

Does social bond matter in customer's commitment?

An empirical investigation on universities students of China

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Abstract— The purpose of our study is to investigate the relationship among social bond, e-satisfaction, e-trust and customer's commitment, based on data collected from universities students in mainland China. We used a random sampling paper based survey approach; Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) has been performed to examine the reliability and validity of the measurement model. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique was used to examine the hypotheses of the causal model. According to our study social bond has not any impact on customer's commitment via e-satisfaction and e-trust in e-tailing. We used students segment of e-tailing as a sample unit, but our results are similar with previous studies. However, managerial implications, study limitations and future research directions are provided in the subsequent section of findings.

Index Terms— China, commitment, e-commerce, online retailing, social bond

1 INTRODUCTION

IN recent year's due to the maturity of retailing business, firms have been stimulated to develop relational bond to establish links with customers that help the relationship endure over time (Chen and Chiu, 2009; Hsieh et al., 2005). In the literature of relationship marketing, previous research has explored three major categories of relational bonds i.e. financial, social and structural (Berry, 1995). The relational binding strategies form a hierarchy which starts with financial bonds i.e. short term monetary incentives (discounts, coupons). The second layer of hierarchy represents a social bond which develops from personalized service delivery and conversion of customers into clients or consumers (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). Similarly structural bond is the third level of hierarchy and that concentrate on value added services that help consumers to be more efficient. The relational bonds i.e. financial, social and structural are essential to the relationship marketing strategies, so firms can increase the customers' opportunity costs of breaking relationship with them (Seiders et al., 2005). Thus, nurturing market relationship has emerged as a top priority for firms. Subsequently, loyal customers are much more profitable than the price sensitive and deal prone switchers who consider the little difference among the alternatives (Ryals, 2005; Day, 2000). Customer commitment is a precursor to the accomplishment of valuable outcomes for instance, future intentions (Kim et al., 2005) and profitability (Anderson and Weitz, 1992).

In mainland China, the e-commerce has been developing rapidly and has a great potential of further development. It has been reported that the number of Chinese internet users had reached 618 million and internet penetration rate was 45.5% by the end of 2013 (CINIC, 2014). China e-commerce market has pegged at \$295 billion in 2013 and it is projected to be \$713 billion in 2017 (Meng, 2014). According to Fung Business Intelligence Center, in China online shoppers are young

people and over 60% were aged 30 or below in 2012. Therefore middle aged consumers are stimulated to shop online (Fung Business Intelligence Center, 2013). Therefore, it is important for e-tailing managers to understand the social bonds role in the customer's commitment. To a firms, online customers especially students can be regarded as one of the most easily recognized and accessible segment. This segment is large enough to be profitable in e-tailing market of China.

The aim of this study is to propose and test an integrative model of social bonds and customer's commitment development for e-tailers. We incorporate mediating variables that include e-satisfaction and e-trust. This study begins with the proposed model and the hypotheses. In the consequent sections, we described the research design, methodology, result analysis, research theoretical and managerial contributions, conclusion with limitations and future research directions.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

This study draws from previous theories to develop hypotheses with regard to the impact of social bonds on e-satisfaction, e-trust and customer's commitment in China. We derive a structural equation model (Fig.1), which illustrates the hypothesized relationships discussed in the consequent sections.

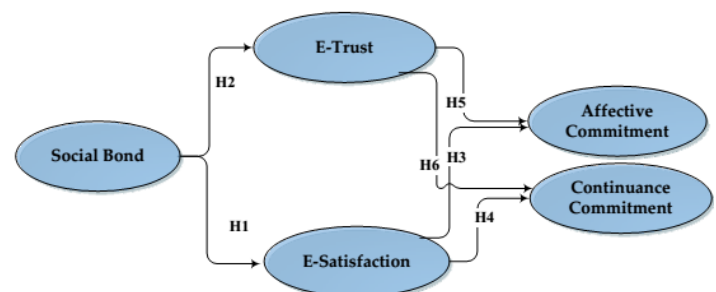


Fig.1 Theoretical Model and Hypotheses

2.1 The relationship between social bond and e-satisfaction

Generally, firms used social bonds by offering some substantial personalized services and delivery of products to retain customers. Therefore social bond involves developing stronger customer relationship through social interaction to provide an important psychosocial benefit (Williams et al., 1998; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). Perhaps, by listening and caring mechanisms, social bonds help to develop the closeness, connectivity and the mutual understanding between firms and their customers (Hsieh, 2005). Therefore, marketers always focused to stay in touch with customers, learning about their needs, wants and expressing their friendship with them (Berry, 1995; Williams et al., 1998). Social bonds have a positive effect through interpersonal interaction on relationship variable i.e. satisfaction and commitment (Čater and Čater, 2009). Therefore, we propose the hypothesis as:

H1: The social bond has positive impact on e-tailing customers (students) satisfaction.

2.2 The relationship between social bond and e-trust

Trust refers as “a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence” (Moorman et al., 1992). Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined trust as the confidence in the exchange partner's ability, reliability and integrity. Garbarino and Johnson (1999) stated that customer trust in an organization is the confidence in the quality and reliability of the services offered. Previously, some researchers have investigated the social bonds impact via interpersonal interaction on variables that include trust, satisfaction and commitment (Čater and Čater, 2009; Huang and Yu, 2006). Therefore, we propose the hypothesis as:

H2: The social bond has positive impact on e-tailing customers (students) trust.

2.3 The relationship between e-satisfaction, e-trust and customer commitment

Customer's commitment is defined as an enduring desire to maintain a relationship (Moorman et al., 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Gundlach et al. (1995) have characterized commitment as affective and continuance. Satisfaction is “an overall evaluation based on the total purchase and consumption experience with a good or service over time” (Anderson et al., 1994). Therefore, e-satisfaction is the precursor of customers' commitment (Kasmer, 2005). Brown et al. (2005) argued that acquisition of online shopping customer satisfaction is very difficult before attainment of trust. Ziaullah et al. (2014) demonstrated that e-satisfaction and e-trust have positive significant effect on customer's commitment. Therefore, we propose the hypotheses as:

H3: E-tailing satisfaction will positively effect on customer's affective commitment.

H4: E-tailing satisfaction will positively effect on customer's continuance commitment.

H5: E-tailing trust will positively effect on customer's affective commitment.

H6: E-tailing trust will positively effect on customer's continuance commitment.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Questionnaire design

We reviewed the literature to identify the valid measures for related constructs and adapted existing scales to measure social bond (Chen and Chiu, 2009), e-satisfaction (Fornell et al., 1996; Kim et al., 2009), e-trust (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Ribbink et al., 2004) and customer's commitment (Fullerton, 2003). Since the scales drawn from the literature originally were in English. So we developed initial questionnaire in English, then translated into Chinese by two Chinese Master and Ph. D students. The Chinese version was checked against the English version for discrepancies. In mainland China, we used the Chinese version of the questionnaire. The indicators were all measured using seven-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree), where higher values indicated stronger social bond, satisfaction, trust and customer's commitment in Chinese e-tailing.

3.2 Sampling and data collection

Data were collected from students (Universities) in China. It is recommended that universities students are likely to be the first and more attractive potential consumers segment of e-commerce due to their high education level and income (Lightner et al., 2002). According to report of Fung Business Intelligence Center, Chinese online customers are young people and over 60% were aged 30 or below (Fung Business Intelligence Center 2013). We used a paper based survey and random sampling method to select our respondents from different locations of universities i.e. research labs, canteens, libraries and mini market during period of January-May 2014. In our study 430 respondents have completed the survey, after sorting and removing errors 383 valid and usable questionnaires left for data analysis. The response rate was 89 percent. The profile of respondents and their characteristics are stated in Table 1 and construct descriptive statistics in Table 2.

TABLE 1
RESPONDENT PROFILE

DEMOGRAPHICS VARIABLE	CATEGORY	SAMPLE	RATIO
GENDER	Male	222	58.0%
	Female	161	42.0%
AGE (YEARS)	Below-20	79	20.6%
	20-29	299	78.1%
	30-39	5	1.3%
EDUCATION LEVEL	High School	3	0.8%
	Bachelor	218	56.9%
	Master	147	38.4%
	Ph.D	15	3.9%
PROFESSION	Students	383	100%
SHOPPING EXPERIENCE (YEARS)	Under-1	48	12.5%
	1-4	239	62.4%
	Over-4	96	25.1%

SAMPLE SIZE=383

TABLE 2
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

CONSTRUCT ITEMS	MEANS	STD. DEVIATION	ANALYSIS N
S1	5.11	1.346	383
S2	5.14	1.214	383
S3	5.18	1.286	383
T1	2.48	1.618	383
T2	2.38	1.631	383
T3	3.56	1.677	383
T4	3.86	1.390	383
T5	3.79	1.387	383
T6	3.86	1.460	383
AF1	4.09	1.552	383
AF2	4.09	1.480	383
AF3	4.07	1.497	383
AF4	4.09	1.385	383
CC1	3.79	1.489	383
CC2	3.21	1.635	383
CC3	3.11	1.580	383
CC4	3.94	1.736	383
SB1	4.90	1.749	383
SB2	4.72	1.658	383
SB3	4.28	1.600	383
SB4	4.67	1.525	383
SB5	4.73	1.581	383

(SB: SOCIAL BOND, S: SATISFACTION, T: TRUST, AF: AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT, CC: CONTINUANCE COMMITMENT)

3.3 Construct development

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) used to measure sampling adequacy of our study. The results that showed KMO value of 0.852 with the significance of Bartlett's test at 0.000 level, indicates the data for exploratory factor analysis (EFA) fitting. We used maximum likelihood analysis for data reduction and promax rotation with Kaiser Normalizations for clarifying the factors. Hence EFA was conducted with specifying five numbers of factors. The cumulative variance explanation reaches 67%. All the items have strong loadings on the construct in the pattern matrix which are >0.30 (Hair et al., 1998). The results of EFA are shown in Table 3. The internal consistency reliability of all items was examined by Cronbach alpha and item to total correlations. Therefore, the alpha coefficients and item to total correlations for each construct are shown in Table 5. The Cronbach's alpha of all measurement constructs ranges from 0.90 to 0.77. A Cronbach's alpha of value 0.7 or higher is commonly considered as a cut off for reliability (Nunnally 1978; Hair et al. 2006). Convergent validity has been examined based on measurement items standardized factor loadings, composite reliability and the variance extracted measures. The results of convergent validity test are also presented in Table 4. Standardized factor loadings of all items in each construct range from i.e. Social bond (0.856-0.609), e-satisfaction (0.880-

0.865), e-trust (0.912-0.642), affective commitment (0.869-0.654) and continuance commitment (0.867-0.678) that exceed the recommended level of 0.60 (Hair et al. 1998). The composite reliabilities (CR) range from 0.91 (e-satisfaction) to 0.84 (social bond) which exceed the recommended level of 0.70. The average variance extracted (AVE) measure ranges from 0.76 (e-satisfaction) to 0.52 (social) which is better than recommended value of 0.50 (Hair et al. 1998). The higher value of AVE, CR and factor loadings results, therefore adequately demonstrates the convergent validity of the measurement items.

4 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

We used SPSS and AMOS-IBM version 21 to analyze the data and demonstrate structural equation modeling (SEM) of this study. It is a powerful multivariate analysis technique used to measure latent variables and investigate causal relationship among proposed model variable. Specifically, SEM allows conducting confirmatory analysis (CFA) for theory development and testing. The overall model fit indices are $\chi^2=362.51$, $df=193$ (p-values=0.00), GFI=0.91, AGFI=0.89, NFI=0.92, CFI=0.96, RMSEA=0.048 indicating that model is acceptable with no substantive differences. Moreover, fit indices of structural model are presented in Table 4. The factor correlation matrix and standardized parameter estimates of hypothesized paths are presented in Table 6 and 7 respectively.

TABLE 3
RESULTS OF EXPLORATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS (EFA)

CONSTRUCT ITEMS	SOCIAL BOND	E-SATISFACTION	E-TRUST	AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT	CONTINUANCE COMMITMENT
SB1	0.771				
SB2	0.703				
SB3	0.619				
SB4	0.592				
SB5	0.505				
S1		0.870			
S2		0.882			
S3		0.888			
T1			0.586		
T2			0.619		
T3			0.575		
T4			0.816		
T5			0.823		
T6			0.761		
AF1				0.805	
AF2				0.890	
AF3				0.768	
AF4				0.683	
CC1					0.877
CC2					0.805
CC3					0.591
CC4					0.510

EXTRACTION METHOD: MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD. ROTATION METHOD: PROMAX WITH KAISER NORMALIZATION. A. ROTATION CONVERGED IN 6 ITERATIONS. *(SB: SOCIAL BOND, S: SATISFACTION, T: TRUST, AF: AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT, CC: CONTINUANCE COMMITMENT)

TABLE 4
FIT INDICES FOR STRUCTURAL MODEL.

FIT INDEX	SCORES	RECOMMENDED CUT-OFF VALUES
ABSOLUTE FIT MEASURES		
MINIMUM FIT FUNCTION CHI-SQUARE (χ^2)	362.51 (p=0.00)	THE LOWER, THE BETTER
DEGREE OF FREEDOM (D.F.)	193	
(χ^2)/D.F.	1.88	<5
GOODNESS-OF-FIT INDEX (GFI)	0.91	>0.80
ROOT MEAN SQUARE RESIDUAL (RMSR)	0.048	<0.05
INCREMENTAL FIT MEASURES		
ADJUSTED GOODNESS-OF-FIT INDEX (AGFI)	0.89	>0.80
TUCKER-LEWIS INDEX (TLI)	0.95	>0.90
NORMAL FIT INDEX (NFI)	0.92	>0.90
COMPARATIVE FIT INDEX (CFI)	0.96	>0.90
PARSIMONIOUS FIT MEASURES		
PARSIMONIOUS NORMED FIT INDEX (PNFI)	0.77	THE HIGHER, THE BETTER
PARSIMONIOUS GOODNESS-OF-FIT INDEX (PGFI)	0.70	THE HIGHER, THE BETTER

TABLE 5
RESULTS OF INTERNAL RELIABILITY AND CONVERGENT VALIDITY TESTS

INTERNAL RELIABILITY				CONVERGENT VALIDITY		
CONSTRUCT	ITEMS	CRONBACH ALPHA	ITEM TOTAL CORRELATION	STANDARDIZED FACTOR LOADINGS	COMPOSITE RELIABILITY	VARIANCE EXTRACTED
SOCIAL BOND	SB1	0.77	0.546	0.836	0.84	0.52
	SB2		0.510	0.609		
	SB3		0.584	0.662		
	SB4		0.643	0.856		
	SB5		0.529	0.616		
E-SAT	S1	0.90	0.813	0.880	0.91	0.76
	S2		0.808	0.865		
	S3		0.810	0.870		
E-TRUST	T1	0.86	0.642	0.663	0.89	0.57
	T2		0.638	0.642		
	T3		0.567	0.693		
	T4		0.687	0.797		
	T5		0.694	0.912		
	T6		0.670	0.804		
AFF. COMMITMENT	AF1	0.88	0.680	0.654	0.88	0.64
	AF2		0.818	0.821		
	AF3		0.765	0.869		
	AF4		0.743	0.843		
CONT. COMMITMENT	CC1	0.84	0.648	0.751	0.87	0.62
	CC2		0.751	0.867		
	CC3		0.756	0.839		
	CC4		0.526	0.678		

TABLE 7
STANDARDIZED PARAMETER ESTIMATES OF HYPOTHESIZED PATHS.

PATH	HYPOTHESES	CO-EFFICIENT ESTIMATE	STANDARD ERROR	T-VALUE	P-VALUE
SOCIAL BOND => E-SATISFACTION	H1	-0.043	0.050	-0.876	NS
SOCIAL BOND => E-TRUST	H2	0.004	0.058	0.067	NS
E-SATISFACTION => AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT	H4	0.194	0.059	3.298	P<0.001
E-SATISFACTION => CONTINUANCE COMMITMENT	H5	-0.001	0.071	-0.017	NS
E-TRUST => AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT	H6	0.436	0.055	7.990	P<0.001
E-TRUST => CONTINUANCE COMMITMENT	H7	0.519	0.065	7.948	P<0.001

NS: NOT SIGNIFICANT

5 WHY NOT SOCIAL BONDING MATTER IN E-TAILING

Howard and Worboys (2003) suggested that online customers are not always concerned about a personal touch. This is the reason of social bond non-significance in e-tailing. Subsequently, most of the online shoppers prefer the relative lack of social interaction during buying online. The straightforward reason is the absence of sales executives or people in the virtual environment. Therefore e-tailing customers can find what they want without feeling pressure of purchase decision (Wolfinger and Gilly, 2001). Furthermore, the self-service technologies are unable to reproduce all of the social interaction elements of shopping (Sauer and Burton, 1999). Therefore, social bond does not have an impact on e-satisfaction and e-trust in the context of e-tailing. In this regard, our results are similar with previous researches (Chen and Chiu, 2009; Lin et al., 2003).

6 CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

In fact social bonding of e-tailing is theoretically important. The findings of this study make important contributions to the e-commerce literature by investigating the effect of social bond on e-satisfaction, e-trust and customer's commitment. Furthermore, this study theoretically highlighted and empirically examined the role of students being e-tailing customers in the context of relationship commitment.

6.2 Managerial contribution

This study provides meaningful information for e-tailors to manage their customer relations in China. Thus e-tailors may need to cultivate social bond effectively to manage their students segment of customers in e-tailing. On the basis of our empirical results, the following implications can be formulated for e-tailing managers.

Firstly, in the current state of virtual environment e-tailors cannot enhance the satisfaction and customers trust through practicing social bond. But it is possible for manager to effectively use social bond in e-tailing. As currently, in China and rest of the world e-tailing business has been emerging more popular. Thus, we recommend to e-tailors that they have to design such kind of interactive websites, where customers can get personalized services, make virtual interaction with staff. There is need of customized services via e-tailing for proper utilization of social bonds. In this manner e-tailors can capitalize social bonding in the context of relationship marketing. Secondly, in our study males are 58% and females are 42%. At this stage, e-tailors can concentrate equally on both types of e-tailing customers.

7 CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

We examined the effect of social bond on e-satisfaction, e-trust and customer's commitment. Particularly, we used a structural equation model (SEM) to empirically investigate how e-tailing social bond impacts on customer's commitment through moderating role of e-satisfaction and e-trust.

Our study reveals several limitations. First, we used a paper based survey to collect data from students that is bit complicated for them. Second, sampling frame includes universities students that may lead to loss of generalizability of results. Third, dependent variable in the hypothesized model, e-satisfaction, e-trust and customer's commitment are likely to be influenced by other variables which were not the specific object of this study. Therefore, future studies might be conducted to examine the complementary and interactional effect of social bond in the same area or some other product classifications and industries.

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