

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE EVOLUTION OF C2C SOCIAL COMMERCE BUSINESS MODELS IN TUNISIA

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Abstract

Facebook is the preferred social networking service (SNS) among Tunisian users for social commerce (SC) and consumer-to-consumer (C2C) commercial activities. This article aims to increase the understanding of the influencing factors of C2C SC activities and provide a new interpretation of the evolution of C2C SC models in Tunisia's fastest growing trend. In order to fulfill this goal, we performed a literature review to update existing multi-facet framework that combines four important dimensions with new fundamental components: incentive systems, information and communication technologies (ICT), participative web, and e-business rules and regulations. This study has shown that these influencing factors are the key ingredients driving the evolution of C2C SC business models in Tunisia and the consideration of the four dimensions founded in our study will aid ECOM professionals to enable the widespread occurrence of C2C SC activities and can drive the success of these business models in Tunisia.

Keywords: Social Networking Service (SNS), consumer-to-consumer (C2C), social commerce (SC).

1. Introduction

The development of Social Networking Services (SNSs) has influenced the evolution of e-commerce (ECOM) (Turban et al., 2010). A new division of ECOM has emerged as a result of combining social activities with commercial features. Many of SNS's aspects are undergoing rapid changes and thus stimulating private individuals across the globe to engage in social commerce (SC) activities and multiply their income streams.

Messaging applications and platforms such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp or Viber are used to communicate with family and friends as well instantly can be used to set up communications between buyers and sellers (Turban et al., 2015), intensifying the spread endorsement of Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C) SC activities.

For instance, in Tunisia, Facebook (FB) and other Tunisian SNSs users take part in both selling and buying activities of products and services. Users (Sellers) are regularly sharing publications (content) attached with pictures, and descriptions of their offer targeting potential buyers (Turban et al., 2015).

Commercial activities over the SNSs often occur between unfamiliar buyers and sellers (Sukrat et al., 2018). While ECOM growth has intensely influenced the evolution of the retail industry in developed and developing countries (Dahiya, 2017), the evolution of Tunisia C2C SC models has shaped modern domestic e-business.

The present research studies in depth the influencing factors involved in the rise of C2C SC business models in Tunisia. Based on the literature review (Wang and Zhang, 2012), we suggest a new conceptual framework, which covers four aspects that could better increase our understanding of the supportive factors of C2C SC development and provide a new interpretation of the evolution of C2C SC models in one of Tunisia's fastest growing trend.

2. The rise of C2C social commerce

In today's marketplace, consumers are increasingly having control over their marketplace experiences. Innovations in mobile technologies are removing barriers and facilitating access to modern social network and mobile applications anywhere and anytime, thus, making users connect to each more than ever before. A wide range of social network has led users to evolve from being content receivers to content creators (Adams, 2015).

Numerous well-known online retailers added several SNS functionalities into their ECOM websites. Consumers today can share knowledge and experience about products and services by using different social networking applications, such as social commerce constructs (SCC) (recommendations, ratings, reviews) (Shen and Eder, 2009). Sharing of information and experiences online consequently impact the consumer's decision to purchase certain products and services from ECOM websites (Snyder et al., 1997).

Online shoppers and online retailers in developing countries stimulated by socio-economic factors usually reinvent the use of SNS platforms, which may circumvent the intervention of intermediary retailers. Reinvention occurs when consumers are using SNS unique characteristics with no intermediaries, managing and performing business transactions with each other as a C2C SC activity (Yue and Xie, 2011).

SNSs provide opportunities for consumers to interact with businesses and other consumers. The adoption of these online platforms that involve the recognition of the consumer's role as an integral part of C2C SC models persuades progressive SNS suppliers to improve their commercial functionalities and consequently facilitates the growth of these new business models.

Wang and Zhang (2012) introduced a comprehensive framework of SC named the information model or I model. The authors explained the evolution of SC from 2005 to 2011 and proposed that SC evolution can be summarized into four interlinked dimensions including people, management, technology, and information. Further, these four dimensions have a mutual effect.

As stated by the authors (Wang and Zhang, 2012), the people's dimension in SC represents private individuals, small or large groups, or virtual communities and societies benefit from the technology. The management dimension embraces policies, strategies, management, operation, processes, structures, cultures, and opportunities practiced to benefit or to make profits from social commerce transactions. The technology dimension represents the technical capabilities and advancement responsible for social commerce's technological feasibility and maturity. The information perspective refers to the uniqueness of this content-driven environment where an extensive and massive amount of content related to products or services is continuously generating, processing and spreading among customers.

3. A Conceptual Framework of C2C Social Commerce in Tunisia

In recent years, several reports have highlighted the contribution of ECOM in the economic growth of Tunisia (export.gov, 2019). ECOM services are covering a wide range of Tunisian products including crafts, textiles, tourism, travel-related services, food, and beverage. Because of specific government regulations related to online payment transactions, the development of this sector is limited. However, C2C SC market is growing exponentially ("Le E-Commerce en Tunisie," 2016).

According to the literature review undertaken, we re-purpose the four dimensions of SC introduced by Wang and Zhang (2012) (i.e., people, management, technology, and information) and replace them with incentive systems, information and communication technologies (ICT), participative web, and e-business rules and regulations.

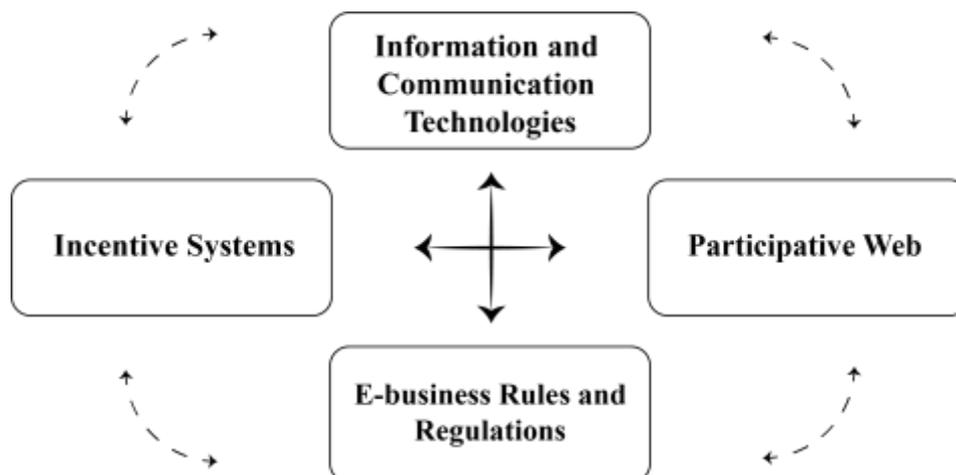


Figure 1 Dimensions of C2C Social Commerce models, updated from the I-model (Wang & Zhang, 2012)

Incentive systems refer to devices including monetary or non-monetary rewards that could engage and stimulate the consumer's motivation. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) refers to technologies that provide access to information through communications (Chalopatham et al., 2015). It includes any communication device, television, mobile technology, and computer; that helps individuals, businesses, and organizations get access to information. Using ICT, particularly mobile technology and digital technology has increased dramatically, and new technologies such as video chat, live chat, and mobile banking played a vital role to support C2C SC activities. Participative Web concerns the implementation of new innovative web services that empower the users to express themselves through different channels and media such as user-created content (UCC) it includes content such as text, image, and multimedia shared across SNSs. E-business rules and regulations, including strategies, procedures, and policies that can assert business structure, ethical conduct, and control or guide consumer's behavior.

Figure 1 illustrates a typical example of the dynamic interrelation of these four dimensions. When a FB member shares a publication about a product or service (Participative Web) on his profile or FB group (ICT), prospective consumers who see the publication and are willing to make a purchase (Incentive system) may contact the seller (user) directly via Facebook Messenger (ICT). Before deciding to buy, the prospective consumer can visit dedicated ratings and review sites or retailers' ratings and reviews (ICT) generated by other consumers (Participative Web) and check their historical sale information such as after-sales service, delivery history, comments, and star rating. To pursue the transaction, customers have to obey the rules and regulations enacted by group administrators and authorities (E-business rules and regulations).

4. The Influencing Factors of C2C Social Commerce in Tunisia

Based on a thorough review of multiple articles, books and the results of a new survey conducted by the national institute of consumption in Tunisia related to customer experience and ECOM (Institut National de la Consommation, 2018) we present a detailed description of the influencing factors behind each aspect of our new conceptual framework (Figure 1).

4.1. Incentive systems

Multiple factors stimulate sellers and buyers to engage in ECOM (Celsi and Gilly, 2019) such as economic incentive, social incentive, or moral incentive. Similarly, in C2C SC activities these factors can profoundly influence the consumer's purchase intention and decisions. Having a well-established incentive plan could promote ECOM in Tunisia and consequently enable the widespread occurrence of C2C SC business.

4.1.1 Economic Incentives

Economic incentives include, low transaction cost, convenience, and particularly price discounts can motivate buyers and sellers to be involved in C2C SC activities. Commonly the consumer wants to pay as less as possible. Schlagbauer et al. (2014) showed that the more discount the seller offers, the higher the potential to trigger the intention to buy. The research revealed that consumers are much more sensitive to the price discount on the online than the conventional environment and that they often choose a product with more significant price discounts (Degeratu et al., 2000).

One of the reasons Tunisian buyers shop at SNS platforms such as FB buy and sell groups is that they can benefit from the higher profitability that results from selling directly to one another without an intermediary. For a local business owner with a limited budget, engaging in C2C SC business can be profitable because of the low transaction cost. They can share their products and services at a cheaper rate and trim unnecessary spendings such as rent and office supplies.

4.1.2 Social incentives

Recent research has highlighted the social embeddedness of ECOM, in which value is shaped by the Tunisian culture and the post-revolution (after January 2011) environment influences. As a collectivist society, which privileges the group over individual interest, mainly always subordinate to the family or group (Sandıkçı and Rice, 2011). Tunisian consumers understand the importance of social support and are involved continuously and mobilized for their network (Madoui, 2012).

Cooperation and online interaction through SNS can fulfill an individual's social needs, bring cordiality among users and positively affect the sense of community (Oh et al., 2014). Informational and emotional supports are two forms that ensure ECOM business success (Yusuf et al., 2018). Similarly, for C2C SC business, these two support messages can improve the attentiveness of social relations among users and encourage them to proactively share knowledge and contribute to evaluating and promoting products and services.

4.1.3 Moral Incentives

In modern societies, moral incentives have high predictive power on purchase behaviors, and they can motivate the consumer to achieve a socially beneficial end (Tolba, 2001). Before making online purchase users do not merely act rationally, they also choose their actions according to moral motivations like fairness, justice, inalienable rights (Schultz, 1986).

Islam is the official state religion in Tunisia. The majority of the population of the country is Muslim. Based on an Islamic point of view, a Muslim should be very loyal, trustworthy and God-fearing in any financial practices (Ali, 2015). In SNS platforms such as FB buy and sell groups, Tunisian consumers often promote ethical behavior as a way of gaining trust and increasing confidence. Having a personal relationship is also an essential factor in the success of business transactions. Usually, consumers avoid dealing with those whom they do not get along with or trust.

Another aspect of Tunisian culture that has a significant influence on business is the conflict avoidance attitude. Tunisians are non-confrontational (Commisceo Global Consulting, n.d.). During traditional business negotiations, they usually reluctantly agree and wait until a better opportunity to express their disagreement, contrary to online transactions they behave as if ECOM and especially SNS platforms can shield them from the discomfort of saying "No" overtly (Zarrad and Debabi, 2012). We assume that an effective incentive plan is suitable for many aspects of a business and it is especially beneficial for the development of models in Tunisia.

4.2. Information and communication technologies (ICT)

Advanced and emerging technologies have been the primary drivers for the societal changes in Tunisia. The collaboration between government, higher education institutions and multinationals has resulted in a well-established international reputation and a favorable technological environment for business (Weber and Hamlaoui, 2018).

Tunisia is the first African country to implement information and communication technologies (ICT) as a based national strategy. It has 11 operational technoparks and over 15 industrial centers devoted to training, scientific, and technological research (Youssef et al., 2012). Moreover, telecommunication solutions are the most promising industry sectors in Tunisia (export.gov, 2019).

FB is the preferred platform among Tunisian consumers and secondly on Instagram (IG), another SNS that is gaining ground in the Tunisian market. 7.40 million from the total population, which is 11,75 million (worldometers, 2019), are monthly active FB users as compared to the second largest platform IG with 1.90 million monthly active users (DataReportal, 2019). Nearly all consumers perform C2C SC transactions in the above-mentioned social networks.

According to DevElite, more than 80% of all ECOM transactions are highly localized, in four major cities: Tunis, Sousse, Sfax, and Gabes, known for their well-developed ICT infrastructures ("Le E-Commerce en Tunisie," 2016). People aged between 30 and 39 are the most active online shoppers, and high-income consumers are likely to shop more often (Institut National de la Consommation, 2018).

FB groups are commonly used to operate C2C commercial activities (Gnagey, 2017). Sellers can leverage advertising in Buy and sell groups for either new and second-hand product or service promotions while buyers can browse, search for relevant product information, connect and exchange information among other consumers. Through cross-platform messaging and Voice IP services such as FB Messenger or WhatsApp customers can contact sellers for more details about the offer and complete the deal.

The lack of trust among sellers and buyers on SNSs has the potential to slow the transaction; Tunisian consumers are not willing to share their banking information during SC operations. They consider "Pay on the Door" which represent 70% of all online transaction payments the safest payment method for ECOM (Nordea Trade, 2019). Another factor that limits and slows the transaction is the underdevelopment of online payment systems (Regaieg Essafi and Bouslama, 2013).

With the largest mobile phone subscriber rates, the third highest Internet penetration rate in Africa, and the development of SNS applications, consumers can directly engage in C2C SC activities and conduct transactions (Nordea Trade, 2019). We assume that the development of e-commerce infrastructure can accelerate the advancement of Tunisia's C2C SC business.

4.3. Participative web

In an increasingly connected world, today's internet users are allowed to take part in producing, rating, and distributing internet content and customizing internet applications. The implementation of new intelligent web services empowered the users to express themselves through different channels and media such as user-created content (UCC) (OCDE, 2007).

User-created content and social networking websites played an essential role in the Tunisian revolution (January 2011) known as "Jasmine revolution" (Noah Tesch, 2011). Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were the primary online tools used to disseminate contents during the protests and report on events live by protesters, activists, and supporters of the protests (Comminos, 2011).

User-created content comprises text, audio, images, videos, blogs, forums, tweets, besides its consumer's profile on SNSs, including biography, ratings, and scores critical to the online identity/image (S.L. Lai, 2015).

Based on the literature review (Sukrat et al., 2018) we can categorize user-created content into two types:

1. Seller-created content: a complex process implemented by companies and retailers and known as content marketing. In this category, sellers produce, distribute and analyze contents that include product information, product reviews, presentation, news, and live feeds to distinguish themselves from the competition.
2. Buyer-created content: including reviews, Gchat, comments, bulletin board, blogs, and forum. In this category, buyer produces and share voluntarily content with their peers such as friends, families, and followers (Pius, 2018) especially when they live a personal experience with a product, a service, or a person.

The researchers anticipated that quality information helps establish trust (Chen and Shen, 2015) and higher trust influence behavioral intentions and stimulate consumers' purchase intention (Hajli et al., 2017). Therefore, we can infer from this that the quality of UCC can enhance C2C SC activities in Tunisia.

4.4. E-business rules and regulations

4.4.1 Online customer community rules

An online community is a group of individuals who share mutual interests, personal opinions, and ideas through the mediation of digital networks (Li et al., 2018). An online customer community that supports C2C SC models needs continuing cooperation between its members.

Tunisian consumers commonly use FB for SC and online communities. Buy and sell FB groups are often created and managed by voluntarily FB users (Jing et al., 2016). They often manage the community following written or unwritten rules. Effective FB group community management positively affects group confidence, trust, and rapport (Staff, 2017).

In a C2C SC models context, sellers who follow a defined sales and delivery strategy along with a well-maintained online customer community can enhance their relationships with prospective buyers and influence their purchase intention (Baethge et al., 2016).

4.4.2 Government regulations of ECOM

In Tunisia, customers use E-dinar, a non-convertible currency as an electronic payment system created by the Tunisian postal service for domestic internet transactions (Touzani, 2004). Moreover, this system can be used to pay public services such as public utilities, telecommunication, and university registration.

For more secure payments, the Tunisian government collaborated with the Universal Postal Union (UPU) to offer more secure shipment deliveries (Universal Postal Union, 2017). Furthermore, companies that operate a global online payments system and support online money transfers such as PayPal has offered its payment service to the Central Bank of Tunisia, and the integration is in effect.

Cross-border ECOM purchases trade used to be negligible owing to the Tunisian dinar's status as a non-convertible currency and the general lack of online payment systems (export.gov, 2019). Nonetheless, Tunisia-based websites offer transshipment services from international ECOM platforms, such as from Amazon and AliExpress.

In April 2018, the Tunisian parliament adopted the Start-up Act law. A progressive initiative expected to increase the number of tech start-ups, support successful entrepreneurship, and generate economic growth (Katrin, 2018). Tunisian start-ups can now have access to a particular worldwide online payment system to pay for cross domestic product and services without prior authorization from the Tunisian central bank.

The Government has also implemented 'Digital Tunisia 2020' project that aims to develop digital governance and quality digital service for Tunisia's industrial and commercial sectors, which should drive ECOM growth further and C2C SC activities (Ezzeddine, 2018). According to the Tunisian Minister of Communication and Digital Economy Anwar Maaroufi 'Digital Tunisia 2020 will enable the country to become the first African country to invest in the digital economy' (Tunisian Monitor Online, 2018). Thus, we suggest that efficient FB group community management along with government support and incentives can accelerate the development of Tunisia's C2C SC business.

5. Limitations and future research

Many potential limitations may necessitate future research. First, we proposed the different factors involved in the rise of SC C2C business models in Tunisia only from the consumers' perspective. We thus suggest that future research may also consider exploring these influencing factors from the companies' (auction-based sites) perspectives. Second, we based our framework of the influencing factors on a thorough review of multiple articles, books and the results of a national survey that only consider users' opinion as a reference. We suggest that future research may approach and target a more "balanced" sample that incorporates ECOM professionals in the investigation. Last, the dimensions proposed are only relevant for Tunisia and other developing countries where a conventional ECOM business infrastructure is still underdeveloped. Further studies may replicate our proposed dimensions to other industrialized countries with highly developed ECOM business infrastructure. For the incentive systems dimension, researchers can examine the effects of sustainable incentives on consumers purchase intention and their capability to stimulate people to engage in C2C SC business. As to participative web, future research may inspect the impact of language proficiency and users' subjectivity on the quality of the information on SNS. As regards to information and communication technologies (ICT), researchers may propose the implementation of artificial intelligence to combat fraud and improve the user experience as well as the application of new systems to keep up with cybercriminals. Finally, for e-business rules and regulations, while cybercrime is rising exponentially, researchers may propose different approaches towards consumer protection in C2C commercial activities.

6. Conclusion

In the present era, many of SNS's aspects are undergoing a rapid transformation and thus stimulating private individuals across the globe to engage in social commerce (SC) activities and multiply their income streams. Similarly, social networking platforms enabled features and functionalities will allow ECOM to evolve. Consumers today can share knowledge and experience about products and services by using different social networking applications, such as social commerce constructs (SCC) (recommendations, ratings, reviews). Moreover, sharing can be observed as a pathway to conduct commercial activities and transaction processes. In reviewing the literature, we identified the influencing factors of C2C SC business models in Tunisia and generated a new conceptual framework, which covers four aspects: incentive systems, information and communication technologies (ICT), participative web, and e-business rules and regulations. The results of this study indicate that these influencing factors are the main pillars for C2C SC business models adoption in Tunisia and that this evolving phenomenon will continue to expand in depth and scope. Based on these assumptions, we propose that the implications of these factors should be explored in future research using empirical evidence.

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