the successful design of a social shopping website should implement effective local SNS features to connect with and engage its users, mediate their identities, and empower them in this rising participatory culture.

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