

**An exploratory study of Hong Kong consumers' use of social
network sites (SNS) for product information search**

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Statement of Originality

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository**, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Karen Yeung January, 2015

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Abstract

The widespread popularity of using social network sites (SNS) has changed consumer information search behaviour. More and more companies are engaging in SNS to attract and interact with customers. The result is that consumers are being bombarded with product information or even negative messages, which may deter them from making purchase decisions; therefore, it is important for marketers to understand when and why consumers prefer to start and/or stop using SNS to search product information and how SNS may affect a consumer's purchase intentions. The broad research question of this study is to explore how consumers perceive the value of using SNS and to understand when and why consumers, with varying levels of involvement in SNS for social purposes, determine to use SNS for product information search and how these consumers determine when to end a search using SNS.

In order to gain a more meticulous and insightful understanding of when and how consumers start and stop searching product information via SNS, this study focuses on four groups of Hong Kong SNS users, whose intensity of SNS use varies from light to extreme, namely, light SNS users, average SNS users, heavy SNS users, and extremely heavy SNS users. A qualitative approach of face-to-face focus group discussions and in-depth interviews ensued, followed by an analysis of their responses. The research process was based on purposive sampling, inductive data analysis, and contextual interpretation.

The findings show that respondents in all groups were inclined to have a positive attitude towards using SNS as an additional tool to improve search results and enabled discovery of product information. They expressed that using SNS for product information search was informative and convenient, and a high proportion of the heavier users of SNS were attracted to use SNS for this purpose. Apart from obtaining updated communication materials provided by marketers, an SNS information search could be triggered by some short and easy-to-read advertisements and posts with multimedia effects on SNS. Heavier users of SNS saw few disadvantages in using SNS for search purposes and had a higher tendency to make impulse purchases with distinctive promotional offers. While users in all groups enjoyed reading the posts of

friends or even strangers about using a particular product, unreliable word-of-mouth was less of an issue for extremely heavy users. It was also common to find that respondents in each user group browsed SNS on their way to the office or school while waiting for or travelling by communal transport. Searching product information via SNS usually ceased when users were occupied by other issues or found the information, such as price, availability and product reviews, that they wanted. SNS helped them save time in choosing a product, even if they finally purchased it in a physical store. The most significant difference between different user groups in the reasons to stop searching was that more of the heavy and extremely heavy users of SNS were able to use SNS to reach a favourable purchase decision after a productive search than those who used it less regularly. This exploratory study should give some ideas for marketers to design proper strategies to stimulate consumers to search product information and make purchase decision using SNS.