

**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.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Ongoing advances in information communication technology (ICT) have led to the establishment of more and different media platforms that enable buyers to search for product information before making a purchase decision (Bruce & Solomon, 2013). Traditionally, consumers have searched for product information via media platforms like print, radio, and broadcast television (Nielsen, 2014), but nowadays they can search via various online platforms such as company websites, consumer discussion forums, internet search engines like Yahoo and Google (Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Especially over the last decade, the growth of social network sites (SNS), such as Facebook.com and Myspace.com for mainly western countries like USA, CyWorld in Korea, and QQ (Qzone) and Renren in China, has offered another path for consumers to search for product information (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013; Park & Kim, 2013; Sharma & AsadRehman, 2012; Zhong, 2010).

Because of the increasing popularity of using internet and mobile devices, SNS have become an integral part of people's daily lives (Nielsen, 2012). SNS can play a role where search engines such as Yahoo.com have traditionally dominated (Bughin et al., 2011; Nielsen, 2012). However, there are gaps in understanding how consumers perceive the role and value of using SNS in a product information search. While brands are increasing their use of social media such as Facebook, further research is needed on how "users respond to information that appears in their newsfeeds, whether they notice advertising on Facebook, and whether they are interacting with brands on Facebook beyond initially clicking on the brand's Like button" (Parsons, 2013, p. 35).

The broad aim of this study is to explore how users of SNS perceive its value for a product information search, given the alternatives of internet search engines which are readily available and brand presence on SNS, which is still relatively recent and growing (Araujo & Neijens, 2012).

In this chapter, SNS are defined and placed in the context of social media (Section 1.2), followed by a definition of search using SNS (Section 1.3). Justification of the focus (Section 1.4), the associated research questions (Section 1.5) and research

methodologies (Section 1.6) are introduced. Finally, the outline of the dissertation (Section 1.7) is highlighted.

1.2 Social Network Sites defined

The terms “social media” and “social network sites” are closely linked, and need to be separated for the purpose of this study. SNS are, collectively, social media in the form of online communication platforms that enable internet users to become friends and develop networks to share opinions and information (Goh et al., 2013). Bolton et al. (2013, p. 248) define social media “as any online service through which users can create and share a variety of content”. They go on to elaborate dimensions that include user generated services such as blogs, SNS, online review sites, virtual game worlds, video sharing and online communities, essentially distinguishing a wider field of social media within which SNS are located. Boyd and Ellison (2007, p. 211) offer a definition of SNS as web based services that allow individuals (but in practice, any person or organisation) to “(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” This definition has been widely used and cited (Araujo & Neijens, 2012; Bolton et al., 2013; Buck, 2012), and is subsequently used in this study.

During the last decade, the growth and popularity of social media has increased tremendously (Daugherty & Hoffman, 2014; Goodrich & De Mooij, 2014). Lampe, Vitak and Ellison (2013) claim that in the USA, in 2005 only 8% of internet-using adults were members of SNS while in 2011 the percentage was 65%, mainly using Facebook. According to a recent survey by Nielsen (2014), Facebook remains the most popular site, and consumers like to use a computer or smartphone to access and engage in this social medium.

While people continue to use traditional search engines like Google and Yahoo, others are increasingly seeking information by means of SNS such as Facebook.com, Friendster.com and Myspace.com (Park & Cho, 2012; Thomas, Peters, & Tolson, 2007). Like most of the social media, many consumers post messages to share their opinions and experiences of using a product with friends or even strangers via SNS. These messages, in the form of word of mouth (WOM), may play an important role in

influencing information search behaviour and the intention of making a purchase decision (Cheung et al., 2009). In view of this, many businesses have started to engage themselves in SNS to collect feedback from customers or inform their actual and potential buyers about updated product information (Bruce & Solomon, 2013; Divol, Edelman, & Sarrazin, 2012). Hence, SNS have changed how companies promote their products to their target customers.

1.3 Search through SNS

“Search” is defined as the act of a user in making a systematic investigation to obtain data or information (Scale, 2008); “information search” is regarded as a fundamental activity in making a purchase decision (Browne, Pitts, & Wetherbe, 2007). Since consumer information search precedes all buying and choice behaviour, it has become one of the most enduring research topics in the area of consumer behaviour over recent decades (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996).

Klein and Ford (2003) observe that numerous articles have been written on consumer information search over the preceding three decades. They define information search as “the stage of the decision-making process wherein consumers actively collect and integrate information from numerous sources, both internal and external, prior to making a choice” (Klein & Ford, 2003, p. 31). Continued research reflects the rapidly changing communications environment and the many gaps in understanding how consumers use the changing mix of electronic media available, with researchers such as Kulviwat, Guo, and Engchanil (2004) proposing a conceptual framework for studying the determinants of online information search due to its recency. Because of the time period, these studies have focused on open access sites using search engines. Studies such as those of Klein and Ford (2003) are concerned, among other things, with users and non-users of the internet, the experience levels of users, and the extent to which an internet search could substitute for traditional information sources; but their conclusion unknowingly foreshadows an attraction of search using SNS: “the extent to which online sources are substituted for traditional sources is likely to depend on their perceived credibility. After all, chat room discussions are generally with strangers (who may or may not be independent of the seller) and not with friends” (p. 46–47). With the emergence of SNS, whose core feature has been described as visible profiles that

display an articulated list of “friends” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), it would appear to be a very suitable vehicle in helping consumers to find and examine the credibility of information via online referrals and reviews (McDonnell & Shiri, 2011; O’Reilly & Marx, 2011).

The study of consumer information search using SNS is still young, as evidenced by the debate on what a social search is. It has been defined in terms of the use of peers and other social resources during a search task, or as the search for people. However, McDonnell and Shiri (2011) note that the ultimate goal of such a search is to find desired information. In this study, we focus on SNS rather than the wider social media domain and follow McDonnell and Shiri (2011) in their broad use of social search as an aid to search information on the internet. Also following these authors, search is distinguished from discovery, the former based on the premise that the user has a concept of what they are searching for.

The growth in users and the posting of profiles, often with personal information, on SNS, as well as the availability of such sites on mobile technologies, has encouraged businesses not only to advertise through such sites but also to establish their own profiles (Hadija, Barnes, & Hair, 2012; Parsons, 2013). Araujo and Neijens (2012) note that brands have several reasons to develop a SNS presence: these include the popularity of SNS such as Facebook and the low upfront cost of establishing a presence; some evidence shows that consumers express trust in brand pages on SNS such as Facebook Fan Page. Parsons (2013) notes that companies are trying to encourage consumers to interact with them, but also that companies can use social media for a variety of purposes due to their interactive capacities. These include generating feedback useful in product development and marketing, obtaining customer information, and providing product information. However, Parsons (2013) recommends a future research agenda including investigating whether consumers’ exposure to social media (such as their responses to the information on the newsfeed on their Facebook) influences their purchase intentions or not.

1.4 Justification for the Study

The relatively recent emergence and rapid growth of social media that has been briefly outlined above (and will be extended in the literature review) has added to the internet

search possibilities of consumers. However, the changes are sufficiently recent and ongoing not to have been adequately researched in terms of understanding why consumers may use links to businesses with a presence on their SNS, how the use of SNS fits in to their overall online search and when they consider sufficient searching has been done using this medium.

There is a wide range of SNS for consumers to post messages sharing their opinions and experiences of using a product with strangers or friends (Durukan, Bazaci, & Hamsioglu, 2012), where friends may also be brands (Araujo and Neijens, 2012). Many companies have spent millions of dollars on SNS for marketing purposes, but with little understanding of how it affects consumers' buying and searching behaviour (Divol et al., 2012).

Although search cost is an important factor affecting purchase decisions, consumers' search strategies and personal satisfaction with past experiences of online search may be more crucial in determining which tools they will continue to use for searching information (Kumar, Lang, & Peng, 2004). If consumers cannot find the required information (e.g. features, design, and price) regarding the product that they are intending to buy via the internet, they may go to a physical store. Differences in product information search have important implications for marketing actions; hence, a better understanding of the consumer decision-making process of SNS users, in particular during their product information search process, should help companies to utilise and design appropriate marketing strategies.

1.5 Research Questions

The purpose of this research 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 understand how SNS are used by consumers in product information search and in making a potential purchase decision, this exploratory research study has developed the following questions:

- RQ1. For consumers who use SNS, how do they perceive the value of using SNS:
- (a) for product information search; and
 - (b) for helping to make purchase decisions?
- RQ2. For current users of SNS:
- (a) when do they commence to use SNS in their product search; and
 - (b) why do they use it for this purpose?
- RQ3. How do these consumers determine they have searched sufficient SNS to cease further search using these sources? (How do they determine they need to move to non-SNS sources or to quit searching?)

1.6 Research Methodology

In order to investigate the perception and actual experience of consumers using SNS for product information search, a qualitative research strategy is deemed appropriate for this research study. Interviews and focus groups are useful methods to allow SNS users to explain why and how they start and end a product information search with SNS. Such an approach is intended to gather “rich” data from SNS users and to obtain findings with a high degree of validity (Belk, 2006; Collis & Hussey, 2009; Lee & Lings, 2008).

This qualitative research adopts a non-probability sampling method to collect data through focus groups and follow it with in-depth interviews. It has two phases to the collection of data. Hong Kong adult consumers and members of SNS such as Facebook and Instagram, with experience of using SNS for product information search, were invited to join this study. In total 32 participants were divided into four groups according to their different levels of involvement in using SNS: light SNS users, average SNS users, heavy SNS users, and extremely heavy SNS users; the basis for their classification is explained in Chapter 3.

The primary data was collected and then coded and analysed using content analysis consistent with a grounded theory approach (Belk, 2006). This coding process has several stages, including repeatedly reviewing the data in an effort to organise it into the most meaningful categories (Saldaña, 2009). Both a priori and emergent coding were employed in this study.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The potential sources of online product information continue to flourish and SNS has become one of the increasingly popular sources of searching product information. This exploratory study should be helpful for the practitioners to recognize the relationship between SNS, information search and purchase decision. By understanding the perceived value of using SNS and how SNS fits into consumers' decision process from commence to stop searching via SNS, the marketers should be able to make use of SNS to formulate appropriate strategies to influence consumers' information search behaviour and make purchase decision using SNS.

1.8 Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 provides a general overview of this dissertation. Chapter 2 provides a literature review on SNS, types of product, information search behaviour, consumer decision-making theories and search theories pertaining to the research topic. The literature gaps and research questions are then addressed. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology: how the data was collected and the data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the data collected during four focus group discussions and eight in-depth individual interviews. The last chapter addresses and discusses the findings of the study as well as the implications for marketers. Limitations and recommendations for future research are also noted.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter identifies the research gap and provides the underpinning for the research questions to be addressed in the following chapter. It explains and examines key concepts derived from relevant research in the areas of social network sites (SNS) and consumer information search (Section 2.2), information search behaviour (Section 2.3), and theories pertaining to the research topic (Section 2.4). It identifies research gaps in relevant literature such as journal articles and edited books (Section 2.5), and develops the questions to guide this research.

2.2 Social Network Sites and Consumer Information Search

Traditionally, consumers have searched for product information in commercial or marketer-dominated sources where marketers advertise via newspapers, magazines, or salespeople to persuade customers to buy their products (Blackwell, Miniard, & Engel, 2012). Since the introduction of the World Wide Web (WWW) in the 1990s, the internet has become an important source enabling consumers to gather richer product information by reading extensive product reviews from other customers (Huang, Lurie, & Mitra, 2009; Kumar & Lang, 2007). Consumers are making ever more use of social media to share product information and seek advice about their purchasing decisions (Liang, Ho, Li, & Turban, 2011). Ongoing advances in information communication technology (ICT) have led to more and different media platforms, such as internet search engines, company websites and SNS, that enable buyers to engage in deep search for product information before making a purchase decision (Agarwal, Hosanagar, & Smith, 2011; Bruce & Solomon, 2013; Dellaert & Häubl, 2012). For instance, a consumer may make use of search engines to look up product information such as features, design, price, and ratings by other users. They can manage and customise their search content using predefined key words to find pre-purchase product information free of charge (Kumar et al., 2004), or by tagging words that make the most sense to them personally. Social media has drastically changed the ways that people interact with each other and share and discover information that complements web search and discovery (Liang et al., 2011; McDonnell & Shiri, 2011; Sharma & AsadRehman, 2012).

2.2.1 Social media defined

Social media consist of a wide range of online, word-of-mouth forums including blogs like Blogger and Xanga, online communities like YouTube and Flickr, search engines including Google and Yahoo, company-sponsored discussion boards and chat rooms, consumer product or service rating websites and two-sided platforms (e.g. Trip.Advisors.com), internet discussion boards and forums, moblogs (sites containing digital audio, images, movies, or photographs), and SNS such as Facebook and LinkedIn (Goldsmith, Pagani, & Lu, 2013; Malhotra, 2012; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Strauss & Frost, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The terms “social media” and “social network sites” (SNS) are closely linked and used seamlessly by many people, but for the purposes of this study the two need to be distinguished.

Bolton et al. (2013, p.248) define social media as “any online service through which users can create and share a variety of content”. Social media are user-generated or consumer-generated online communication platforms (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Sharma & AsadRehman, 2012; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) that allow internet users to become friends and develop relationships to share insights and experiences, to play games and connect for business or pleasure (Sharma & AsadRehman, 2012; Strauss & Frost, 2009).

Social media are hybrid, offering electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) opportunities and serve as a platform for sending and receiving messages (Goodrich & De Mooij, 2014). Information can flow horizontally from consumers to consumers instead of vertically from companies to consumers, and can be disseminated more widely and quickly than through traditional platforms like advertising in print media and on company webpages (Bruce & Solomon, 2013; Goh et al., 2013; Sashi, 2012). It has been found that referrals on social media show longer carryover effects than traditional advertising (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). This can lead to benefits and limitations for both social media owners and users.

McDonnell & Shiri (2011, p. 7) note that “social media services and systems can be used to enhance and expand search on the web”. Since social media platforms enable consumers to use blogs and social networking forums to create, edit, share and distribute informational content rapidly (Bruce & Solomon, 2013; Huang & Yang, 2010;

Sharma & AsadRehman, 2012), consumers feel that they gain more power in determining the production and distribution of information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Users of social media also earn respect and recognition by posting reviews on brands or products (Bruce & Solomon, 2013). This encourages them to spend more time on using social media.

Although marketers are challenged by consumers using communication platforms that they do not control (Bruce & Solomon, 2013), social media has many advantages. For example, they can offer a platform for companies to communicate and interact with their target consumers (Al Kailani & Kumar, 2011; Bruce & Solomon, 2013). They can help firms to engage in timely and direct end-consumer connection at relatively low costs with high levels of efficiency than can be achieved with more traditional communication tools (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Vinerean, Cetina, Dumitrescu, & Tichindelean, 2013); a small firm can make use of social media to generate growth in returns on investment (ROI) (Kumar, Bhaskaran, Mirchandani, & Shah, 2013).

Companies must accept the dilemma caused by the increasing popularity of social media (Akrimi & Khemakhem, 2012) as on the one hand, they introduce uncertainties and possible harms as businesses have no control over the content of consumers' comments on their products while, on the other hand, companies enjoy the benefits of cost-effective ways of targeting potential and existing consumers according to their preferences and demographics (Akrimi & Khemakhem, 2012; Bruce & Solomon, 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The recent blossoming of SNS, a form of social medium, allows businesses to enhance their brand building and increase their sales. It has changed the normal routine on how companies communicate and promote their products to their target customers.

2.2.2 The social network site defined

A Social Network Site (SNS) has no universal definition. It mainly refers to a user-generated system publishing and sharing interests, opinions, information, photos, and videos online (Goldsmith et al., 2013; Jiang, 2013; Kim, Leem, Kim, & Cheon, 2013; Lee, Park, Kim, Kim, & Moon, 2011; Shu & Chuang, 2011; Zhang & Daugherty, 2009). The concept of social networking is based on the idea of six degrees of separation: that is, each individual is connected to every other individual in the network by no more than

six other people (Shu & Chuang, 2011; Strauss & Frost, 2009). SNS provides a virtual space for users to communicate through the internet, which can be an important medium of consumer socialisation (Vinerean et al., 2013): in other words, it provides a social medium in the form of an online communication platform that enables internet users to become friends and develop networks to share opinions and information (Goh et al., 2013; Sharma & AsadRehman, 2012). It fosters the information to be disseminated within the social network very quickly.

As mentioned in previous chapter, Boyd and Ellison (2007) define SNS as web based services that allow individuals to construct a profile to share and connect with people who are already in contact. Since Boyd and Ellison's (2007) definition has been widely adopted and cited (Araujo & Neijens, 2012; Bolton et al., 2013; Buck, 2012), their definition of SNS is subsequently used in this study.

The use of internet technologies to create a wide range of SNS such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn connects people with similar interests and allows users to establish on-line profiles and search for other users (Shu & Chuang, 2011). They can send messages inviting friends to join an SNS and become new members when accepted. Users' profiles are connected and the process may repeat, increasing the total number of links in the network (Cole, 2007; Coulter & Roggeveen, 2012; Shu & Chuang, 2011). These connections allow people to search for and access valuable resources such as discovering interesting books, people or jobs (Kadushin, 2012; Scale, 2008). The motives for social network participation are threefold: to form accurate perceptions of reality, to develop meaningful social relationships, and to maintain a favourable self-concept (Goldsmith et al., 2013).

SNS have become a very popular tool to allow members or participants to reveal or post messages to share their personal lives with their friends or even share opinions and experiences of using a product with peers (Durukan et al., 2012; Jiang, 2013; Xu, Li, & Song, 2012). Studies in India, Taiwan, UK, USA and Holland, show many users consider SNS as a somewhat important part of their life (Dennis, Morgan, Wright, & Jayawardhena, 2010; Lorenzo-Romero, Constantinides, & María-del-Carmen, 2011; Sharma & AsadRehman, 2012; Shu & Chuang, 2011). In other words, people around the world establish links by joining SNS to catch up with friends (Huang & Yang, 2010;

Kadushin, 2012; Loop & Malyshev, 2013). For instance, when a new member has joined an existing social network, he or she may instantly link to his or her friends or relatives who are already members. By importing contacts from their email accounts they can be connected within a very short period of time to satisfy social needs (Goel & Goldstein, 2014).

Making connections through SNS and the internet is ever-growing (Kadushin, 2012), and there is an increasing value to and need for understanding the impact of online social networks on consumer behaviour and decision-making (Goldsmith et al., 2013). For example, business firms can post updated product information or monitor their brands awareness via SNS. By 2012, 73 per cent of Fortune 500 companies had a corporate Twitter account and 66 per cent had a Facebook page, however, only 28 per cent of big companies had a corporate blog (Loop & Malyshev, 2013). Using SNS as a platform for communication is relevant not only for large multinational firms but also for small and medium sized companies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), and there is an increasing trend among SNS users to review comments about a product before making a purchasing decision (Riegner, 2007). This type of user-generated content communication has become an important marketing tool influencing consumer behaviour.

Of the long list of SNS, Facebook is the most popular in the world; it is the most common SNS in Hong Kong (Nielsen, 2012, 2014), and so it is worthwhile to elaborate on Facebook in this study. Facebook, a people search engine, was found in 2004. Since its establishment, it has millions of members all over the world (Richter, Riemer, & vom Brocke, 2011).

Facebook has different types of “pages” that allow people to connect, interact, and share information, video and photos (Champoux, Durgee, & McGlynn, 2012). Facebook is used by consumers but also by large companies like Coca-Cola and Starbucks (Araujo & Neijens, 2012; Culnan, McHugh, & Zubillaga, 2010; Liang & Turban, 2011) and small businesses (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Since 2006, Facebook has invited companies, like Apple, to set up company profiles and they have witnessed the immediate benefits and remain logged in (Champoux et al., 2012). Apart from letting an individual set up personal pages, Facebook has attracted millions of companies to

establish brand communities for marketing purposes (Goh et al., 2013). Apart from posting information about upcoming events, new products and promotions, Facebook can allow a firm to educate and invite its current and potential customers to be followers in order to retain relationship (Champoux et al., 2012). It has been speculated by some Facebook staffers that companies will eventually abandon their corporate business sites entirely and rely on Facebook (see Figure 2.1) for all their on-line business activities. Both companies and individuals will opt to receive messages from others via Facebook pages: anyone who signs up as a self-designated follower will automatically receive messages posted by followed members, which may include friends or companies (Kadushin, 2012; Loop & Malyshev, 2013). This provides an opportunity for customers to receive up-to-date product information from their favourite brands whenever they login their SNS accounts.

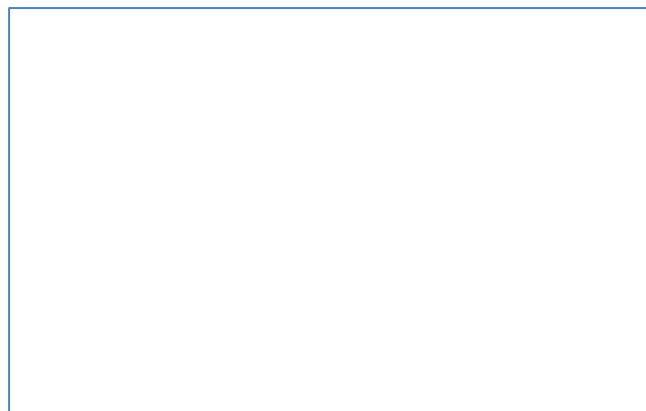


Figure 2.1 Screenshot of an example of Facebook pages

(source: <https://www.facebook.com/FacebookPages>)

The popularity of Facebook rests on its open, public, two-way conversation, although this sometimes proves to be as much of a hindrance as a benefit. For example, Starbucks' Facebook page has over 21 million "likes", while its corporate page has 1.8 million visitors a month (Champoux et al., 2012); a report from 2010 noted that the fans on Facebook pages spent US\$71.84 more per year on that brand than those who had not "liked" the page (Jeong, Paek, & Lee, 2013).

Facebook offers four main types of page: Personal; Fan; Official; and Community (Champoux et al., 2012; Lewis, 2010; Scale, 2008; Strand, 2011). Personal pages are

used by anyone registered as a member of Facebook, while Fan pages (see Figure 2.2) are typically run by an individual or group to show their interest in a certain event, artist, or brand. Official Facebook pages (see Figure 2.3) are created by companies to invite their fans to join and allow them to follow the company' news and product-related information (Coulter & Roggeveen, 2012; Strand, 2011); however, it is often difficult for users to distinguish whether a page is official or unofficial (Strand, 2011). Community pages can be created by anyone who is interested in a topic or experience; however, no company has the power to control who sets up the community pages which are owned collectively by a community (Strand, 2011).

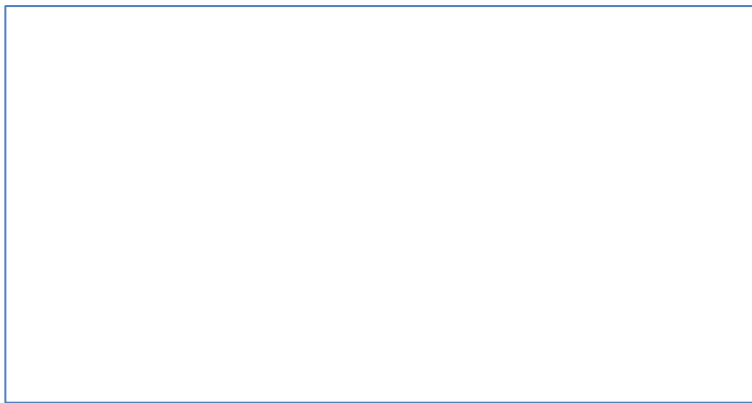


Figure 2.2 Screenshot of an example of Fan pages

(source: <https://www.facebook.com/cocacola>)

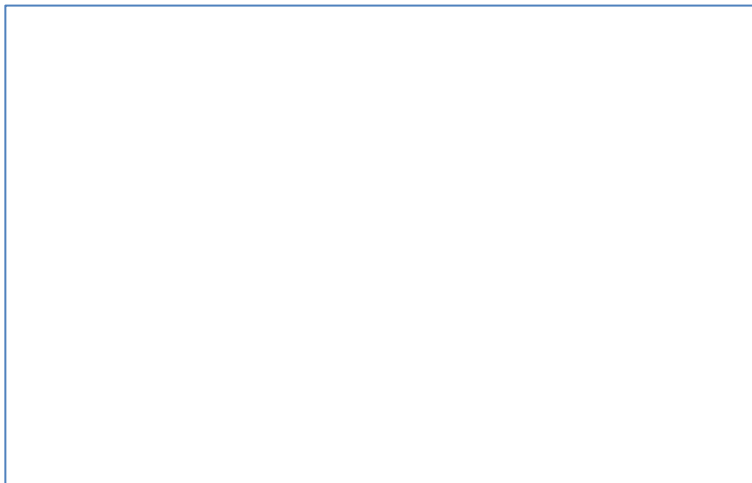


Figure 2.3 Screenshot of an example of Official pages

(source: <https://www.facebook.com/Godiva>)



Figure 2.4 Screenshot of an example of Community pages

(source: https://www.facebook.com/UoNStudents?hc_location=stream)

In order to increase revenue, more and more companies are engaging in SNS to reach and interact with their customers (Bruce & Solomon, 2013; Culnan et al., 2010; Liang & Turban, 2011; Parsons, 2013; Rigby, 2011; Wilson, Guinan, Parise, & Weinberg, 2011). These include generating feedback, useful in product development and marketing; obtaining customer information; as well as providing product information. For example, members' personal information disclosed on their personal pages encourages business to post advertisements on their "News-Feed" (Barreto, 2013; Parsons, 2013). When they join Facebook pages, their comments or how they rate products may be publicised on their "News-Feed" (Coulter & Roggeveen, 2012). Araujo and Neijens (2012) also note that consumers express trust in brand pages, which accelerates the enthusiasm of companies to establish Facebook Fan Pages. As it is possible for customers to post negative comments on Facebook pages, "companies seem to control the wall content rather than allowing users to post directly on their walls without responding to a current posting" (Parsons, 2013, p. 35). Strand (2011) suggests that brand owners must monitor what is happening not only on Fan pages but also on Community pages. Despite the increasing attractiveness of virtual brand communities on SNS, few studies to date have investigated the underlying reasons and motives for engaging in these pages to forage for product information. This study will address this gap.

A SNS such as Facebook can act as an additional platform from which to communicate with customers. However, companies have to think carefully about how to make good use of this technology, and avoid overwhelming their customers with messages (Parsons,

2013). There are many successful stories of the application of SNS (Liang & Turban, 2011), but there are also stories of failure. Consumers complain that they are bombarded with excessive amounts of product information and advertisements. Some describe Facebook ads as “annoying, irritating, and deceptive” (Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2014, p. 76). They worry about breaches of privacy if their profile pages, on which personal information is displayed, are disclosed to strangers (Liang & Turban, 2011; Smith, 2012). The rapid growth of negative messages via SNS may deter consumers from making purchasing decisions. A better understanding of the impact of different types of SNS behaviour on consumer buying can help companies to formulate strategies to promote and sell their products effectively. Parsons (2013) recommends future research which includes investigating whether consumers’ exposure to SNS (such as their responses to the information on the newsfeed on their Facebook) can influence their purchase intentions or not. In view of the increasing popularity of SNS for searching for and sharing product information, much study is needed to find out how product information posted or shared on this medium can affect consumers’ information search behaviour.

2.3 Information Search Behaviour

Since consumer information search precedes all buying and choice behaviour, it is one of the most enduring research topics in the area of consumer behaviour over recent decades (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). A search is the act of a user making a systematic investigation to obtain data or information (Scale, 2008); an information search is a process to seek knowledge about a problem or situation; it is regarded as a fundamental activity in almost all decision-making behaviour such as making a purchase decision (Browne et al., 2007). Klein & Ford (2003) define information search as “the stage of the decision-making process wherein consumers actively collect and integrate information from numerous sources, both internal and external, prior to making a choice” (p.31). The internal search is to retrieve product knowledge from memory, while an external search implies the need to gather information from the outside world, including family, friends and the marketplace (Blackwell et al., 2012; Lehto, Kim, & Morrison, 2006).

Apart from internal versus external, information search can also be classified as active versus passive. With a specific need, a consumer takes an active approach to retrieve desired information via search engines or discussion forums as quickly as possible (Cole, 2007). When lacking a specific information need, a consumer is engaged in passive search by simply enjoying “their social network sites, aimlessly browsing without need to draw the search to a definite conclusion” (Cole 2007, p. 12).

The information itself can vary from incomplete and subjective to complete and objective (Tsiros & Mittal, 2000), and the knowledge, preferences and perceptions of the information seeker may influence what types of information may be sought (that is, context variables such as search goods versus experience goods), as well as when, where and how to search for the information (Cole, 2007; Huang et al., 2009; O’Reilly & Marx, 2011). For example, O’Reilly & Marx’s (2011) study finds that corporate blogs are filled with product-specific information only and customers place little confidence on the information provided there. With the emergence of SNS, where its core feature has been described as visible profiles that display an articulated list of “Friends” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), SNS would appear a very suitable vehicle in helping consumer to find and examine the credibility of information via online referrals and reviews (McDonnell & Shiri, 2011; O’Reilly & Marx, 2011). Despite the prevalent use of the SNS for product information search, very little is known about when and why SNS users start and end the search.

2.3.1 Factors affecting information search behaviour

There is a long history of research into what and how product information search affects consumer behaviour. Extensive studies of the variables that affect the length and depth of information search have found that consumers’ gender, age, personality, and inertia influence their information search behaviour (Blackwell et al., 2012; Kulviwat et al., 2004). Perceived costs and perceived benefits (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996), perceived risks and time constraints (Laroche, Saad, Cleveland, & Browne, 2000), experiences and responses to information about a product (Huang et al., 2009), consumers’ IT literacy skills (Buck, 2012), ability and motivation (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996), or declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge (Shen & Wyer, 2008) and expertise knowledge (Marchionini, 1995), may also affect their search behaviour.

Kulviwat et al. (2004, p. 247) argues that “perceived benefit and cost are the two major determinants of online information search derived from information economics”. Perceived risk may include performance, psychological, social and financial risk. To reduce perceived risk, consumers may limit their pre-purchase information search by relying on brand loyalty or the advice of others (Veloutsou & McAlonan, 2012). Time pressure may restrict consumers’ efforts when searching for product information (Laroche et al., 2000) and, consumers spend less time searching if they have previously bought experience goods such as automobiles (Dimoka, Hong, & Pavlou, 2012; Laroche et al., 2000); however, if they have been dissatisfied with a product in the past or lack experience of a new product, they may spend more time on an information search (Kulviwat et al., 2004). If the required information is outdated or not available (Scale, 2008), consumers may spend more or less time searching.

Users may require mastery of IT literacy skills to navigate complicated settings on SNS efficiently and effectively (Buck, 2012). The ability to search is rooted in self-efficacy and is related to the cognitive ability to search for and critically evaluate information; the motivation to search is related to the desire to exert effort in the collection and processing of information (Kulviwat et al., 2004; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). Lampe et al.’s (2013) study finds that users with good self-esteem and internet efficacy are more likely to use SNS to search: in other words, the ability to search stimulates the number of search activities and is positively related to the motivation to search online.

Consumers may use declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge to interpret different pieces of searched information to evaluate the attractiveness, quality, or price of the available products (Shen & Wyer, 2008), while their system knowledge enables them to select the most suitable browsers, search engines, and vendor sites to aid a search (Marchionini, 1995). O’Reilly & Marx (2011) explain that those consumers who have a high ability to identify corroborating sources of information can assess the creditability of online WOM information, and know how to search for information in significantly different ways than those with less expertise. They are also likely to spend more time searching for more sources to determine the reliability of the eWOM. However, their work focuses on “technically savvy consumers who regularly make online purchases and who spend more than three hours a day on the internet” (p. 335); they do not identify users of SNS or people who spend less than three hours per day on

the internet. This research study will focus on investigating consumers who are users of SNS and have the experience to search for product information via SNS.

2.3.2 Sources of information affect information search behaviour

Sources of information may include persons, or places like the SNS, internet and physical stores, and the source may have a great impact on how and when a consumer starts and ends a search for product information. Some studies find that consumers search actively by paying attention to the internet or to retail outlets in shopping malls (Lee, Park, & Han, 2011). Technological advancement has made it possible for consumers to use mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets to access, create and share product reviews with their friends or opinion leaders, virtually everywhere (Al Kailani & Kumar, 2011; Blackwell et al., 2012; Bruce & Solomon, 2013; Buck, 2012). Some consumers use these devices to make purchases online, and the physical store is only used for testing the product (Soopramanien, 2011). As the presentation of information with multi-media content may enhance the perceived value of the information (Ransbotham, Kane, & Lurie, 2012), “understanding how consumers search for product information online is vital for successful marketing practice” (Cole, 2007, p. 6). In other words, consumers’ search behaviour is affected by the source of their information.

Since SNS have become an important source of information and has changed how consumers search for and share product information (Nusair, Bilgihan, Okumus, & Cobanoglu, 2013; Scale, 2008), companies that used to share product information online via a static company website have been forced to post information on interactive SNS sites like Facebook and Twitter to match changing information search behaviour (Mihalcea & Savulescu, 2013). An important question is whether SNS are viewed as sources of information, like traditional media, or as influences in opinion formation, like interpersonal or WOM communications.

2.3.3 Search through SNS

An internet search does not generate new information automatically; it merely facilitates information exchange (Kulviwat et al., 2004) so that “the concept of social search has become the latest buzzword in online search” (Scale, 2008, p. 541). Scale (2008)

considers that “social search may retrieve subjective results” (p. 552), while McDonnell and Shiri (2011) find that “social search” plays an important role in web search and can enhance and improve search engine results. Social search is apparently another name for search through SNS, as it “allows user input in determining what information should be relevant and meaningful” (Scale, 2008, p. 546).

Consumers may not primarily use SNS for product information search, but might do so after reading posts from their friends or posts suggested on their SNS. It is believed that reference groups have a high impact on the information search steps of the Consumer Decision Process (CDP) model (Serralvo, de Nadai Sastre, & João, 2010). Such kinds of user-generated content may provide information to affect consumers in making purchase decisions. A few years ago, many SNS users took a passive approach, as described by Cole (2007), but since the introduction of Facebook Fan pages and other community pages, some have taken an active approach instead, using SNS for product information. SNS have provided functions so that users can share commercial information within their social networks. For example, after viewing an attractive advertisement, consumers may click the “Like” button on Facebook (Hadija et al., 2012; Liang et al., 2011), and their family and friends may perceive this as a reliable source of information and help share and distribute the product information (Di Pietro, Di, & Pantano, 2012; Goh et al., 2013; Racherla & Friske, 2012). These messages, a form of word of mouth (WOM), play an important role in influencing search behaviour and the intent to purchase (Blackwell et al., 2012; Doh & Hwang, 2009; Liang & Turban, 2011; Xu et al., 2012). Jeong et al. (2013) argue that those who “like” a Fans page have a high tendency to continue using “fanned” brands, and recommend them to friends. They are selective: SNS users are aware of ads in the category of fashion/accessories, beauty and cosmetics, but fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) and travel products are likely to go unnoticed (Liang & Turban, 2011). Some recent studies have investigated factors affecting consumers’ acceptance on SNS (Lorenzo-Romero et al., 2011), but limited research has been done on when and how consumers start and end a product information search using this medium.

Although having more SNS contributors may improve viewership of user-generated content, it may also complicate development efforts and reduce viewership (Ransbotham et al., 2012). Despite the increasing popularity of SNS as an information

search tool, privacy and security issues are being criticised (Tow, Dell, & Venable, 2010). Some people also complain that the search capacity of SNS is not comparable to engines such as Google and Yahoo (Shu & Chuang, 2011). It is not yet known if such criticisms will stop people from searching product information via SNS. A recent study of 12–14-year-olds in Ireland to find out why young people engage in SNS (Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010) is a small beginning; there is as yet no similar study of adult consumers, or of consumers in Hong Kong.

With the growth of users and the popularity of mobile devices, more companies are engaging in SNS as evidence suggests that consumers trust Facebook (Araujo & Neijens, 2012). Studies have focused on the motivations, factors, and effectiveness of engaging in WOM activities via social media (Cheung & Thadani, 2012), but limited research has explored how an SNS such as Facebook, a trendy platform carrying and sharing information including WOM, is viewed by consumers as a source of product information in comparison with producer-generated information sites (Christodoulides & Jevons, 2011). This study, apart from investigating whether consumers' exposure to responses to information on their newsfeed on Facebook can influence their purchase intentions (Parsons, 2013), will consider to what extent consumers will engage in, and stop, searching for information on SNS sites.

2.3.4 Intensity of use of SNS affects information search behaviour

Measuring duration and frequency of exposure to the SNS are proved to have a relationship with users' behaviour on SNS (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). It has also been found that the search duration on the types of information on a website can affect the chance to make a purchase decision (Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2004). Most of the studies have shown that users tend to visit SNS several times a day (Akyildiz & Argan, 2012; Lorenzo-Romero, Alarcón-Del-Amo, & Constantindes, 2012). However, there is no consistent classification of different groups of SNS members in terms of duration of use on SNS. A recent survey has found that most participants spend less than two hours per day on SNS (Durukan et al., 2012); but, another study shows that users, on average, spend 34 minutes on SNS a day while the highest quartile spend 45 minutes or more per day on SNS (Lampe et al., 2013).

Studies such as those of Klein and Ford (2003) are concerned with, among other things, users and non-users of the internet, experience levels of users, and the extent to which internet search could substitute for traditional information sources but their conclusion unknowingly foreshadows an attraction of search using SNS. Lorenzo-Romero, Alarcon-del-Amo and Gomez-Borja (2011) investigate how users and non-users differ in their reasons to participate in SNS. Recent findings by Lampe et al. (2013) classify Facebook users as non-users, light users and heavy users. The study indicates that different groups of people perceive the value of Facebook at different levels, with heavy users giving it the highest value and non-users rating it lowest. Different users find advantages in different aspects, depending on how they adopt SNS (Lampe et al., 2013). Generation Y, who were born and grew up with digital technology (Kotler et al., 2011), have a high inclination to use SNS to share and search for information; and findings by Bolton et al. (2013) show that people tend to spend more time when they engage in diverse activities via SNS. These range from contributing, sharing, and playing to following a brand.

In order to examine if there are any variations in information search behaviour in terms of SNS usage, this research study will be based on the intensity of use of SNS developed by Ellison, et al. (2007). Invited participants give a self-reported assessment of the frequency and duration of their use of SNS for social purposes.

2.3.5 Type of product affects information search behaviour

Although the internet provides a fast, cheap and generally accurate platform for consumers to search product information before making purchase decisions (Al Kailani & Kumar, 2011; Sen, King, & Shaw, 2006), some scholars argue that consumers may conduct minimal pre-purchase information search for different types of products (Huang et al., 2009). A product is “anything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition, use, or consumption that might satisfy a want or need” (Kotler et al., 2011, p. 247). It includes physical goods such as mobile phones and services such as consultations.

There are various approaches to classify consumer products. They can be divided by frequency of purchase and buying effort, such as convenience goods and shopping goods. Convenience goods such as tissues involve less buying effort and are usually bought frequently, while shopping goods such as a camera might require time and effort to search and compare brands and prices, and are normally bought infrequently (Kotler et al., 2011). Nelson (1970) has proposed that products can be categorised as search goods or experience goods, based on whether the quality of products is evaluated before or after purchase (Brown, Pope, & Voges, 2003). Search goods imply that the quality of the products can be assessed before purchase; the quality of experience goods can only be assessed afterwards (Luo, Ba, & Zhang, 2012). Consumers tend to spend less time on a pre-purchase information search if they already have some experience in buying experience goods such as automobiles (Dimoka et al., 2012; Laroche et al., 2000).

Extensive research has been conducted on consumer search behaviour related to different types of product. A recent study found five product categories (music, DVD, video games, software, tickets and photographic products) which customers prefer to purchase online, while they prefer to purchase other types of product at a physical store: furniture and home appliances, which require delivery or installation, are examples (Suryandari & Paswan, 2014). This current study will consider what influences customers' search behaviour when purchasing search goods such as air tickets and music.

2.4 Theories related to Purchase Decision and Information Search Behaviour

To begin a search for information, one must recognise a need for additional data (Jaillet, 2001). Since consumer information search precede all buying and choice behaviour, they have become one of the most enduring research topics in the area of consumer behaviour (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). Some theories are widely used to explain search behaviour and purchase decisions. For instance, since John Dewey's consumer decision process model was first introduced in 1910 (Bruner II & Pomazal, 1988), it has been adopted and modified to help explain how consumers make purchase decisions sequentially. One of the most well-known and complete models has been proposed by Blackwell, Miniard and Engel (Serralvo et al., 2010). As shown in Figure 2.5,

consumers go through seven major stages when making a purchase decision (Blackwell et al., 2012). A consumer who needs or desires to make a purchase will go through a series of actions and mental guesses (Serralvo et al., 2010). A need may be triggered by an external stimulus (such as an attractive advertisement or promotion) or an internal stimulus (such as a physical need because of dehydration or hunger) (Blackwell et al., 2012; Kotler et al., 2011): the purchase decision starts when an individual requires something to satisfy a need. Consumers search for information from various sources to find solutions to satisfy unmet needs before making a purchase (Blackwell et al., 2012). During the search, they may find and inspect the various products available to select the one that best matches their preferences and fulfils their needs (Dellaert & Häubl, 2012). To reduce the chances of cognitive dissonance, they may use a set of cues based on the searched information to help make their final purchase decision (Awasthy, Banerjee, & Banerjee, 2012; Kotler et al., 2011). After evaluating all available alternatives against their criteria, consumers may buy the most preferred product (Blackwell et al., 2012).

This CDP model can be treated as a road map or framework to help marketers understand how consumers search for and analyse information to make logical and consistent buying decisions (Blackwell et al., 2012). The search for information is a critical step in the consumer decision-making process, and when, why and how consumers search for information may affect their actual purchase intentions and decisions. This study focuses on the two steps prior to purchase: that is, the search for information, in the CDP model.

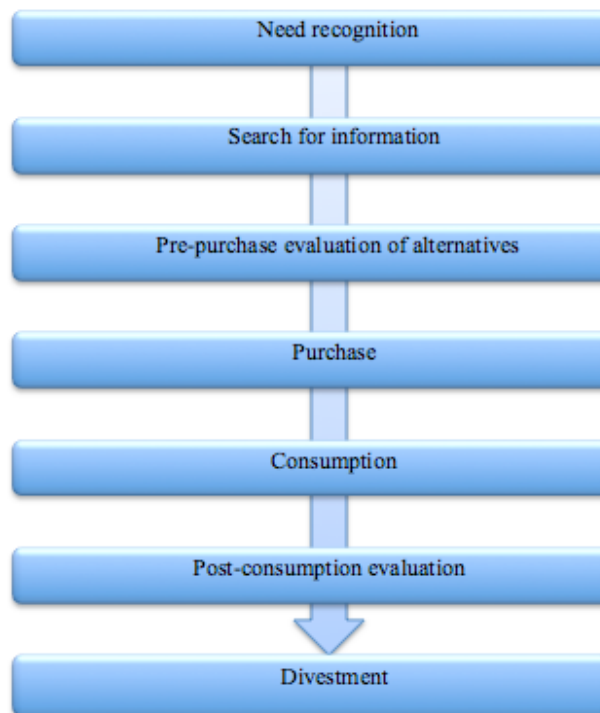


Figure 2.5 How Consumers Make Decisions for Products

(Source: Blackwell et al., 2012, p. 71)

2.4.1 The economics of information search theory

In recent years some scholars and researchers have combined the CPD model with Stigler's (1961) economics of information search theory to explain how consumers spend time and costs in searching for product information (Sen et al., 2006). It is assumed that a rational consumer will opt for the lowest price of the same product (Spann & Tellis, 2006). Although the CDP model is widely accepted as an explanation of how consumers make rational decisions about purchases, in reality it is unlikely that consumers have all the required information available and are able to manage and evaluate it all before they make their purchase decision (Sacchi & Burigo, 2008). In some circumstances, consumers may be placed in an uncontrollable situation, having an urgent need to find a product to solve an immediate problem or need (Blackwell et al., 2012). For example, when consumers are under time pressure to select a product with features that are difficult to assess, they may consider the country of origin to help them make their choice (Zhang, 1996) instead of the searching all the available information.

They may look for a platform like SNS which allows consumers to search for information at lower costs and faster speed (Punj, 2012).

In order to pay the minimum price, consumers may take time to plan and think thoroughly, based on the information provided on the internet (Spann & Tellis, 2006); but as navigating to all available choices may be more time consuming than time saving, some researchers argue that the internet and SNS may not necessarily lead to better consumer decision-making (Punj, 2012). Despite the perceived benefits of search via online SNS, consumers do not vary much in terms of the effort and time spent on web search compared with traditional retail environments (Huang et al., 2009). Studies by economists reveal that a perceived higher time cost in searching for information online may shorten a search; similar time costs are not apparent in traditional retail settings (Punj, 2012). In other words, unlike what is assumed by economists, time may not be treated as having the same value as to money (Okada & Hoch, 2004; Saini & Monga, 2008); consumers may place higher importance on time costs in an online setting conducting a perfunctory search on the Web that results in a non-optimal decision (Punj, 2012). Sometimes consumers make impulse purchases, in particular when online: for instance, a consumer may buy an item of clothing if they find the style or colour attractive, not because they really need it (Park, Kim, Funches, & Foxx, 2012). One survey finds that impulse purchasing accounts for about 40% of all online expenses (Verhagen & van Dolen, 2011). In summary, the availability of more sources of information may not necessarily drive people to make optimal decisions, as other factors are also in play.

No matter which platform is used, consumers find that searching for information costs time. Search costs are a significant factor which may affect consumers' awareness of new products (Kumar et al., 2004), as the extent of an information search may vary among consumers because of their different ways of costing it (Stigler, 1961). The traditional model of economics of information search assumes that consumers search for information until the marginal cost of the search equals its marginal benefit (Huang et al., 2009), and consumers stop searching if the marginal cost is higher. If this happens, consumers may stop before they are fully informed (Lehto et al., 2006). To counter the chance that they will be overlooked because of this, some companies pay search engine

providers (such as Yahoo) for better placement in search results, or for increasing their product exposure with advertising banners (Kumar et al., 2004).

According to Dellaert & Häubl (2012), product recommendation not only influences the way consumers search for product information but also affects how they make their final choice. When searching for product information assisted by recommendations, consumers tend to spend less time and effort on each stage of the search, but spend more energy on a thorough comparison of the available alternatives. With greater variability in the expected attractiveness of the next-to-be-inspected alternative, consumers tend to cease searching sooner (Dellaert & Häubl, 2012). Hence, the core feature in SNS, that can display an articulated list of “Friends”, may be a very suitable vehicle in helping consumer to find and examine the credibility of information via online referrals and reviews (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; McDonnell & Shiri, 2011; O’Reilly & Marx, 2011). However, none of these studies have tried to find out whether the eWOM from their friends on SNS can reduce the time in searching for reliable product information. This study is going to fill the gap.

2.4.2 Heuristic decision-making

Decisions that matter for many buyers are often ones that they lack confidence in making (Loibl, Cho, Diekmann, & Batte, 2009). In order to minimise the risks of buying a product, consumers will search for information before making a purchase decision. Sometimes they may not be able find and evaluate all available alternatives, and will use heuristic cues to simplify their decision-making. For instance, consumers tend to apply previous judgements of having been satisfied to their re-evaluation of a repeat purchase (Mattila, 1998), which may result in more efficient decision-making as they do not need to spend time and effort searching for information.

Other buyers face the problem of information overload, which makes it difficult to pick a product (Lee & Lee, 2004; Park & Lee, 2008), while some rely on intuitive or heuristic decision-making (Dane, Rockmann, & Pratt, 2012; Zellman, Kaye-Blake, & Abell, 2010). Some tend to make decisions “based on quick-and-easy heuristics rather than an analysis of the available information” (Saini & Monga, 2008, p. 914); an indication that decision-making is more heuristic in situations that involve spending time rather than money (Saini & Monga, 2008; Saini, Rao, & Monga, 2010).

2.4.3 Stopping rules of information search and decision-making

The issue of understanding when to cease an information search via the internet is crucial because people can conceivably search forever (Browne et al., 2007). People may apply the cognitive or motivational stopping rules. Cognitive stopping rules result from processing information with people's mental models of tasks or environments while motivational rules result from people's preferences or incentives (Browne et al., 2007). McDonnell & Shiri (2011) add that users of social search may stop searching because they are lazy or unable to employ advanced search features that might help them search better.

Some consumers may apply an optimising theory when searching for product information. Suppose there are a number of different sources and each source has its own independent probability distribution for reward, search cost and time (Weitzman, 1979). Consumers may inspect the available products one at a time until they can find the product which best matches their preferences and needs (Dellaert & Häubl, 2012). The inspection is continued unless the cost of the search is higher than the expected reward from inspecting more alternatives, and the search will terminate when the product with the highest expected value of all the inspected products has been identified. Each decision-making stage involves a product comparison decision and stopping decision (Dellaert & Häubl, 2012).

The reviews of these rules and theories support the need to see whether they can be applied for explaining the information search behaviour on SNS as stated on the last two research questions listed below.

2.5 Gaps and Research Questions

Online social networking is increasingly popular in most countries. Consumers participate more and more in online conversations via SNS. They have greater control over their media habits and exert greater influence over the products and brands considered for purchase (Sharma & AsadRehman, 2012). In view of these changes, many companies try to engage low-cost SNS to inform their customers about their products. Some people think that Company's official webpages will eventually be

replaced by Corporate Facebook pages, as the number of visitors on Facebook pages is higher than its official webpages (Champoux et al., 2012).

Existing studies examine a diverse range of topics related to SNS:

- how users benefit from using SNS (Shu & Chuang, 2011);
- what makes users engage in SNS such as virtual brand communities (Sung, Kim, Kwon, & Moon, 2010);
- how it influences music sharing (Lee et al., 2011);
- how it affects social search (Scale, 2008);
- how users use the services of SNS (Park, 2010);
- why users are willing to disclose personal information on SNS (Tow et al., 2010);
- how SNS are made use of in promotions (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Vinerean et al., 2013);
- how to manage it successfully (Lewis, 2010; Loop & Malyshev, 2013);
- how social support and Web site quality influence the intention to use SNS (Liang et al., 2011);
- how its social shopping features have an impact on buying behaviour (Olbrich & Holsing, 2011);
- how third-person effects in an SNS context differs from traditional media contexts (Zhang & Daugherty, 2009);
- how to predict the intention to post reviews on SNS (Goldsmith et al., 2013);
- how consumers respond to word-of-mouth communication on SNS (Coulter & Roggeveen, 2012);
- and the value of collaborative user-generated content (Ransbotham et al., 2012).

As Facebook pages, like other forms of social media interaction, are inherently “public”, recent research has focused on privacy issues (Loop & Malyshev, 2013), its relationship to personality traits (Huang & Yang, 2010) and its relationship to workplace problems (Lin, Le, Khalil, & Cheng, 2012). None of these studies directly focus on how social networking sites affect information search and purchase decisions. A recent study by Goodrich and De Mooij (2014) examines the influence of culture on the role of social media in the consumer decision-making process, compared with other online or offline

purchase decision information sources, across 50 countries. The results show that individualistic countries like the USA and Australia are less likely to use social media for purchase decisions, whereas collectivistic countries like China and Thailand may use more social media when seeking opinions before making purchase decisions (Goodrich & De Mooij, 2014). Although the study investigates how culture affects the way people use media to communicate, it does not evaluate how this might affect their search behaviour via SNS.

A study by Cole (2007) examines how SNS shapes consumer behaviour when engaging in an information search. She summarises four modes of information search from Wilson's 1997 model: passive attention, passive search, active search and ongoing search. Cole (2007) defines "passive attention" as referring to a person who does not have specific needs but is exposed to posts on SNS member sites. "Passive search" refers to exposure to information that might be useful, while "active search" means to seek for information intentionally. Cole focuses on the classification scheme as a means of clarifying the dimensions of a networked information search. While young consumers are using more SNS to improve the quality of their purchase decisions by finding information and reducing risks (Cole, 2007), further research is needed to understand to what extent SNS influences pre-purchase information search and when and why consumers start and stop a search. For example, do consumers notice the ads displayed on SNS (Sharma & AsadRehman, 2012; Vinerean et al., 2013), and information about brands on Facebook fan pages and Twitter blogs (Akrimi & Khemakhem, 2012; Champoux et al., 2012; Culnan et al., 2010).

These studies mainly quantify the users who intend to purchase products via SNS, but little is known about when and why people start and stop searching for information via SNS. Do they stop searching because of a satisficing rule rather than a utility-maximising rule? Satisficing as a decision-making process is a simple choice rule in which the first alternative that is good enough according to some criterion is chosen, while utility-maximising is to pursue a choice with the best alternative (Prabha, Connaway, Olszewski, & Jenkins, 2007; Stüttgen, Boatwright, & Monroe, 2012).

Using SNS is a ubiquitous activity. Knowing why, how and when consumers start and stop using SNS for searching product information is important to comprehending

consumer purchase behaviour. In order to address the gap in knowledge about how SNS affects consumers' behaviour in product information search and in making a potential purchase decision, this study poses the following questions:

RQ1. For consumers who use SNS, how do they perceive the value of using SNS:

- (a) for product information search; and
- (b) for helping to make purchase decisions?

RQ2. For current users of SNS:

- (a) when do they commence to use SNS in their product search; and
- (b) why do they use it for this purpose?

RQ3. How do these consumers determine they have searched sufficient SNS to cease further search using these sources? (How do they determine they need to move to non-SNS sources or to quit searching?)

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explains why an interpretive approach to this exploratory study is used and how the data are collected in order to achieve the research objectives addressed in Chapter 1. This chapter first elaborates and justifies the chosen research design including the research approach and data collection methods (Section 3.2), then discusses the rationale for using a purposive sampling technique followed by describing the recruitment criteria and instruments employed (Section 3.3). Finally, the process for data collection and analysis is elucidated (Section 3.4).

3.2 Research Design

The research questions guiding this study are derived from the literature. The study is designed to elicit a fine-grained understanding of consumers' perceived value of using Social Network Sites (SNS) for a product search process, and to gain insights into consumers' tacit rules that govern the amount of time they use SNS for making a potential purchase decision; hence, this qualitative study has adopted an interpretive approach to explore consumers' search experience via SNS and to examine their feelings about and opinions of using SNS for product information search and its influence on purchase intention.

3.2.1 Research Approach

Although quite a number of researchers tend to rely on statistical analysis to conduct quantitative research to find explanations of things or objects, some scholars like to rely on human perception and understanding revealed through qualitative research to refine theories (Belk, 2006). In other words, qualitative research is best used for studying personal experience in described situations (Thompson, 1997).

In this study, there is a need to investigate the perceptions and experiences of a population group, SNS members, when using SNS for product information search and purchase decision-making. When there is a need to explore the real and deep feelings of participants (Bryman & Bell, 2007), a qualitative research strategy is deemed an

appropriate approach. It is also found to be valuable to reveal how SNS users construct their world and what they are doing, in terms that are meaningful and offer rich insights (Barbour, 2008). In other words, this study is focused on the perceived value of information search behaviour by SNS users. It does not look for generalisations applicable to the overall population (Canhoto & Clark, 2013). An interpretive and experiential approach to data collection can help understand the search context and obtain findings with a high degree of validity (Belk, 2006; Collis & Hussey, 2009). Therefore, this study is going to employ an interpretive approach to obtain opinions, perceptions and experiences, and to gather “rich” data from the respondents, that is, SNS members or users (Gephart Jr, 2004; Lee & Lings, 2008; Park & Lee, 2009). The whole research process is based on purposive sampling, inductive data analysis, and contextual interpretation.

3.2.2 Data Collection Method

This study employs face-to-face focus group discussions and in-depth interviews which are two of the most broadly used techniques in qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2007). A focus group is an interview with eight to twelve participants, guided by a moderator to discuss a research topic (Malhotra, 2012). An in-depth interview, on the other hand, is conducted on a one-on-one basis to uncover hidden issues that might not be shared in a group setting (Malhotra, 2012). Each of these primary data collection methods has strengths and weaknesses. For example, focus groups can allow a small group of people to throw out ideas and surface attitudes freely, but individual participants may modify their true deep feelings and opinions based on the feedback from other people in the group.

Apart from findings that are difficult to generalise, the data collected via focus groups is inadequate to fully address the research questions stated in the previous chapter; hence, following up with interviews on a one-to-one basis can allow selected participants to explore their answers in more depth (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Both focus groups and interviews complement each other, helping to clarify the specific research problems of this study.

3.3 Sampling Method, Recruitment Criteria and Instruments

This section discusses the sampling method employed and the recruitment criteria used to find appropriate participants before discussing the instruments adopted for this study. Steps in the recruitment process are shown in Figure 3.1.

3.3.1 Sampling Method

This study employs purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method widely adopted in exploratory research trying to discover new theoretical ideas (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Unlike quantitative research, the deliberately chosen sample is not intended to be statistically representative, but it can reflect well particular groups of the sampled population, in this case SNS members or users with varying usage rates for social purpose (Dunne et al., 2010). It is particularly well suited for a small-scale, in-depth study like this one (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This purposive sampling method is deemed appropriate in improving the suitability of the samples that represent the population (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Canhoto & Clark, 2013).

As the study is seeking to find how consumers use SNS to search product information, it would be meaningless to ask people who have never used this method; in this study, qualified participants had to be members of SNS which were by invitation only. In other words, popular forums (e.g. the Hong Kong Discussion Forum) or search engines (e.g. Google, Yahoo) or consumers' reviews (e.g. OpenRice.com for restaurants) in Hong Kong, which are open to all, were excluded (Cheung & Lee, 2012). However, even if people were SNS users, this did not automatically imply that they had experience in using SNS in a product information search. As discussed in Chapter 2, experience and internet efficacy can influence how long a person spends on an information search via SNS (Bolton et al., 2013; Kulviwat et al., 2004): qualified participants had to have this experience. Due to the difficulty of identifying participants with the necessary characteristics, a non-probability sampling technique is said to be suitable in this research settings (Canhoto & Clark, 2013). In order to study SNS users as the sampling frame, it is necessary to adopt purposive sampling strategies to reach appropriate populations (Baltar & Brunet, 2012).

3.3.2 Recruitment Criteria

“Demographic factors are important in influencing the adoption decision, whereas attitudes that specifically relate to the risks and benefits of using online shopping may be more important in explaining usage behaviour” (Soopramanien, 2011, p. 346). Some empirical studies find that putting in effort to identify the demographic characteristics of SNS users does not lead to drawing consistent and strong conclusions on differences in age, gender and education level of members of SNS (Goldsmith et al., 2013). As most of the participants of prior studies have been university students, the results may not be generalised to non-students. Because of these inconsistent research findings, there were no specific demographic profiles were considered when recruiting qualified participants for this study.

As in Sharma & Rehman’s (2012) study, the main objective of this research was to find a heterogeneous mix of respondents of all age groups distinguished by common usage of something. It did not divide the focus groups by demographic but by behavioural variables, in this case frequency of use. As explained in the previous chapter, intensity of SNS use (in terms of frequency and duration) has significant differences on information seeking- and consumption-related behaviours (Durukan et al., 2012; Park & Kim, 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2009). The participants in this study were divided into groups according to the frequency and duration of their daily use of SNS. In order to compare differences, extremely heavy, heavy, average and light users of SNS for social purposes were distinguished.

In Valenzuela et al.’s (2009) study, on average respondents spent one to two hours per day on SNS. Following this, in this study it was determined that if respondents identified themselves as spending around one or two hours per day on SNS, they could be considered average users. If they spent less than an hour, they were termed light users; those who spent two to three hours, or more than three hours, were considered heavy and extremely heavy users. Based on this intensity of using SNS for social purposes, four focus groups were formed. Once the required number of qualified participants of each type of SNS user was identified and found, they were contacted and invited to attend the focus group discussion. As might be expected, the group of average

SNS users was found very quickly, while extremely heavy SNS users took longer to recruit.

SNS users are defined as individuals who are currently members of SNS. Park (2010) classifies SNS users into three types: active, semi-active and non-active. He defines non-active users as those who do not have an SNS account, or who have an account but no longer use it. In this study, all respondents were either semi-active and used SNS at least several times a week, or active users who used SNS more frequently than this. In order to ensure fairness and authenticity (Bryman & Bell, 2007) as well as to truly reflect and represent the perceptions of existing SNS users, non-active users were excluded from this study, because they could not share product information search experience via using SNS and any past experience of using SNS might no longer be valid in helping to explain consumer search behaviour. Because people can open fake accounts to post messages on open discussion forums and recommendation websites, their information search and decision-making behaviour may be different from other SNS; hence, only members with SNS accounts by invitation were invited to participate.

Potential participants were approached through popular social media platforms such as Facebook (Canhoto & Clark, 2013). In order to find potential participants, the researcher first sent a private message via her Facebook account to ask friends for contacts who might have experience in searching product information via SNS. In a snowball approach, those contacts were in turn asked for further contacts. After identifying appropriate respondents, a formal invitation letter with a consent form and participant information statement was sent to each participant via email. Those who agreed to join were asked to sign and return the consent form.

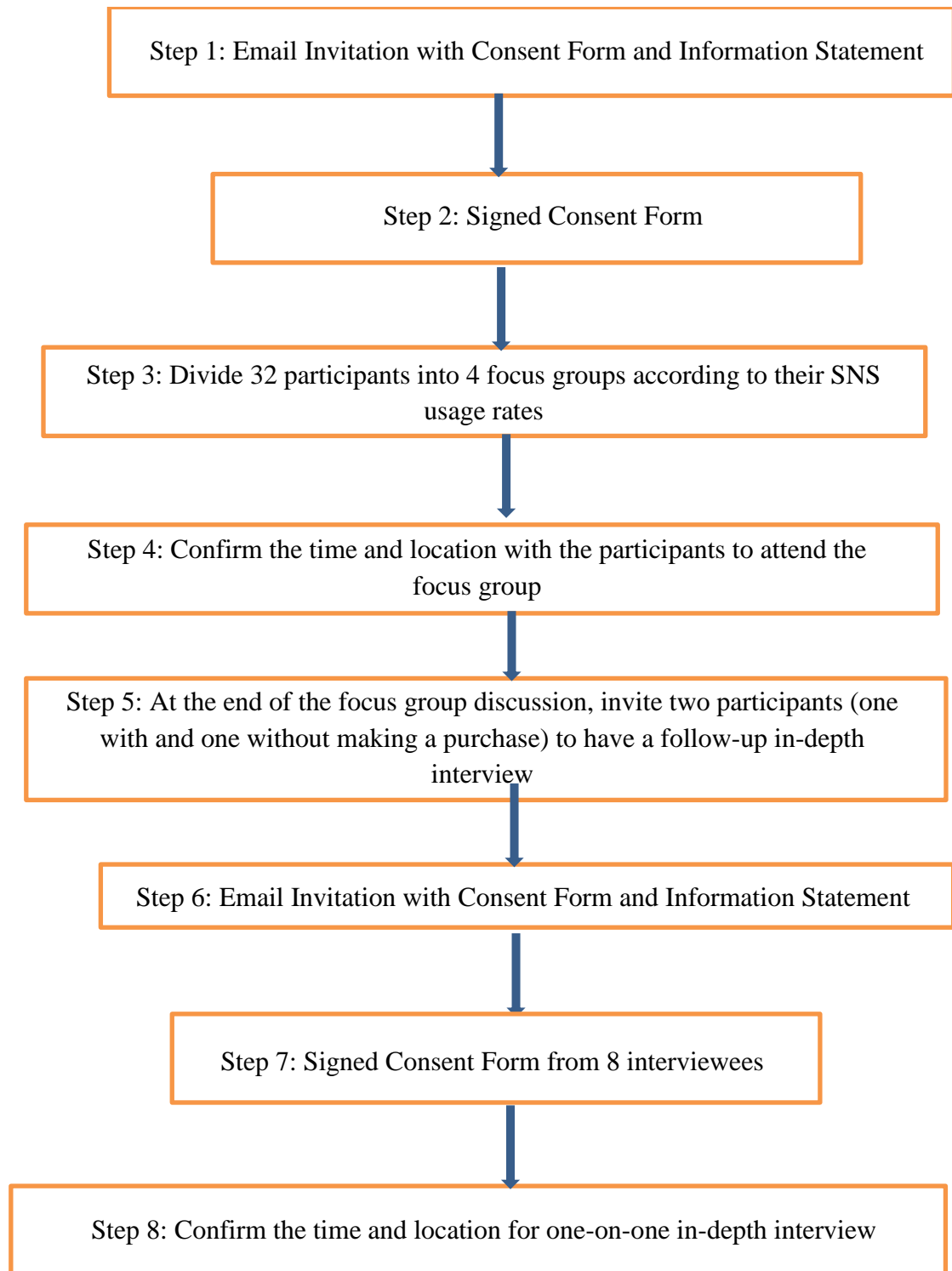


Figure 3.1 The steps for inviting participants

This study had two phases of data collection. Participants, regardless of age, gender or occupation, who had experience of using SNS for product information search, were first invited to attend a focus group discussion. Afterwards, one participant from each focus group who had made a purchase after an information search via SNS, and one who had

not, were invited to attend a follow-up interview on a one-to-one basis (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2).

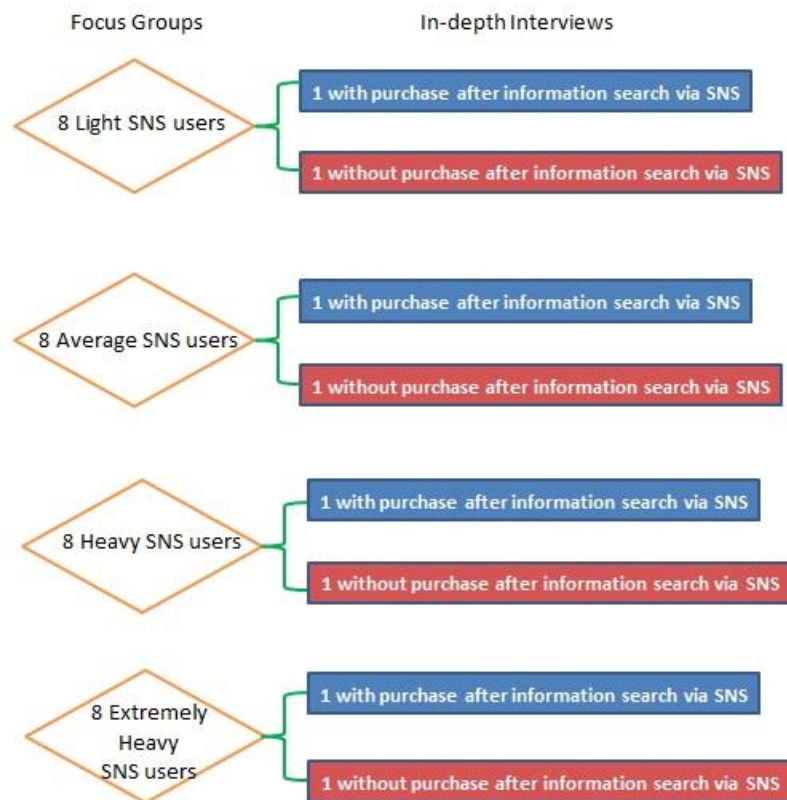


Figure 3.2 Number of participants in this study

A typical focus group should have eight to twelve participants, and each group should be “homogeneous in terms of product usage” (Malhotra, 2012, p. 185). It is believed that increasing the sample size to a large scale may not contribute to evidence because of diminishing returns (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). With limited time and resources, this research study used eight SNS users in each focus group (see Figure 3.2). The total sample size of 32 SNS users is above the minimum requirement (that is, 30) for a simple qualitative study (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Lee & Lings, 2008).

Before starting each focus group discussion and interview, all participants were clearly informed of the aims of the study and the anonymous use of the collected data.

Each focus group discussion and interview session was digitally recorded and notes were taken by the researcher; later, these were transcribed by a word processing package.

The focus groups were all moderated by the researcher, using a common discussion protocol to promote group interaction and encourage spontaneity by respondents to express their search behaviour using SNS (Dennis et al., 2010; McDonald, 1994; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008). Apart from stimulating spontaneous discussions the moderator ensured that the participants did not wander too far from the research topic (Brown, Suter, & Churchill, 2014).

During the interviews, apart from asking questions based on the interview guide, additional questions were asked to clarify answers and acquire more detailed explanations, depending on the responses received earlier during the relevant focus group discussion and in the interview itself. The participants were provided with a semi-structured guide that contained open-ended questions designed to reveal a deeper understanding of their experience and behaviour in using SNS to search product information and make potential purchase decisions (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Malhotra, 2012). The semi-structured interviews were intended to capture the ‘richness’ of data which might be missed in a more structured format (Malhotra, 2012). The respondents were encouraged to express their feelings in their own terms (Brown et al., 2014).

The interviews, like the focus groups, were limited to approximately an hour, ample time for the researcher to collect responses following the questions presented in the interview guide (please see Appendix 2). This was also designed to avoid fatigue or disinterest (Packer-Muti, 2010). This semi-structured guide was developed as a checklist to ensure that all topics related to the research questions were addressed.

In short, the research sample consisted of 32 Hong Kong adult SNS users aged 18 or above, regardless of gender or occupation. They were invited to participate in this study if they met the recruitment criteria described above. Qualified participants were first assigned to a focus group discussion, with eight people in each group. Two from each group were later invited to attend an in-depth one-to-one interview. Both group discussions and interviews were planned to be completed in an hour.

3.3.3 Instrument

As mentioned by Collis & Hussey (2009), necessary qualitative data can often be found in secondary sources such as the literature. However, in order to address the research

questions of this study, primary data via focus group discussion and in-depth interviews is required.

Although qualitative research is not inclined to use or rely on questionnaires or instruments developed by other people (Creswell, 2009), the researcher in this study is playing the role of an instrument in interviewing participants. To help the researcher stay focused on the research questions during the data collection process, the focus group protocol and interview guide were prepared (please see Appendix 1 and 2). Unlike predetermined questions in a questionnaire, a protocol and guide with semi-structured questions allows room for the researcher to change or add questions in response to the data emerging during the sessions. Audio recording and note taking are used as well to check, confirm, revisit comments and ideas that emerge.

Despite the fact that all participants were Hong Kong residents, they were proficient in English, which is an official language in Hong Kong. Although English is not the mother tongue of most Hong Kong people, all the participants were asked if the focus groups and in-depth interviews could be conducted in English. As all agreed, it was not required to provide translations of the interview questions, information statements or consent forms.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

In a qualitative study, researchers typically “build their patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up, by organising the data into increasingly more abstract units of information” (Creswell, 2009, p. 175). This inductive process enables the researcher, in collaboration with the participants, to refine topics and clarify abstract or uncertain views in a feedback loop during the sessions, to make it clearer. During the entire collection process, the researcher keeps a focus on understanding how participants interpret the meaning of specific topics (Creswell, 2009), and this type of interpretive research may require modifying or refining the original questions as new themes emerge.

3.4.1 Coding

Under a grounded theory methodology, the first stage of data analysis is coding, which is “the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis”

(Saldaña, 2009, p. 4). “The codes are labels which enable the qualitative data to be separated, compiled and organized” (Collis & Hussey, 2009, p. 179). “A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3).

Although the treatment of qualitative data will vary greatly from researcher to researcher, several ‘rules of thumb’ should be followed when synthesising responses to open-ended questions (Malhotra, 2012). In order to capture themes embedded in verbatim data efficiently and accurately, the researcher reduces the responses into ‘categories’ or ‘codes’, which can then be analysed (Brown et al., 2014).

The first stage in the analysis process is “to segment the data into ‘units of meaning’” (Tow et al., 2010, p. 131). With reference to syntactic units such as sentences or paragraphs, this stage begins with line-by-line or a similar coding method (Tow et al., 2010). Data is analysed based on its meaning, not on its syntactical structure.

In the second stage of data analysis, the ‘units of meaning’ are organised into preliminary categories (Tow et al., 2010). Throughout the process, the researcher compares and seeks similarities and patterns in the content, whilst ensuring adequate information about the ‘units of meaning’ are derived is retained (Seaman, 1999; Tow et al., 2010). The preliminary categories are then developed.

In the third stage, the preliminary categories are refined and consolidated to produce a list of the domains, and then the ‘units of meaning’ are allocated to their respective domains, which are then scrutinised to identify relationships between them such as value and context (Seaman, 1999; Tow et al., 2010). ‘Value’ is defined as the importance the user places on using SNS in product information search and purchase decision-making, while ‘context’ refers to the situation and product type.

A priori coding is used: that is, the categories are coded based on the literature. All relevant and useful ‘units of meaning’ can be treated as quality indicators to show the search results (Kumar & Lang, 2007). Based on the literature, responses to the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews are coded into one of the following categories

and domains (Bughin et al., 2011; Huang et al., 2009; Saini & Monga, 2008; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996; Tsiros & Mittal, 2000). Examples are listed in Table 3.1.¹

Table 3.1 Examples of a priori coding

| <i>Categories</i> | <i>Domains</i> |
|----------------------------------|----------------|
| Product specification: colour | Value |
| Product specification: price | Value |
| Product specification: shape | Value |
| Product specification: dimension | Value |
| Product specification: design | Value |
| Price transparency | Value |
| Payment method | Value |
| Gift | Value |
| Self-consumption | Value |
| Better matching | Value |
| Find right information | Value |
| Enjoyment | Value |
| Emotional Support | Value |
| Comparison | Context |
| Individual preferences | Context |
| Experience | Context |
| Word of mouth (WOM) | Value |
| Convenience | Value |
| Time constraints | Value |
| Time saving | Value |
| Perceived satisfaction | Value |
| Perceived risk | Value |
| Cheaper | Value |
| Money constraints | Value |
| Clothing | Context |
| Cosmetics product | Context |
| Skin care products | Context |
| Sports shoes | Context |
| Air tickets or travel packages | Context |
| Search goods | Context |
| Experience goods | Context |

¹ As comments from the interviews and focus group discussions are reported verbatim throughout this work, some may lack grammatical correctness.

Emergent coding is also employed in this study. Responses which are not matched in the literature but regarded as relevant to the research study are coded. Examples of some coding emerging from the data are listed in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Examples of emergent coding

| <i>Categories</i> | <i>Domains</i> |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Only way to find the products | Value |
| Get discounts | Value |
| Delivery services | Value |
| Buy present for girlfriend | Context |
| Seek for affirmation | Value |

An example of the segmenting and categorising process is illustrated in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Perceptions or reasons for using SNS for product information search

| <i>Responses</i> | <i>Units of meaning</i> |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Convenient | Convenient |
| More convenient to search | Convenient |
| Very convenient | Convenient |
| Very up-to-date | With up-to-date information |
| It's a good way to learn about new products | With up-to-date information |
| Quite reliable | Reliable |
| Get reviews from other users | WOM |
| Get to know the comments on the products | WOM |
| Get discounts | Promotional offers |
| Get gifts | Promotional offers |

3.4.2 Data Analysis

After coding, the collected data is analysed via content analysis derived from grounded theory, “a methodology in which a systematic set of procedures is used to develop an inductively derived theory about phenomena” (Collis & Hussey, 2009, p. 83). This

approach is said to help researchers to find meaningful answers as well as to construct new questions in the specific contexts they choose to investigate (Belk, 2006).

Unlike positivist studies grounded on priori theories, grounded theory was developed as a discovery-oriented option to quantitative research, which was sometimes inadequate in capturing lived experience. It can be used to describe the world of the persons under study and to develop categories with appropriate cases (Collis & Hussey, 2009; Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000). The analysis made use of software, MS Word, to help sort the data and to conduct appropriate coding.

3.4.3 Data Verification

Qualitative research is not evaluated according to the criteria of reliability and validity used in quantitative studies. Instead, Ritchie and Lewis (2003) argue, researchers should strive to achieve *reliability* through the criteria of trustworthiness and consistency. To ensure the *validity* of findings, researchers should focus on the correctness of qualitative evidence.

In order to ensure the findings collected from the focus group was not biased towards a particular perspective by one or two dominant speakers, in-depth interviews were conducted to complement and enhance the creditability of the data. This research strategy is called triangulation, and is commonly used in qualitative research studies to confirm and test the validity of findings by examining the same data from different methodological perspectives (Babbie, 2013). In addition, this study employed audio recording and transcription of all focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to enable verification of the trustworthiness and correctness of the data collection process so that accuracy in citing comments could be confirmed. This is a standard procedure in this type of research to ensure the overall quality of interpretation.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Results

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explained the research methodology to be used. This chapter starts with an overview of the procedures undertaken for data preparation (Section 4.2). The profile of the participants of the focus groups and in-depth interviews is described in Section 4.3. The findings of the three research questions presented in Figure 4.2 will be analysed in Sections 4.4 to 4.6. The responses from each case are then compared across groups. Finally, an overall summary about the key findings is presented (Section 4.7). This procedure is summarised in Figure 4.1 below.

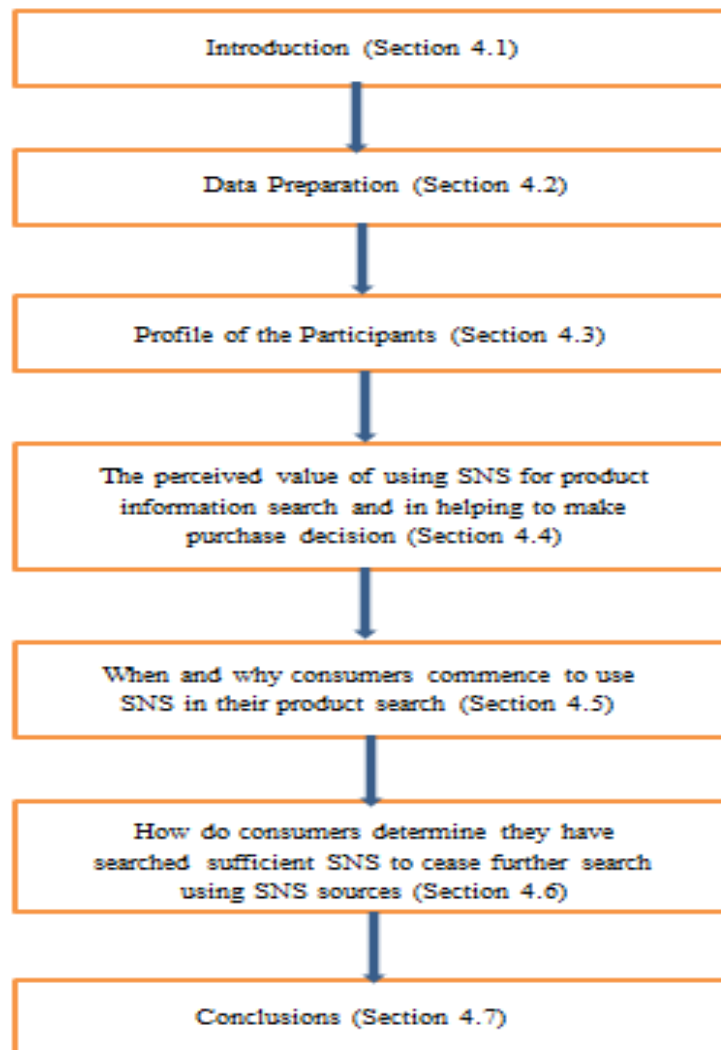


Figure 4.1 Outline of Chapter 4

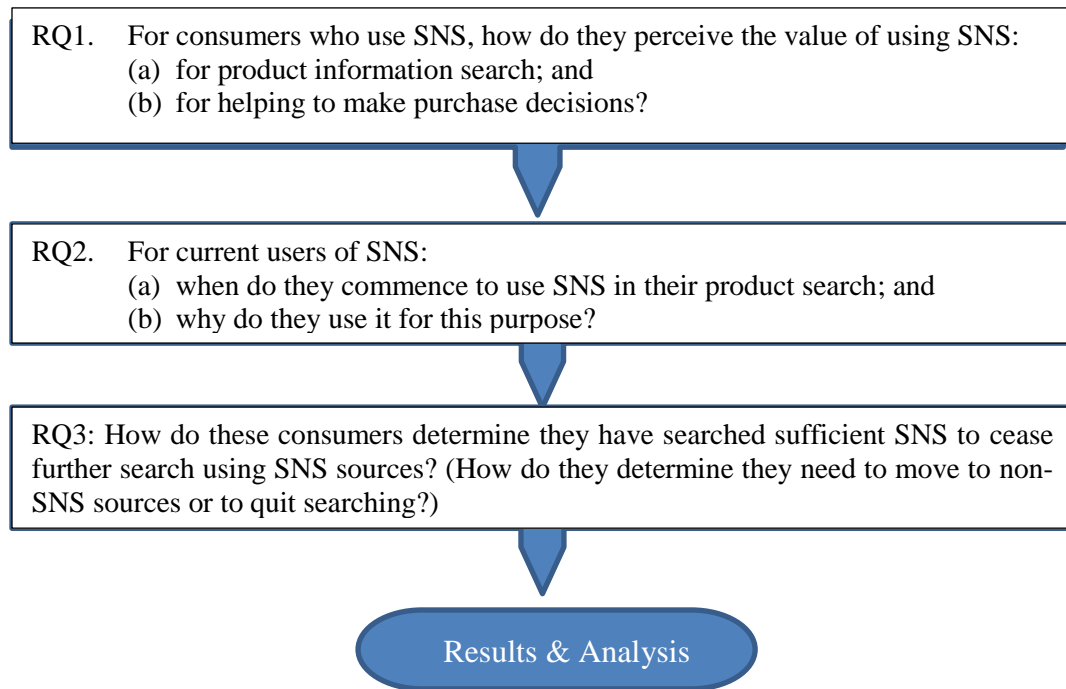


Figure 4.2 The research questions controlling this study of consumers who use SNS

4.2 Data Preparation

Data preparation involves coding and editing in order to ensure the accuracy of data being converted from its raw form into classified forms suitable for analysis (Malhotra, 2012). During the process, errors may be revealed and corrected (Cooper & Schindler, 2006). The data is organised into categories in order to ensure the quality and consistency in its interpretation (Brown et al., 2014). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the first step in coding is to obtain transcripts of the verbatim responses. With the help of computerised software such as MS Office Word, the list of responses from participants is searched, sorted, coded and classified into categories prepared in the previous stage. This is an important step for the subsequent analysis of the results (Brown et al., 2014). For example, in order to identify the participants without disclosing their real name, each respondent is assigned a code, as shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Code used to identify participants

| The 1st letter | Meaning |
|----------------------------|--|
| L | Light SNS user |
| A | Average SNS user |
| H | Heavy SNS user |
| E | Extremely Heavy SNS user |
| The 2 nd letter | Meaning |
| F | Focus Group |
| I | In-depth Interview |
| The last 2 digits | Meaning |
| 01 | The first respondent in the focus group or in-depth interview |
| 02 | The second respondent in the focus group or in-depth interview |
| 03 | The third respondent in the focus group |
| 04 | The fourth respondent in the focus group |
| 05 | The fifth respondent in the focus group |
| 06 | The sixth respondent in the focus group |
| 07 | The seventh respondent in the focus group |
| 08 | The eighth respondent in the focus group |

The data was collected from four focus group discussions and eight in-depth interviews. The analysis was based on listening carefully to the audio-recordings and examining the transcripts with verbatim responses of both discussions and semi-structured interviews. Presentation of the findings is structured around the three research questions stated in Figure 4.2.

4.3 Profile of the Participants

In order to address the research questions, data collected from 32 SNS users was analysed via content analysis. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these 32 SNS users were categorised as extremely heavy, heavy, average and light users of SNS, as shown in Figure 4.3.

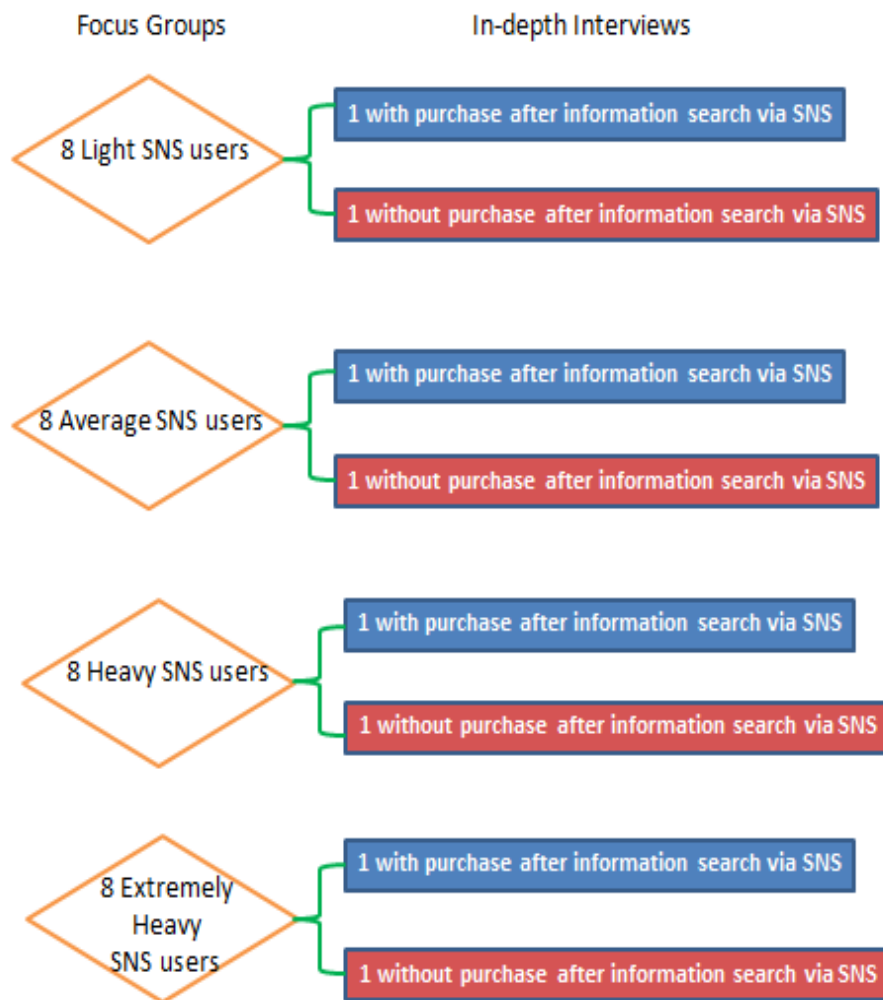


Figure 4.3 Number of participants in each focus group and in-depth interview

Nine males and twenty-three females agreed to participate in this study (see Figure 4.4). The preponderance of females reflects one effect of the snowballing approach, where the researcher used her network (primarily female) to initiate further contacts to be approached. Fifty-six per cent of the participants are university students (see Figure 4.5). The primary occupations of the non-student group were administrative and professional (white collar). Essentially, the sample reflects a higher level of education than for the Hong Kong population as a whole. It was not surprising to find that most of the participants were university students, as the most popular SNS, Facebook, was first introduced to enable students to exchange news, photos, opinions and information (Yousif, 2012). This is another limitation of snowball sampling as people tend to

congregate with others holding similar values, and university students have more to do with other university students than with, say, politicians or housewives.

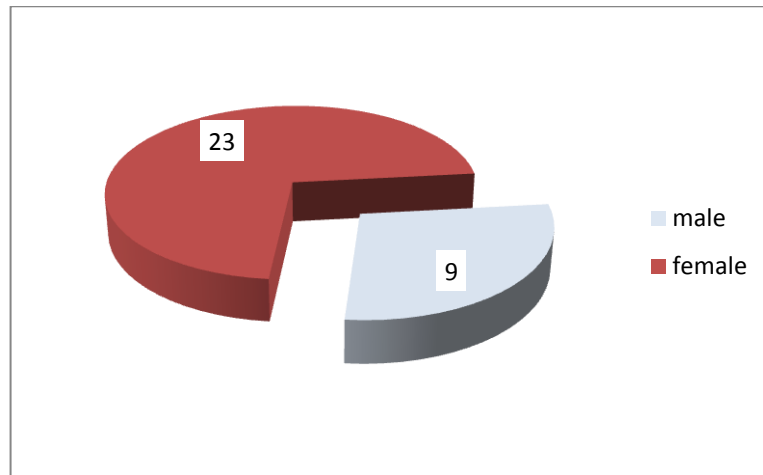


Figure 4.4 Respondents by gender

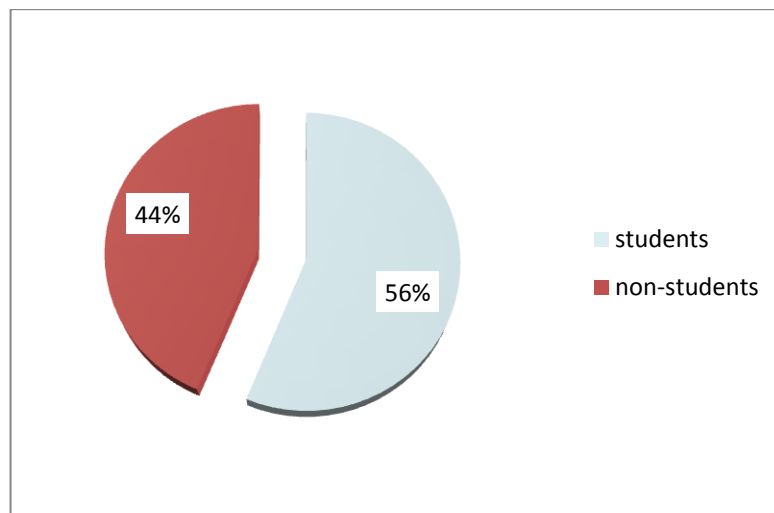


Figure 4.5 Respondents by occupation

The percentage of participants by gender and occupation in each focus group is presented in Figures 4.6 and 4.7. Students tended to use SNS more than non-students: for example, in the focus group with average SNS users, some participants revealed that they used SNS less frequently since they had left university and started working, and had been heavy SNS users while they were still studying. One respondent said,

I use it every day. Like the previous respondent, I use about one hour a day. I think I used it more frequently when I was in university. It is because I had more

free time. Since I have started to work, I feel much tired and I don't have much time to use SNS. (AF07)

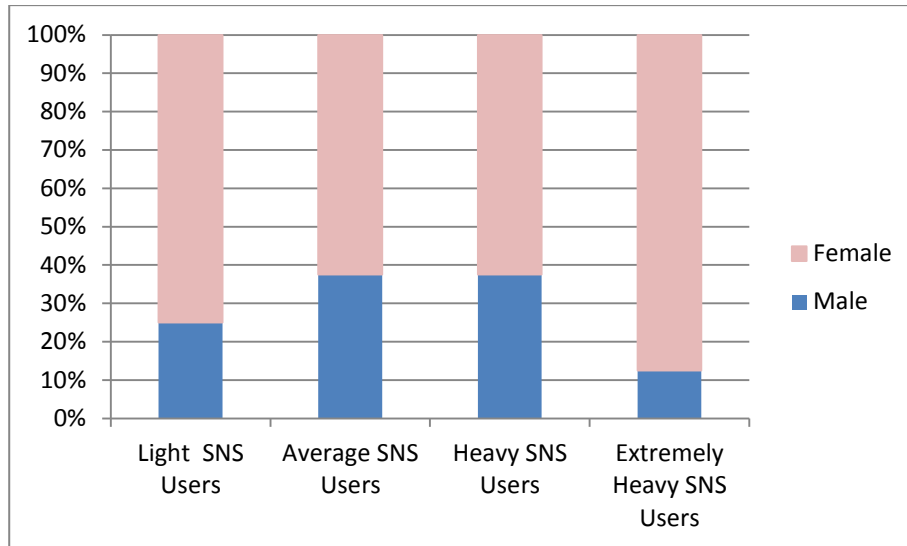


Figure 4.6 Gender of the respondents and SNS Type

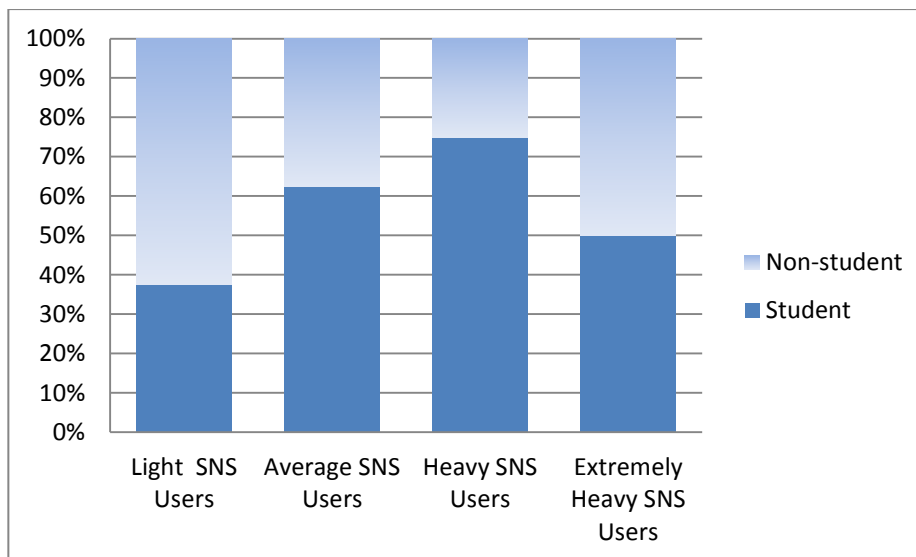


Figure 4.7 Occupation of the respondents and SNS Type

The respondents were all Hong Kong consumers at least 18 years old. The majority of the respondents in this study were aged between 18 and 25, and is also a result of snowballing, which is in line with the fact that the largest number of SNS users is mainly young people, as discussed by Sharma and AsadRehman (2012). Although there has been a recent trend for older people to open SNS accounts, they are considered

laggards, as SNS have been available for more than a decade (Blackwell et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2013).

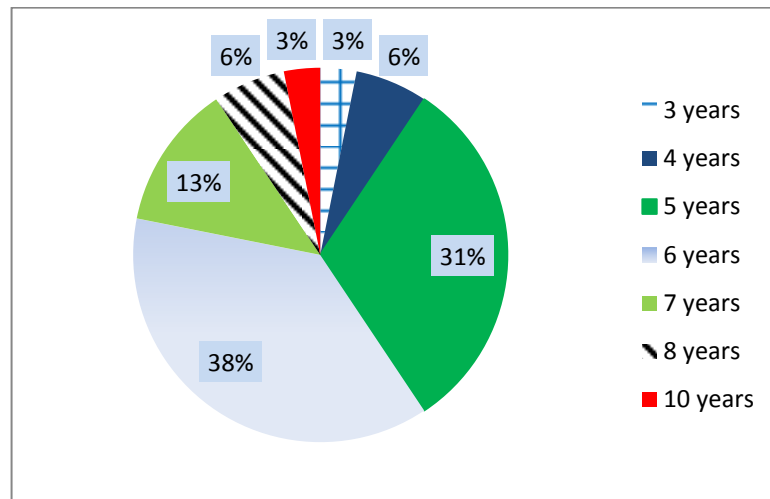


Figure 4.8 Experience in using SNS

The respondents had been using SNS for periods ranging from three to ten years (see Figure 4.8). In other words, none of the participants were new to SNS. Over 90% of the participants had been using SNS for 5 years or more (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2 Experience in using SNS based on usage rates

| Years of experience of using SNS | Frequency in each focus group of users | | | | Total Percentage |
|----------------------------------|--|---------------|-------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| | Light Users | Average Users | Heavy Users | Extremely Heavy Users | |
| 3 years | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3% |
| 4 years | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 6% |
| 5 years | 3 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 31% |
| 6 years | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 38% |
| 7 years | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 13% |
| 8 years | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6% |
| 10 years | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3% |
| Total | 8 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 100% |

The table shows that the average experience in using SNS for social purposes is about five to six years (see also Figure 4.9). The focus group of extremely heavy SNS users had more years of experience in using SNS for social purposes (Kim et al., 2013). All participants had the desired characteristics of the target population (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009), being either semi-active or active users (Park, 2010).

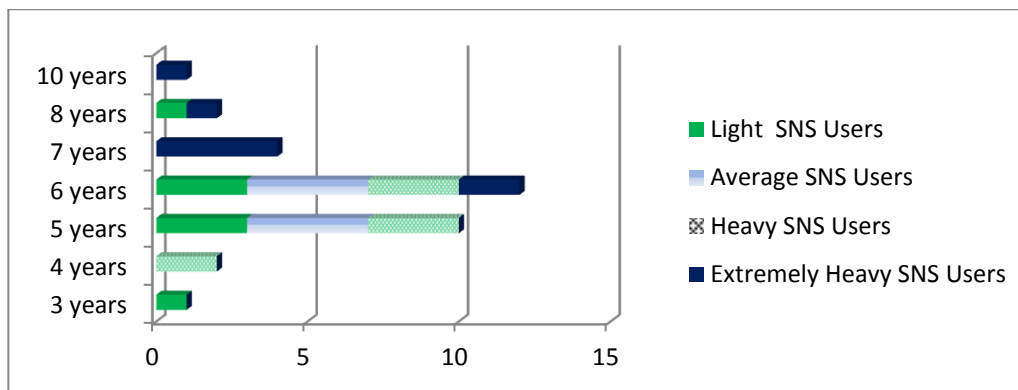


Figure 4.9 Years of experience in using SNS showing usage rates

All 32 participants had at least one SNS account, and more than 50% had more than one (see Table 4.3). Some had five or six accounts in different SNS such as Facebook, Google+, Renren, Twitter, LinkedIn, Weibo, and Instagram (see Figure 4.10). All the participants had a Facebook account, with the next most popular sites being Instagram and Weibo. That the most common SNS used by this group is Facebook confirms the Nielsen report, *The Digital Consumer* (2014).

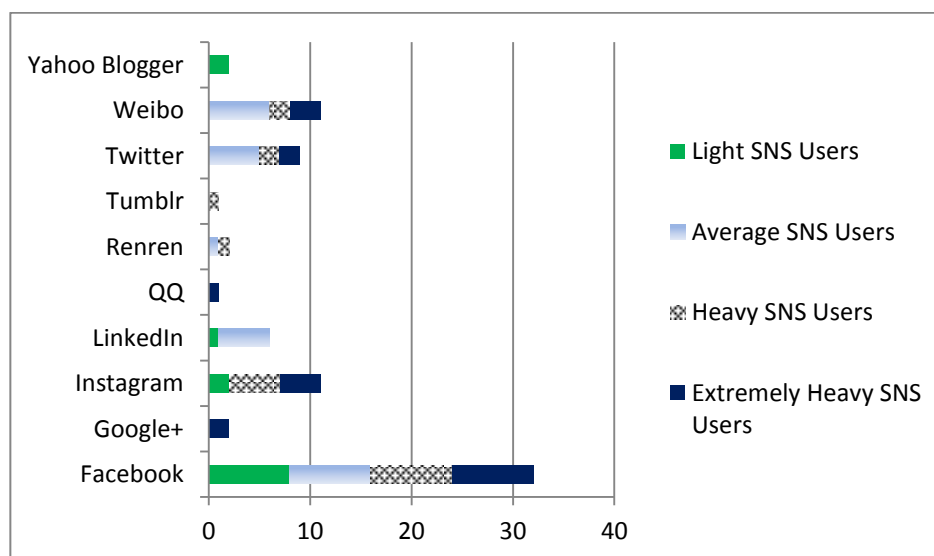


Figure 4.10 SNS accounts and user types

Table 4.3 Frequency distribution of SNS accounts by type of user

| Name of SNS | Frequency in each focus group of users | | | | Percentage |
|---------------|--|---------------|-------------|-----------------------|------------|
| | Light Users | Average Users | Heavy Users | Extremely Heavy Users | |
| Facebook | 8 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 100% |
| Google+ | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 6% |
| Instagram | 2 | 0 | 5 | 4 | 34% |
| LinkedIn | 1 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 19% |
| QQ | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3% |
| Renren | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 6% |
| Tumblr | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3% |
| Twitter | 0 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 28% |
| Weibo | 0 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 34% |
| Yahoo Blogger | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6% |

All participants had a Facebook account; some had more than one. At least two of the participants maintained two accounts for different groups of people: one for their friends and the other for parents or relatives; more than three participants had one Facebook account for work and one for personal use:

My mom and dad want me to add them in my Facebook account. But, I don't want them to know my daily life. I have not added them in my frequently used Facebook account. I have another SNS account for my parents. (EF01)

I got 2 accounts also. Like her, I have one for personal and one for my work. For the work account, I have to use it to contact my clients. I have to open a new account for them so that they will not search for my personal one. (EF03)

There was no significant difference between the number of SNS accounts and the usage rates of average, heavy or extremely heavy SNS users; however, most light SNS users had a single SNS account and only 25% had more than one. With more SNS accounts, respondents tended to spend more time on SNS for social purposes (Kim et al., 2013).

This might explain why light SNS users, mainly with one SNS account, usually spend less than an hour a day using SNS.

4.3.1 Light SNS Users

Of the light SNS users, a few did not check their SNS accounts regularly although all used SNS at least once a day. Some checked their SNS account several times per day. They normally spent around half an hour to one hour per day using SNS for social purposes:

I normally login my SNS account once a day. It's about half an hour. Before I go to bed, I'll check what my friends tell me. (LF03)

On average, I spend less than an hour a day. But, if I need to search some information, I may spend longer time. (LF01)

Many times a day. But, every time just for a few minutes. So, it's about half an hour each day, but only few minutes each time. (LF07)

I guess it is about 30–60 minutes for me. Just like the others, I use several times a day, I don't spend much time on every time I login. (LF05)

4.3.2 Average SNS Users

Average SNS users typically spent one to two hours several times a day on SNS. Some tended to use SNS via smartphones while waiting for a bus or train, or for food in a restaurant:

If I am on the street, it may be 10 – 15 minutes. If I am at home, it may be an hour. So, normally, it's more than an hour per day. (AF08)

I use less than two hours a day while waiting for the bus or waiting for food in a restaurant. (AF06)

These participants' use of their smartphones to engage in SNS is an example of how mobile devices are said to be the catalyst for the use of SNS (Kim et al., 2013).

4.3.3 Heavy SNS Users

Heavy SNS users generally spent around three to four hours on SNS daily. Most used their mobile phone and computer to check their SNS accounts at work or school or during travel on public transportation:

If it's holiday, I guess it's about 3 or 4 hours. Maybe on school days, up to 6 hours because when I switch on the computer, I will leave the page open. (HF08)

It's around 3 hours per day while I'm travelling and one hour at home. It's because I'm very busy in the office and I cannot open Facebook during my working hours due to the company policy. (HF03)

4.3.4 Extremely Heavy SNS Users

Extremely heavy SNS users spent at least four hours on SNS per day. Two spent around ten hours a day, because they normally turned on the SNS with gadgets such as their mobile phone, tablet, laptop or computer, to remain online all day long. Each of these participants had at least two SNS accounts. Half of them had two accounts on Facebook: one for friends and one for work or parents or relatives:

I am the 10 hours type. I have two Facebook Accounts – one for work and one for personal use. (EF05)

I have two accounts on Facebook – one for relatives and one for friends. (EF04)

4.3.5 Summary

Although there are some variations in the amount of time that participants spend on using SNS for social purposes, Table 4.4 summarises the average number of hours spent on SNS by members of each focus group.

Table 4.4 Average time spent using SNS for social purposes by type of user

| Group of respondents based on usage rate | Average daily time spent using SNS for social purposes |
|---|---|
| Light SNS users | Several minutes to one hour |
| Average SNS users | One to two hours |
| Heavy SNS users | Around three hours |
| Extremely heavy SNS users | Four hours or more |

Light users usually spent less than an hour per day on SNS, although if they found something interesting or planned to purchase a product, they would do more pre-purchase browsing. This echoes findings by Kim and Eastin (2011) that there is a positive relationship between exploratory information seeking and pre-purchase browsing time. Other types of SNS users spent more than one hour in a day on SNS.

Most of the respondents in this study are Generation Y, who are highly influenced by online social networks (Nusair et al., 2013). They were either semi-active or active SNS users, and had held SNS accounts for at least three years. The most common SNS for participants was Facebook, which matches other findings that Facebook is the most popular SNS in the world (Hunt, Atkin, & Krishnan, 2012) and one of the most preferred social networking sites (Bicen & Cavus, 2010). Those with more SNS accounts tended to spend more time using SNS.

4.4 RQ1: The perceived value of using SNS for product information search and for helping to make purchase decisions

In order to address the first question of this research, participants were asked to express their perceptions of the value of using SNS for product information search and in helping to make purchase decisions.

4.4.1 Light SNS Users

Seventy-five per cent of light SNS users claimed that their major purpose in using SNS was to keep in touch with friends, not for searching information about a product (see

Table 4.5). For example, friends would set up an invitation to join a gathering or event, and afterwards would post and share pictures on SNS like Facebook.

Some of these participants claimed that they would lose the chance to socialise with their friends if they did not have a SNS account. Seventy-five per cent of the group claimed that they used SNS to keep in contact with their friends:

I use SNS to keep contact with my friends only. (LF03)

Table 4.5 Light users' reasons for using SNS

| Reasons | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Keeping in touch with friends | 6 | 75% |
| Getting more information about products | 3 | 38% |
| Searching information for doing assignments | 1 | 13% |
| Help doing translation | 1 | 13% |

Discussion of what the respondents saw as the perceived benefits and disadvantages of SNS led to the headings in Table 4.6. Some participants found that it was “useful”, “informative” or “convenient” to search for product information via SNS:

For me, it's totally different. I do search product information via SNS as it is informative. I can get more information about the product. (LF01)

Another added:

I think SNS is convenient and time saving. I can get more information. (LF08)

Table 4.6 Light users' perceived value of using SNS

| Perceived value | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Benefits: | | |
| Informative | 5 | 63% |
| Convenient | 4 | 50% |
| Useful | 3 | 38% |
| Attractive promotional offers | 1 | 13% |
| Time saving | 1 | 13% |
| | | |
| Disadvantages: | | |
| Unwanted/annoying advertisements/content | 3 | 50% |
| Unreliable WOM | 2 | 25% |

One respondent showed a negative attitude towards invasive advertising when browsing the SNS. He explained he used SNS less than before because he found it becoming commercialised:

SNS has become more commercialised. I find that Facebook has some “junk” content. I try not to use it as much as possible because the ads are really annoying. (LF05)

Another respondent said:

I will not read the advertisements. The purpose for me to use the SNS is to read the status of my friends. (LF06)

These responses match those made in interviews carried out by O'Reilly and Marx (2011, p. 342), that consumers “consider themselves independent thinkers not easily swayed by company advertising”.

Light SNS users had had experience in seeking information about search goods and experience goods such as basketball shoes, tablets, skin care products and travel services (see Table 4.7). It was not surprising to find that most did not make a purchase after information search via SNS. Even those who made a decision to purchase did not

necessarily buy the products online, generally because they had significant concerns about the risks and uncertainties of online purchasing. These reasons match those given in studies by Al Kailani and Kumar (2011) and Soopramanien (2011) that the higher the perceived risks and uncertainties of the internet, the less likely the willingness to purchase online. Only one light SNS user made the purchase decision to book a hotel online after searching product information via SNS.

Table 4.7 Types of product searched via SNS by Light SNS users

| Type of Product | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Skin care or cosmetics products | 3 | 38% |
| Travel services | 2 | 25% |
| Clothes | 1 | 13% |
| Basketball shoes | 1 | 13% |
| Restaurants | 1 | 13% |
| Smartphone | 1 | 13% |
| Tablets | 1 | 13% |
| Handbags | 1 | 13% |

As in Tow et al.'s (2010) study, some respondents claimed that they used Facebook or Instagram to keep in touch with their friends, and seldom used it as a major tool for product information search. Some had never even thought of using it to search for product information. For example, one respondent was found to have habitual buying behaviour (Blackwell et al., 2012) and made use of heuristic cues in making decisions (Mattila, 1998) instead of spending time on searching product information via SNS:

I have never bought anything via SNS as I lack confidence of it. I usually go to the same stores to purchase same types of products. I do not spend too much time on searching product information [on SNS]. (LF03)

4.4.2 Average SNS Users

Most of the respondents in this category had been invited by their friends to join SNS. Some started using SNS to play games with friends or for photo sharing and reading

news among friends; this was their major purpose, not product information search (see Table 4.8). As one participant said,

Everyone has started using Facebook. It has become a very important communication channel. (AF05)

Table 4.8 Average users' reasons for using SNS

| Reasons | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Invited by friends | 5 | 63% |
| Sharing photos and news among friends | 4 | 50% |
| Playing games with friends | 2 | 25% |

Most used their mobile phones to check their SNS accounts, alerted to new postings by pop-up messages.

Discussion of what respondents saw as the benefits and disadvantages of using SNS led to the headings in Table 4.9.

Table 4.9 Average users' perceived value of using SNS

| Perceived value | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Benefits: | | |
| Informative | 6 | 75% |
| Attractive promotional offers | 3 | 38% |
| Useful | 2 | 25% |
| Enjoyment | 2 | 25% |
| Convenient | 1 | 13% |
| Time saving | 1 | 13% |
| More interactive | 1 | 13% |
| | | |
| Disadvantages: | | |
| Unreliable WOM | 5 | 63% |
| Impolite administrator | 2 | 25% |
| Unwanted/annoying advertisements/content | 2 | 25% |
| Invading privacy | 1 | 13% |
| Information overloaded | 1 | 13% |

The respondents collected information for both search goods and experience goods (Huang et al., 2009). They searched product information such as concerts tickets, music albums, online games, air tickets and restaurants (see Table 4.10).

Table 4.10 Types of product searched via SNS by average SNS users

| Types of product | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| CD or Music albums | 3 | 38% |
| Skin care products | 2 | 25% |
| Handbags | 2 | 25% |
| Online games | 1 | 13% |
| Concert tickets | 1 | 13% |
| Restaurants | 1 | 13% |
| Air tickets | 1 | 13% |
| Clothing | 1 | 13% |

Some saw the SNS as a convenient way to communicate with the “company” to get the most up-to-date information. One respondent said,

I think Facebook can enhance the communication between customers and business because we can inbox them asking about the price and time for delivery [of the product]. (AF05)

Some even followed “pages” like “Fan Page” to get the most up-to-date information about the products that they liked. One respondent noted,

I like to search information like concerts. There are fan pages that put all the information online. When I have questions about the details like the dates or how to queue up, I can communicate with the organiser. It's much more convenient because I use Facebook and I add the fans page. (AF07)

A respondent said he enjoyed browsing SNS as it was like reading an online magazine during his spare time:

Facebook can serve the function of a magazine in that we can read many online articles. (AF05)

Another respondent found that the content of SNS allowed interactive communication, which was better than the official webpages of the skin care products and restaurants they were interested in. The respondent read conversations between users and administrators to understand more about the products. A participant explained that he preferred to search and purchase music albums via SNS as the site had some special “gifts” which might not be offered in a physical music store. Another respondent claimed that she had experienced finding cheaper air tickets via SNS, a bargain that could not be found on official websites.

Among this group, two respondents had a negative attitude towards SNS. They had received spam messages which invaded their privacy, and found it annoying. They sometimes received advertisements for products like “*wall-washing*” on their Facebook’s “Newsfeed”.

Another respondent added that there was a kind of “information overload” on his SNS account. He was hesitant in believing WOM comments or content on SNS, thinking the administrator of the pages might suppress negative comments about companies’ products. He had no confidence in the honesty of the comments or their representativeness. Some respondents suspected comments posted on the SNS came from fake accounts, and would not consider positive comments that were accompanied by a profile picture not of the person posting but of scenery or a cartoon character.

In short, average users revealed mixed feelings towards using SNS. They found it convenient, and cheaper to buy products that came with discounts or gifts or premiums when purchased online. They also found some benefit in eWOM, which provided useful information about items for sale (Cheung & Lee, 2012). However, some tended to find the use of SNS by marketers annoying because it invaded their privacy and made unreliable and false claims.

4.4.3 Heavy SNS Users

Most heavy SNS users were invited by friends to join their SNS. Some younger respondents said that all their friends were members of SNS, and they had to use them in order to keep in contact (see Table 4.11):

All my friends have a Facebook account. I must have an account as I need to communicate with them. (HF05)

Most of this cohort had more than one SNS account, and 37.5% said that they had opened several SNS accounts to follow celebrities in different regions or to keep in contact with friends in other countries. For instance, one participant said,

I opened the Twitter account for following the news of western celebrities while I have the Weibo to check the status of the Mainland Chinese celebrities. (HF02)

Another added,

I opened a Facebook account because most Hong Kong people use it. I have a Renren account because I was an exchange student in the Mainland China. I want to keep contact with people that I have known in China. (HF06)

Table 4.11 Heavy users' reasons for using SNS

| Reasons | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Invited by friends | 5 | 63% |
| Sharing news or status among friends | 4 | 50% |
| Following celebrities | 3 | 38% |
| Keeping contact with people in different countries | 1 | 13% |
| Playing games with friends | 1 | 13% |

The respondents had experienced searching for products like textbooks, clothing, gifts, and food such as cupcakes, frozen yogurt and ice-cream (see Table 4.12). One of the participants explained,

I do not have much time to shop around. I can collect product information through Facebook. When I find a product that I want to buy, I simply take out my credit card and make the payment online. The products will be delivered to my office within a few days. I do not need to walk to the shop to pick up the product. (HF05)

Table 4.12 Types of product searched via SNS by heavy users

| Types of product | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Restaurants | 3 | 38% |
| Air tickets | 3 | 38% |
| Clothing | 3 | 38% |
| Presents | 1 | 13% |
| Food | 1 | 13% |
| Computer accessories | 1 | 13% |
| Textbooks | 1 | 13% |
| Handbags | 1 | 13% |

Discussion of what these respondents saw as the perceived benefits and disadvantages of using SNS led to the headings in Table 4.13. Most heavy users tended to have a positive attitude towards SNS. They found it useful for its up-to-date information and promotional offers. Some said it was convenient and time-saving when searching for product information:

Generally, it's useful and updated. For example, I frequently check a Facebook page which offers cheap air tickets every week. Other users may give comments about the air tickets. It's very useful. (HF02)

And, it's very convenient. I can browse the Facebook and I can get all information about cheap air tickets or clothes. I just bought a product after seeing a shop posted the photo on the Facebook. I found it's very beautiful and I just bought it by clicking a button. (HF05)

I think it's quite effective in using Facebook, too. It's because many products have Facebook pages nowadays. So, if I "like" their pages, they will have any changes or news updated on Facebook. So, Facebook is like a central database for me, too. (HF08)

Table 4.13 Heavy users' perceived value of using SNS

| Perceived value | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Benefits: | | |
| Informative | 7 | 88% |
| Attractive promotional offers | 3 | 38% |
| Convenient | 3 | 38% |
| Know the comments from other users/WOM | 3 | 38% |
| Useful | 2 | 25% |
| Time saving | 1 | 13% |
| Quite reliable | 1 | 13% |
| | | |
| Disadvantages: | | |
| Unreliable WOM | 3 | 38% |
| Perceived risk | 2 | 25% |
| Unwanted/annoying advertisements/content | 1 | 13% |

Some participants wanted to read comments posted by others:

I think it's a good way to know how other people commented on the products. Sometimes, when we look at the product and have no idea about whether it's good or not, we can see how other people think about it. (HF04)

They agreed that the comments gave them some useful information about the products. These results accord with previous findings that most consumers with online purchase experience will refer to customer reviews, that is, eWOM, before making a purchase decision (Doh & Hwang, 2009).

Although some of the respondents suspected the comments posted by others on SNS, they found that SNS were able to help them find useful, up-to-date information about products that they wanted to purchase.

4.4.4 Extremely Heavy SNS Users

Extremely heavy SNS users were invited by friends to join SNS. More than other SNS users, 50% had more than one Facebook account for different groups of people, for the reasons listed in Table 4.14. One participant said,

Everyone has joined Facebook, and you cannot reject it. (EF05)

Another participant added,

I have two Facebook accounts. One is for my friends and the other is for my Dad and Mom. My parents wanted to add me and I didn't want them to know my daily life and university life. S, I opened a new Facebook account for them. (EF01)

Table 4.14 Extremely heavy users' reasons for using SNS

| Reasons | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Invited by friends | 6 | 75% |
| Sharing photos and news with friends | 5 | 63% |
| Requested by relatives | 2 | 25% |

This group had the experience to search for a wide range of products via SNS. Their experience in searching for information extended to products like limited edition sneakers, baby products, gadgets, restaurants, travel services and apparel (see Table 4.15).

Extremely heavy users tend to have a favourable attitude towards using their SNS accounts for product information search:

For everything I want to buy, I will use SNS to search the product information, for example, new mobile phone. (EF08)

Table 4.15 Types of product searched by extremely heavy users

| Types of product | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Clothing and accessories | 5 | 63% |
| Sneakers | 2 | 25% |
| Electronics/computer products | 1 | 13% |
| Restaurants | 1 | 13% |
| Presents | 1 | 13% |
| Baby products | 1 | 13% |
| Handbags | 1 | 13% |
| Mobile Phones | 1 | 13% |
| Air tickets | 1 | 13% |

Discussion of what the respondents saw as the perceived benefits and disadvantages of using SNS led to the headings in Table 4.16.

Table 4.16 Extremely heavy users' perceived value of using SNS

| Perceived value | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|------------------|-------------------|
| Benefits: | | |
| Informative | 8 | 100% |
| Convenient | 6 | 75% |
| Attractive promotional offers | 5 | 63% |
| Know the comments from other users/WOM | 4 | 50% |
| Interactive | 2 | 25% |
| Time saving | 2 | 25% |
| | | |
| Disadvantages: | | |
| Unreliable WOM | 2 | 25% |

At least 75% of the respondents found that SNS was a convenient tool for searching product information (see Table 4.16). A particular respondent mentioned that it was the

only way that he could buy the clothing that he preferred. They all thought that SNS were informative. It could provide them with up-to-date product information, and they enjoyed using this channel to communicate with other shoppers. For instance, a respondent said,

I can get those updated products information very quickly. I can read those comments by other users. (EF01)

Another added,

I always use my mobile phone to browse the Facebook. It's more convenient for me to search the product on Facebook than having another websites. And, other shoppers may reply to my question instantly so I think it is a good way to search. (EF06)

Although half considered it useful to read comments from other product users, some said they did not trust the comments because someone was recruited to write them. One participant gave an example:

In my university life, I needed to find sponsors from some restaurants for providing us the food. The requirements were to write 20 positive comments. They asked me to open 20 accounts to post the comments there. After that, I don't really believe those comments. I think lots of them are not the real one. (EF06)

During her in-depth interview, another respondent remarked,

If I look for some comments, I may use social network sites first. However, sometimes I will go directly to Taobao. People who write good comments will get rewards on Taobao. If you write good comments for some shops, they will give you \$2 discount for next purchase. For Facebook, it allows everyone to comment. (EI02)

Apart from getting useful and up-to-date information, two of the extremely heavy users enjoyed the time and cost savings of using SNS for making purchases online:

I usually search for the baby products. Every three months, you have to change all the baby things. So, it saves time for working mums. There are many baby product shops on the Facebook. They have so many new ideas on how your kids can feed better. They have many newly invented tools for your kids. (EF03)

During the in-depth interview, a respondent said,

I start to use social network sites in a product search when I want to look for some product information during office hours and when I do not have time for shopping. (EI02)

When price was one of the important criteria in making a purchase decision, the transparency of pricing meant it took less time to do a product comparison.

In short, SNS could provide benefits such as price transparency and raising product awareness, as described by Bughin et al. (2011). Although the respondents enjoyed reading eWOM from other users and marketers, they were aware that some comments were not reliable. Like the less heavy other users, their awareness that businesses were using SNS as a promotional tool was seen as a drawback, but this was tempered by the usefulness of selected information. In general, extremely heavy SNS users identified fewer disadvantages to using SNS for information search than light, average and heavy users.

4.4.5 Summary of findings and cross-case analysis on group differences on RQ1: For consumers who use SNS, how do they perceive the value of using SNS for product information search and for helping to make purchase decisions?

The motives for participants to use SNS were related to passing time, information seeking, interpersonal utility, hedonic motives such as emotional enjoyment and entertainment. These findings echo those of Hunt et al. (2012) and Li (2011).

Responses during the focus group discussions indicated that most participants had favourable attitudes towards using SNS for information search, although not all of them had used SNS for this reason, especially light users. All participants had some experience in using SNS for searching information, and most considered it a useful

additional search method. Some, especially light users, did not undertake active search via SNS, as their major motive for using SNS was not this but to keep in contact with friends and relatives.

The findings show that the respondents used SNS to search for different types of product, including both search goods and experience goods (Huang et al., 2009). The products were not limited to tangible goods such as music CDs and clothing, but included intangible services such as travelling packages. The most mentioned products were fashion items, possibly because these might be a hedonic activity as described by Verhagen & van Dolen (2011).

The four groups experienced benefits in using SNS in different ways, based on how they used it, and identified more disadvantages in inverse relationship to their intensity of use. Across the groups, the informative value of using SNS for searching product information increased with the user's intensity of SNS use. This finding accords with those of Lampe et al. (2013) that heavy users rate more highly the perceived value of Facebook. Participants had some reservations about using SNS for an information search because of unreliable WOM, a drawback identified by all user groups although not as often by very heavy users. Some found advertisements annoying; others had little faith in positive eWOM by unknown community members. These findings echo the results of Barreto's (2013) study, that Facebook's advertisements cannot attract more attention than acquaintances' recommendations. Users also suspected some consumer reviews were fake. The results match the findings of Malbon (2013) and Kucukemiroglu and Kara (2014).

There does appear to be a link between the usage rate of SNS and making purchase decisions. There is a higher tendency to make online purchase decisions after a product information search via SNS. In other words, heavier users of SNS have a higher tendency than lighter SNS users to make purchase decisions after information search via SNS.

4.5 RQ2: When and why do users commence to use SNS in their product search

To address the second research question, during the focus group discussions participants were asked to indicate when and why they started using SNS to search product information. The two participants from each focus group were invited to share more of their experiences in the follow-up one-to-one interviews.

4.5.1 Light SNS Users

Most respondents started using SNS to search product information out of curiosity, or were triggered by external stimuli such as advertisements or posts by their friends. After seeing these commercials or posts, they were interested enough to “click” the link to have a look.

During the focus group discussion, the respondents briefly described when and why they started using SNS for product information search. Their grouped responses are listed in Table 4.17.

Table 4.17 Light users’ reasons to start searching via SNS

| Reasons | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| WOM such as posts by friends or other users | 4 | 50% |
| Triggered by external stimuli such as advertisements | 4 | 50% |
| Wanted to obtain up-to-date information | 3 | 38% |
| Replaced old items | 2 | 25% |

Half the participants claimed that they were stimulated by advertisements on their SNS page to browse the product information. Some said they were influenced by the posts of their friends to find out more about the product being mentioned. A few took the initiative to search product information by themselves: they wanted to get more up-to-date information before they went to a physical store to purchase the product and thought it would save time if they had selected an appropriate product before they arrived. For instance, two of the participants had sufficient experience to start searching skin care products after they noticed new items were available. They searched for

product information such as comments from other users or trusted friends before they went to a store to try them out. This made them spend more time reading posts on SNS. During the focus group discussion, one of the respondents explained:

When I see some skin care products, I might spend time to read the comments. As it is unplanned, it may take a longer time for me. (LF01)

Although they hesitated to believe all the comments given by SNS members, they thought the eWOM was helpful. It could save the time spent at a physical store choosing and examining the required product. One of the respondents explained,

I have the experience to search skin care products. Some pages are embedded with the video clip with comments. It can persuade people to use it. I will then go to the store to check it out. (LF02)

As they had already searched information such as price, discount, design, ingredients and functions of a product, they were able to make the purchase decision more quickly when they looked for the product in a physical store; hence, they tended to read and consider comments from other users and friends before making a purchase decision.

As in Soopramanien's (2011) study, the respondents started searching product information via SNS because it was convenient to do so. If the products were found to be attractive, they would spend some time to check for more information such as their price, design and availability. During the follow-up interview, a respondent said,

There is no particular reason to do so but just convenience. I just go ahead [with the search] because I know that there are a lot of companies trying to post information first on Facebook. Just out of curiosity, I would go to search the product or company etc. and see how they advertise on Facebook. There is no particular force that drives me to search information on Facebook. (LI01)

He liked using SNS to search product information as it had some multimedia function. He described planning to purchase a mobile phone,

They would show some pictures of using that particular product and how these particular products achieve certain kind of functions or to show the functionality of the product. (LI01)

His responses matched a study that found visual information to be important in attracting customers to browse for more about a product via the internet (Lin, Lu, & Wu, 2012). The results could also be applied to the online SNS environment.

Another respondent said he started to search information via SNS when he recognised the need to purchase. He wanted to replace his old pair of basketball shoes, and started searching the product via his favourite brand's Fans Page on Facebook. During the in-depth interview, he recalled,

For my last search experience via SNS, I started to search for a pair of basketball shoes when I realized mine was really old. And then I went to the Nike page, I went to find whether there was a new release. (LI02)

Interestingly, one of the respondents ended up deciding to purchase the product even after finding negative WOM about his preferred product via SNS. Among those negative comments, he simply tended to seek for affirmation of other users' experience of what he expected. During the in-depth interview, he said,

To be frank, there are a lot of negative comments in those pages. They would say the product is not good enough. If I found that there are people sharing the same opinions with me, I will go ahead [to buy the product] and then stop searching information. (LI01)

Although light SNS users were mainly influenced by their friends' posts or advertisements to start searching, they had diverse views and experiences in searching product information via SNS.

4.5.2 Average SNS Users

During the focus group discussion, most participants acknowledged that they were influenced by posts from their friends to start searching product information via SNS (see Table 4.18).

Table 4.18 Average users' reasons to start searching via SNS

| Reasons | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|------------------|-------------------|
| WOM such as posts by friends or other users | 5 | 63% |
| Triggered by external stimuli such as advertisements | 4 | 50% |
| Wanted to obtain up-to-date information | 3 | 38% |
| Sought for discount or cheaper price | 2 | 25% |

Over half these users showed passive search behaviour in that they were triggered by advertisements with multi-media functions. Visually orientated advertisements (like videos) could draw them to browse the products linked to their SNS accounts or Facebook pages. This matched the findings in Lin et al.'s (2012) study.

Average users also enjoyed the up-to-date information that they could obtain through SNS:

You can know some newly released album through Facebook. Some companies upload the songs on YouTube and post it on Facebook. Apart from that, you can also know some new information about online game. (AF02)

Two of this cohort started searching product information when they read the “special offer” of a particular product on a “Newsfeed”. During the in-depth interview, one respondent explained why she started using SNS,

I start to use [SNS] when I want to see if there were any special offers and discounts. On the official website, I normally get the normal price. However, on Facebook, I expect them to have some special offers which give me a better bargain than the ones on the official sites or at the stores. Sometimes on Facebook, when you click “like”, they will give you coupons and discounts. (AI01)

However, the rest of the participants performed active search about the products they really wanted to buy when they noticed that SNS could be platforms for finding the “most updated information” or the “best offer”. During the in-depth interview, a participant said,

I would like to know whether people think the product is good or not when I want to buy something. I may not know the quality or where I can buy it, so I may search on the SNS and ask for the opinions of my friends or other users. (AI02)

These active search participants even enjoyed the interaction between seller and buyer (Häubl & Trifts, 2000), contacting sellers directly via SNS to ask about the price and availability of products.

4.5.3 Heavy SNS Users

Heavy users expressed a more positive attitude towards using SNS for product information search and making a purchase decision. The main reasons for starting to search the SNS for product information varied in emphasis from those of the light user group (see Table 4.19).

Table 4.19 Heavy users' reasons to start searching via SNS

| Reasons | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Wanted to obtain up-to-date information | 6 | 75% |
| WOM such as posts by friends or other users | 4 | 50% |
| Triggered by external stimuli such as advertisements | 4 | 50% |
| Sought a discount or cheaper price | 2 | 25% |
| Recognised the need to purchase a gift | 1 | 13% |

Some of this group started searching because they saw advertisements or newsfeed from their friends. One respondent said,

I seldom search product information via SNS. Sometimes, when an advertisement pops up while I'm using my SNS account, and if the product looks attractive, I will check for the price of the product. Normally, I will seek for information from other websites such as "Hong Kong Discussion Forum" and my friends' opinions. (HF03)

During the in-depth interview, another participant said,

It is very difficult to say [when I started searching product information via SNS]. But just like last time, I searched the product information on Facebook because I was already on the Facebook page and thought that perhaps I could get more information there. (HI01)

When asked to recall the first time she decided to search for product information via SNS, the respondent gave a different answer:

I think I started 2 to 3 years ago. I started to take a look at the Facebook advertisements and I thought that maybe I could get the information there. Before that, I did not know I could search product information on Facebook. (HI01)

Some respondents said that they were aware of the ads in the category of fashion/accessories, beauty, cosmetics, and artists. The ads in the category of FMCG and travel were likely to go unnoticed if they were not “liked” by friends:

I think I seldom take the initiative to search the products on Facebook. Maybe I will search on other search engines like Google and Yahoo, but then I mainly look as that information appears on my newsfeed. I do not know why they pop up in my newsfeed. Probably because some of my friends “like” the page, so when they press “like” for a particular item again, they will appear on my newsfeed, and then I can know my friends “like” them. (HI02)

Apart from the convenience of using SNS to search the most up-to-date product information, they thought it a very effective way to just “click” and “browse” for more information or to purchase the product. Sometimes they just searched product information on SNS like “window shopping”. During the in-depth interview, one respondent said,

I searched just because of the convenience. I do not have a specific product to buy, but I just think that maybe the shop has some new products and maybe I’d be interested in them, so I just take a look at any time, at any place. (HI01)

One participant said that SNS was a “good way” to know what other people said about the product. She thought it was a reliable source of information if it was recommended

or reviewed by known friends. In other words, she was influenced by eWOM to make a purchase decision. This matches the findings by Pan and Chiou (2011) that a recommendation by family or friends is perceived to be a reliable source of information. However, as mentioned by Pan & Zhang (2011), consumers who are willing to take risks in product purchase might process product information differently.

In fact, most of the respondents said that they would read the comments posted by users or friends about the products that they wanted to purchase. They would tend to look at those comments which were not written in a formal tone. Interestingly, two would only read the negative comments, as they thought the positive ones might have been solicited and paid for by the producer or seller. They would believe negative comments which had detailed descriptions with evidence:

I would focus on the negative comments first. I would spend longer time on reading negative comments than positive comments. (HF06)

I'd skip all the good comments because I think they are created by the owner of the shop. And, I would focus on the negative comments. If the negative comments are very detailed with some specific evidence, some would attach a receipt and describe the incident very realistically, I would believe it and I would not buy that product forever. (HF07)

One participant said she started searching product information when she had no idea for a gift she wished to give to a friend. She started searching SNS pages with the word “accessories” and finally found a suitable product. She found this very convenient, and it helped her save a lot of time:

I remember that there was a time I wanted to look for a birthday gift for my friend. She likes different kinds of accessories. I did a product search on my cousin's product page because he only has a Facebook page for his products. I think before asking him or looking at the real products, I wish to take a look at what kind of accessories or jewellery it can offer, and also the size and the price of them. (HI02)

Apart from starting a search for product information triggered by an advertisement or posts by others, some of this cohort started to search information as they noticed that it might be a good source of gifts for their friends. Before making an actual purchase, respondents would search product information such as price and availability using SNS.

4.5.4 Extremely Heavy SNS Users

Extremely heavy SNS users took a much more active search approach when using SNS. Apart from reading posts by friends or other users, most of them were active searchers who started searching SNS for up-to-date product information (see Table 4.20). They enjoyed using SNS for this purpose because of its convenience and WOM.

Table 4.20 Extremely heavy SNS users' reasons to start searching via SNS

| Reasons | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Wanted to obtain up-to-date information | 6 | 75% |
| WOM such as posts by friends or other users | 5 | 63% |
| Sought special or unique items | 3 | 38% |
| Sought discounts or cheaper prices | 2 | 25% |
| Triggered by external stimuli such as advertisements | 1 | 13% |
| Replaced old or missing items | 1 | 13% |

Some of them noticed that SNS were the only way that they could get a unique product or a better price. One participant said,

I find Facebook got more promotions and better price. For example, a polo shirt may be sold at HK\$1,000 in store. But, if you purchase it from a Facebook shop, it may cost \$700. And, some of the styles are only sold in US shop, not in Hong Kong.(EF02)

Another added,

I don't usually search branded products on SNS, but the shop was opened by my friends. They are more unique and you cannot find similar products when you go to the store.(EF07)

During an in-depth interview, one respondent explained,

When I want to buy some fashion items or clothing items, I will go to search through the SNS. There is more unique colour or pattern. But, when you go to the store, you can buy those regular and current items, but not the unique one. I want to buy those unique items which people can't easily buy from the stores. Then, it won't be the same as others. (EI01)

With the introduction of Facebook Fan Pages and other community pages, some respondents took an active approach, spending more time using “key words” to search the items that they would like to buy. During an in-depth interview one respondent said,

Sometime, I am attracted by the advertisements on the Internet or Facebook which initiate me to understanding more about the products. In Facebook, there are some tailor-made advertisements for the key words you are searching. For example, if you keep on typing the word “baby”, they will form some baby products advertisements in your Facebook which may attract you to search further and to get more information about the products. Both situations apply when you want to buy something or when you are attracted by the advertisements. (EI02)

Most extremely heavy users had added “liked” pages which automatically let them know the most up-to-date information:

It is quite easy to learn new product. Many companies create the fan pages and they would introduce the new products on their pages. So, if I “like” their pages, I can get updated information about their products. It's very convenient. And, I can see my friends “like” the products. Sometimes, when we get together, we would talk about the product. (EF04)

In particular, one of the respondents treated SNS as their major platform to gather up-to-date information about the “trendy” products that he liked:

Nowadays, a lot of fashion brands would like to spread their marketing strategy or advertising or promotion through the SNS such as those fan pages in Facebook. So, normally, I will “follow” most of the fashion brands' fan pages

which always update their news. So, I prefer to first search the fashion items through the SNS such as those fans page. For example, I have several favourite American and European fashion fan pages in Facebook. They always update some new items and share the ways how I can buy it, and share some comments about those fashion items. (EI01)

A few respondents found that they could obtain unique and up-to-date information via SNS, information usually not available on official websites:

Sometimes, those companies' official websites only show the regular patterns or items, however, they will promote some special items such as limited edition sneakers on SNS only. For example, they find some artists or famous singers or famous fashion idols to wear those limited edition items and have some snapshots and post it on their SNS. Then, when I have a look on it, I like it a lot and I will buy it. But, through their official websites, I can't find that news because they mainly promote these unique or special items via SNS rather than other official webpages. (EI01)

In short, extremely heavy SNS users tended to be much more active in searching for product information and in using the new functions offered by SNS. There was a significantly positive attitude towards ads displayed on social media websites (Vinerean et al., 2013) although only a few years ago most SNS users were using passive search approaches as described by Cole (2007).

4.5.5 Summary of findings and cross-case analysis of group differences on RQ2: When and why do users commence to use SNS in their product search

The responses of the different focus groups did not show a significant difference between search for search goods and experience goods, although two respondents did show a preference for using SNS to search for specialty products (Kotler et al., 2011; Nelson, 1970).

Across all user groups there were three common reasons to start using SNS to search for product information. When consumers wanted to obtain up-to-date information, or if

triggered by advertisements or by posts from their friends on the “News Feed”, they would start to search for product information via SNS. In each user group there were respondents who would use their spare time to browse SNS, especially when reading posts by their acquaintances. Apart from light SNS users, some respondents sought cheaper prices or promotional offers when they started using SNS for product information search. Only one heavy SNS user claimed to use SNS to find ideas for gifts.

With information showing prices and users’ reviews of products, SNS helped respondents save time in choosing a product even if they finally made the purchase in a physical store. At odds with most light SNS users, one respondent considered using SNS to help make a purchase decision by seeking affirmation from comments provided by other users of the product. This accords with the findings of Fischer et al. (2011) that individuals, consciously or not, elect to expose themselves to information that supports their own decisions or beliefs.

Their responses indicate that most participants had favourable attitudes towards SNS. Consistent with the findings for RQ1, heavy and extremely heavy SNS users appeared to have more confidence using SNS for search purposes. Light SNS users tended to enjoying shopping at a physical store more than an online store because they wanted to try out the product. Nevertheless, these respondents did admit that gathering product information via SNS before they went to the shop could save time.

All participants had experience in using SNS for searching information, but most of the light users treated SNS as an additional platform to help them search for product information and seldom did an active search via SNS. They were usually triggered by an advertisement or friends’ posts to start a product information search (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011; Yousif, 2012). The results match the findings of Trusov et al. (2009) that referrals on SNS show longer carryover effects than traditional advertising. The participants tend to rely more on feedback and review from their known friends and relatives. Heavier users took a more active approach in searching for product information via SNS. Some extremely heavy users considered SNS their first source for up-to-date and the most popular information about their favourite products such as fashion items. This echoes McDonnell and Shiri’s (2011) finding that social search can help improve search results and enable discovery. With their greater ability and

knowledge of to search (Jaillet, 2001; Kulviwat et al., 2004), heavy and extremely heavy SNS users tend to spend more time and may even pick SNS as the first medium to search information on their desired product, especially fashionable items and search goods.

4.6 RQ3: How do these consumers determine they have searched sufficient SNS to cease further search using these sources?

In order to obtain responses to the third research question, focus groups were asked to describe when and why they stopped using SNS to search product information. The two participants from each focus group who were invited to attend a follow-up, one-on-one interview were asked to elaborate more of their personal experiences and reasons for ceasing product information search via SNS.

4.6.1 Light SNS Users

Participants commented on their concerns about the security and reliability of messages on SNS. They recounted bad experiences of friends in using SNS to find product information and make purchases online. They tended to believe more what their friends and peers said about a product.

During the focus group discussions and interviews, it was found that most respondents did not make purchase decisions after product information search via SNS (see Figure 4.11).

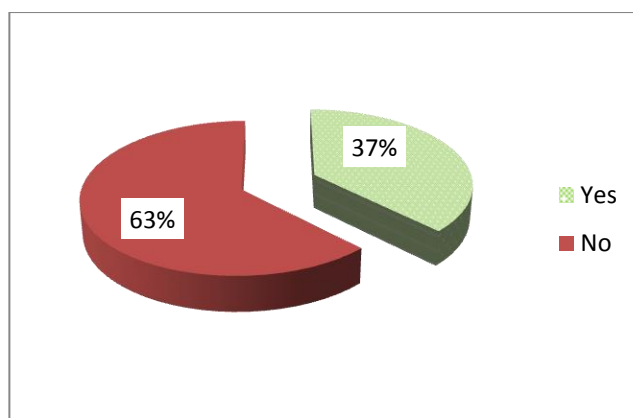


Figure 4.11 Light users' purchase decisions using SNS

Discussions of when respondents determined to stop searching for product information via SNS are listed in the following table (see Table 4.21).

Table 4.21 When light users decided to stop searching via SNS

| When to stop | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|------------------|-------------------|
| Wanted to try out the product at a physical store | 6 | 75% |
| Linked to other websites | 4 | 50% |
| Could not find the expected information | 4 | 50% |
| Felt satisfied with the desired information | 2 | 25% |
| Could not find any more interesting or up-to-date information | 2 | 25% |
| Felt tired of searching information | 1 | 13% |
| Found too many advertisements | 1 | 13% |

Some light users stopped searching once they had found the product information they required. As most searched passively, they had no any intention to purchase a product after information search. Most would not purchase products such as skin care via SNS or online as they preferred to touch, examine and try the products before purchase. Their behaviour can be explained by their perceived risk of purchasing a product via SNS. As one of the participants said,

I prefer to go to the store to try the tester of the skin care products and talk to the beauty advisor face-to-face at the counter. (LF07)

She stopped and went to a physical store after she had searched the product information.

Another respondent said,

The company's Fans Page is usually embedded with the video with some favourable comments that try to persuade you to use it. I will then go to the physical shop to check it out. (LF01)

Sometimes they were being diverted to search another webpage:

I had an experience that I needed to book a hotel and I found the website of the hotel on my Facebook. Then, I just clicked the link to the hotel's official website and booked the hotel. (LF08)

One respondent found the advertisements annoying, and stopped searching when he saw too many advertisements on his SNS account:

I will close it at once when I find many advertisements on my newsfeed. (LF05)

Some found that they could not find the updated or desired information on SNS:

Last time, when I saw a pretty handbag on SNS, It only showed it had promotional discount. I could not find the price. I then stopped searching. (LF03)

During the follow-up interview, a respondent recalled his decision to stop searching via SNS because he was disappointed when he could not find the expected information:

For my last search experience via SNS, I started to search for a pair of basketball shoes when I realized mine were really old. And then I went to the Nike page, I went to find whether there was a new release. I could only get some photos of the design. But, I couldn't find what is available for sale. By then, I stopped searching Facebook. And, I decided to go to the shop to buy by myself. (LI02)

In another in-depth interview, the respondent stopped searching when he felt tired or when he was satisfied with the information found on the SNS:

So long as I find I am satisfied with the posts there. If I find that there are people sharing the same opinions with me, I will go ahead and then stop searching information. Or, when I feel tired, I will stop searching. Or, another situation, if I have some doubts about those comments, I will go to the physical store to see it. (LI01)

He also mentioned that time cost was important for him:

Actually there is a time cost. But because I don't need to pay for the search function on Facebook, I will just go ahead. So long as I feel satisfied, I will stop searching. (LI01)

Light users ceased using SNS to search for product information in different circumstances. Some stopped when they felt tired of searching or when they were satisfied with the information found; however, most tended to go to the physical store to try out the product before making a purchase decision.

4.6.2 Average SNS Users

During the focus group discussion, half of the average users considered SNS had helped them make purchase decisions (see Figure 4.12).

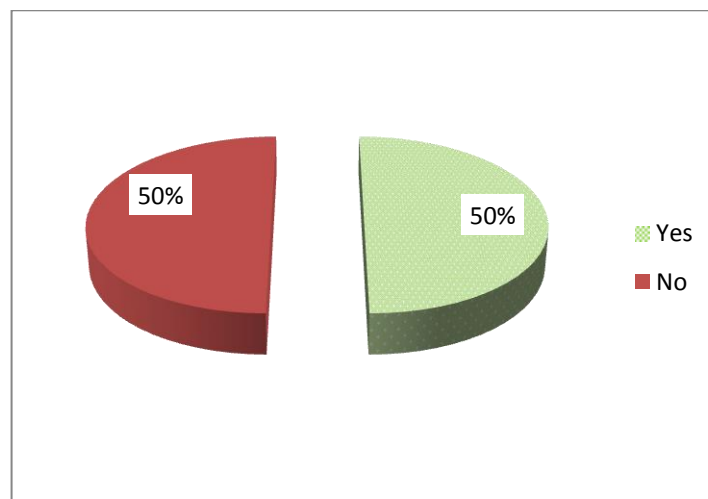


Figure 4.12 Average users' purchase decisions using SNS

Some thought SNS could not help them make a purchase decision as they did not trust the content posted there:

SNS is just a platform for a company to do promotion. I don't really trust it. I also doubted the legal liability about what they said on SNS. (AF04)

Most respondents still preferred to purchase at a physical store after searching product information using SNS:

I can get the information on when the new album will be released via Facebook Fan page. But, I will go to the physical store to buy it because I want the souvenir of the CD, such as poster and photo. (AF02)

Other respondents echoed this:

With SNS, I can get more information. But, when it comes to the action of purchase, I would prefer to go to the official shop to buy things. Even if it is a CD, I prefer to have a hard copy.(AF05)

For facial products, I would go to the physical store to test the products on my hands. I can also get the advice from the Beauty advisor there. (AF08)

Although two respondents wanted to purchase a product after information search via SNS, they did not have credit cards and could not complete the purchase:

Sometimes you may need credit cards, but I do not have one. I think it is troublesome. So, I have never made purchases online through the foreign shops on Facebook. (AI02)

Discussion of when respondents determined to stop searching for product information via SNS is summarised in Table 4.22.

Table 4.22 When average users decided to stop searching via SNS

| When to stop | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|------------------|-------------------|
| Wanted to try out the product at a physical store | 5 | 63% |
| Felt satisfied with the desired information | 4 | 50% |
| Could not find any more interesting or up-to-date information | 3 | 38% |
| Could not find the expected information | 3 | 38% |
| Linked to other websites | 3 | 38% |
| Being occupied by other issues | 2 | 25% |
| Could not proceed to purchase on SNS | 2 | 25% |

Half of the participants ceased to continue to search for product information on SNS when they were satisfied with the collected information:

When you feel you have collected enough information, you will stop. Just like when I need to buy an electronic product, I will google it and Facebook it. I will feel satisfied when I find where I can get the best offer. Then, I will stop.(AF05)

Some stated disappointment at the information given via SNS. For example, one respondent shared her experience to stop searching for information about air tickets as the Facebook Fan Page could not give needed information such as the amount of taxes or carrier surcharges and itinerary details. She had to go to the official website of the airlines company to book online. During the in-depth interview, she commented,

There is not enough information on social network sites. It is only a PDF file and it just has some basic information. In the terms and conditions for the price, it states “taxes for airport and fuel taxes not included”, but it does not mention how much the taxes are. Sometimes when you go overseas like Milan, the taxes can be very expensive like a few thousand dollars, so I have to check. Also, they did not mention the time. They mentioned the date, like departing on Monday and coming back on Friday, but they did not mention whether I have to go in the morning or at night. If I am going at night on Monday and coming back in the morning on Friday, that would be a waste of time. At that time, there was not enough information and I went to Cathay Pacific official websites, and I stopped looking at social network sites. (AI01)

Some searched the product information during their spare time and would stop when they were occupied by other matters. One respondent who said that she searched product information like “window shopping” explained:

I stopped searching as I just wanted to do “window shopping” to check some latest information about the clothing. I will go to the shops located in the shopping malls where I usually buy my favourite Korean-style clothing. Sometimes, I search [product information] Facebook to kill my time. (AI02)

In short, there were two common reasons for average users to stop searching via SNS: when they wanted to buy the products at a physical store or when they had found the sought-for information, such as price and design.

4.6.3 Heavy SNS Users

During the focus group discussion, over half of the heavy users considered SNS search had helped them make their purchase decision (see Figure 4.13).

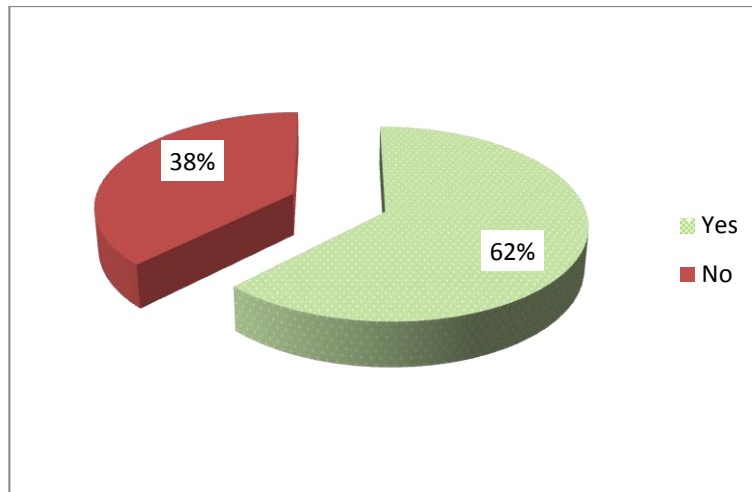


Figure 4.13 Heavy users' purchase decisions using SNS

Discussions of when respondents determined to stop searching for product information via SNS are summarised in Table 4.23.

Table 4.23 When heavy SNS users decided to stop searching via SNS

| When to stop | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Felt satisfied with the desired information | 5 | 63% |
| Could not find any more interesting or up-to-date information | 4 | 50% |
| Wanted to try out the product at a physical store | 3 | 38% |
| Linked to other websites | 2 | 25% |
| Could not proceed to purchase on SNS | 2 | 25% |
| Could not find the expected information | 1 | 13% |

In this group, most stopped searching SNS when they found the sought-for information. For example, some said they stopped searching when they found the price of an attractive product was too expensive, while others found the design did not look good. One respondent recalled:

I remember when I found a pair of boots which fit my style. I contacted the Fan page owner and checked the availability and price. When I noticed the price was very expensive, I stopped it. (HF03)

Another respondent agreed:

I would stop when I found the product was too expensive. (HF05)

Several respondents mentioned that some companies rarely updated the content on their SNS accounts; therefore, they stopped searching the product information via SNS. One person who searched the SNS regularly on “liked” products said,

I stop when I have looked through all the new products. I read the page regularly. Once a day, usually, in the morning. I take a look at Facebook when I have just arrived at the office. I can remember what products were updated yesterday or just updated today, so I will just take a look at the new products and if I am not interested in them, I will just close the page. (HI01)

Some were concerned about quality and would go to a physical store to test a product personally:

When I see some clothing or shoes I prefer, I will look at some basic information. The main reason why I stop searching is because I do not know about the quality. I would rather go out and then look at some similar styles which I can really try them on and touch them. (HI02)

Another respondent recalled

Last time, I wanted to purchase an aroma diffuser. I could not purchase it on Facebook because I needed to smell it before making a purchase decision. So, I went to the store to smell it. (HF05)

One of the respondents stopped searching for product information as she did not have a credit card to make purchases via SNS and had to go to a store to buy what she wanted. Another stopped searching when he was being diverted to a website to make payment via PayPal, which he did not like.

It also appears from the group discussion that while some of the reasons for stopping use of SNS for search purposes pertain to perceived shortcomings with the links available through SNS, the main reason was a successful information search leading to purchase.

4.6.4 Extremely Heavy SNS Users

Contrary to light SNS users, almost all extremely heavy users had the experience of making a purchase decision after searching SNS. Some even purchased the product via SNS. In this group, almost all considered SNS had helped them make a purchase decision (see Figure 4.14).

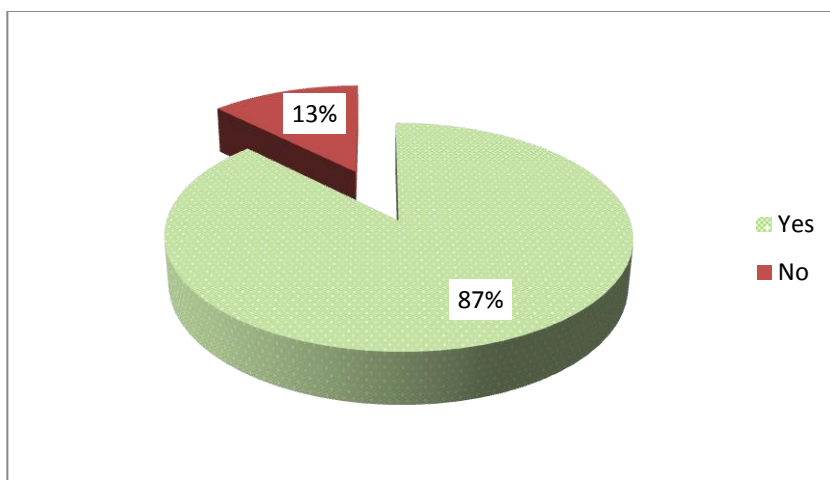


Figure 4.14 Extremely heavy users' purchase decisions using SNS

Discussions of when the respondents determine to stop searching for product information via SNS are summarised in the following table (see Table 4.24).

Table 4.24 When extremely heavy SNS users decided to stop searching via SNS

| When to stop | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|------------------|-------------------|
| Could not find any more interesting or up-to-date information | 6 | 75% |
| Felt satisfied with the desired information | 5 | 63% |
| Wanted to try out the product at a physical store | 3 | 38% |
| Could not proceed to purchase on SNS | 3 | 38% |
| Linked to other websites | 2 | 25% |
| Being occupied by other issues | 2 | 25% |
| Could not find the expected information | 2 | 25% |
| Felt tired of searching information | 2 | 25% |
| No longer required to search | 1 | 13% |

In this group, most of the participants stopped searching when they could not find any more interesting or up-to-date information. Most of them enjoyed the search process and reading the latest information about a product. Some of them simply used SNS as a form of entertainment when they had spare time. They would keep on searching product information until they felt satisfied or found no additional information. As one participant said,

Sometimes, I search for product information that I don't really want to buy. I just want to search information about every product and enjoy reading the information about the latest product. Just like "window shopping". I stop when I cannot find anything interesting. (EF08)

Others had similar reasons:

It's like a kind of entertainment. Sometimes, I just randomly search on the Facebook page. (EF07)

I will search until I watch most of the photos. Some SNS pages may update weekly. When I see most of the photos, I stop. (EF06)

Two would stop searching when they felt tired or were occupied with other matters:

It really depends on the time costs and needs. If I have something urgent to do, I would stop searching. But, when I am not busy, I would keep searching until I feel tired. (EF03)

I will stop searching when I find that is enough. Because when I read so many comments, I will feel dizzy and I will not continue. (EF04)

During the in-depth interview, a respondent said,

I will stop when I get similar results. If I get more or less the same information, I will just stop searching because I cannot get additional information by spending more time on it. It is good enough to stop. (EI02)

Some said they stopped searching when they could make a purchase decision based on the given product information such as price:

I will search until I make a purchase decision. (EF01)

Sometimes they stopped searching as they could not find the information they required:

If I can't find what I want, I will go to other websites rather than SNS. For example, I want to buy a pair of sneakers for myself for running, I'll search for those fan pages and SNS. If I can't find the colour or the sneakers that really suit me, I'll go to use the search engine or something else to find what I want. But, normally, I can find what I want from the SNS. (EI01)

Two of them stopped searching because they could not make purchases via SNS:

Actually I did not make purchase on a social network site because usually they do not have payment methods, so you have to do face-trade, or you have to pay through bank account and they deliver the products to you. Usually I just search the information and then go to purchase in a real store or in an online shop in the other webpage, like Taobao. (EI02)

Like other levels of SNS user, two extremely heavy users stopped searching when they decided to go to the physical store to try or test the product:

For example, McDonald's offered a new type of burger. I searched SNS and found negative comments. But, I still went to taste it" (EF01)

Another respondent said,

For electronic products like desktops, after searching the SNS, I will go to the physical store to try the product. (EF04)

Need recognition can stimulate a person to start a search (Blackwell et al., 2012). One of the respondents said that he once wanted to find a watch to replace a lost one. However, he stopped searching via SNS because the lost watch was found by his friend. In that situation, his need disappeared:

Because I lost my sports watch, I would like to buy a new one. I searched through the SNS. It's an agent's fan page which collects a lot of different items from Europe and US stores. I tried to search the sports watch I prefer to buy. I had collected some information and had a look at it. However, at last, my friend told me that he had found my watch that I lost. So, I stop. (EI01)

In general there were various reasons for extremely heavy users to cease their search on SNS and move on to other sources to find or buy a product. Most of them stopped searching when they were satisfied that the found information could help them make their purchase decision; but payment methods and lack of sufficient useful information did deter some from continuing to search product information via SNS, sending them to other platforms to purchase the products.

4.6.5 Summary of findings and cross-case analysis of group differences on RQ3: How do these consumers determine they have searched sufficient SNS to cease further search using these sources?

All groups of users said that they sought information from various sources, not just SNS. Regardless of the type of SNS user, all stopped searching information via SNS when found the information (such as price, design, availability) that they wanted, a situation somewhat like the satisficing theory of information search (Prabha et al., 2007; Stüttgen et al., 2012). However, some stopped searching when they could not find the

information (e.g. costs and preferences) that they expected. This echoes the cognitive stopping rules as discussed by Browne et al. (2007).

In each group, some participants stated their disappointment that searched products were too expensive or unavailable. That left them with no choice but to give up their search and purchase intentions. Some respondents simply stopped searching when they were occupied with other things. Others stopped searching when no additional useful information could be found, such as where they could purchase a product via SNS, and they had to go to a physical store or official website to buy it. These results match the finding of Bhatnagar and Ghose (2004) that websites need to update their content very frequently, especially for young, educated consumers.

The most significant difference between user groups in reasons to stop searching was that more of the heavy and extremely heavy users were able to reach a favourable purchase decision, the percentage using SNS for their purchase decision rising from 37% for light SNS users to 87% for extremely heavy SNS users. It is also clear that extremely heavy and heavy users tended to spend more time than light users on searching product information via SNS. If this is a productive search using SNS, it may well link to high tendency of these groups to make a positive purchase decision.

Different users had different requirements of their product search. For those who made a purchase decision right after an information search using SNS, the focus was often on either the price or the availability of a product. Most interviewees who bought products via SNS thought they had had a relatively good bargain; some said that the products or the promotion offers could not be found in the physical stores or on other platforms. In other words, the uniqueness of a product (especially a fashion item) or a promotional offer such as a special gift or discount drove respondents to search for product information and make a purchase decision using SNS.

In addition to the perceived risk of purchasing products online, most respondents who did not make a purchase decision after a product information search via SNS did not proceed mainly because online buying did not match their buying habits or the product could not be purchased directly through SNS. The first of these reasons indicate that some respondents clung to habitual buying behaviour (Kotler et al., 2011) while others tended to make heuristic decisions (Saini & Monga, 2008) when purchasing a product.

Self-confidence and personality traits considerably influenced purchase decisions (Anderson, 2002; Chen & Lee, 2008; Loibl et al., 2009). However, there is no indication that those who made product purchases via SNS were convenience-oriented shoppers. These findings confirm those of Brown et al. (2003) on internet shopping pre-SNS.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has reported the findings from the analysis of the data collected from focus groups and interviews. Although all participants were experienced in using SNS to search product information, this was not the primary reason for SNS membership. Users making the most use of SNS for social purposes appeared to be more active in product information search than lighter SNS users. If respondents had a positive attitude towards using SNS for product information search, they also had a higher likelihood of making a purchase decision after a search.

In general, participants perceived SNS as an additional tool to search product information and to help them make a purchase decision, although some treated SNS as the preferred platform to find fashion items or exclusive promotional offers. Apart from saving time and cost to search product information, some respondents liked the interactive communication with marketers and other users. By reading the up-to-date information provided by marketers on SNS, these consumers could learn more about their favourite products: an appreciation tempered by their doubts about the reliability of reviews posted by other users.

A search was usually triggered by an advertisement or by posts from acquaintances. For convenience, most participants enjoyed using their mobile devices to browse SNS for product information while they were travelling or waiting. Some respondents preferred to “click” advertisements or actively search “key words” to find ideas for a gift or to replace an old product with a new one. Some sought the comments given by other users to affirm their intent to purchase, while others found advertisement and message popups on their SNS pages annoying enough to stop searching and close their pages.

Most participants stopped searching when they could not find any more additional information via SNS; others ceased because they were satisfied with the information they collected. In general, heavy and extremely heavy users were more able to find the

information they sought, a success reflected in their purchase decisions. Participants in all groups mainly looked for product information like price, design, size, discounts, exclusive offers, payment method and reviews from other users. When they could not find the desired information, they might look for it on other platforms: for example, they might go to the official website or a physical store to find the expected information about the product. There is no indication that those who stopped searching and then made product purchases via SNS were convenience-oriented shoppers.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 Introduction

This chapter integrates findings drawn from the analysis of the data, relating it to the literature on information search and consumer decision-making discussed in Chapter 2 (Literature Review). This chapter begins by discussing the results of this study in relation to the three research questions outlined in Chapter 1 (Section 5.2); then the implications and outcomes of the research are examined in Section 5.3. Finally the limitations of this study and directions for future research are addressed (Section 5.4).

5.2 Discussion of the findings

Facebook has just celebrated the 10th anniversary since its establishment in 2004 (Kim et al., 2013). Other SNS such as Instagram and Weibo (China's Twitter-like messaging service) are becoming increasingly popular among SNS users in Hong Kong. These, particularly Facebook, are the favoured sites of the focus group members. Multiple site use is common among heavy and extremely heavy SNS users.

Because of its real-time communication functions, SNS are favoured by people who use them for product information search (Chu & Choi, 2011). However, from the analyses of the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, it is apparent that the four groups of SNS users demonstrated some differences in their perceptions and usage of SNS for product information search.

5.2.1 The perceived value of using SNS for product information search and for helping to make purchase decisions

For most participants, regardless of level of use, the major purpose in using SNS was not for product information search but for keeping contact with friends. This matches findings by Park et al. (2009) and Kim et al. (2011) and can be considered an extrinsic motivation. The findings from this study also accord with Stigler (1961) that information is a valuable resource. Using SNS gives some users the benefits of cost saving in searching information (Sen et al., 2006).

The perceived value of using SNS for product information search was examined primarily in terms of perceived benefits and disadvantages, gathered from focus group and interview responses. There was a marked progression in the importance assigned to perceived benefits by light to extremely heavy SNS users, rising from 63% of the light user group to 100% of the extremely heavy group. Perceived convenience also rose. While informational benefits were the dominant perceived benefit mentioned by each group, there was significant tension between this and the dominant perceived disadvantage of using SNS, unreliable WOM, especially that posted by other, unknown community members. These findings match those of O'Reilly and Marx (2011), Malbon (2013) and Kucukemiroglu and Kara (2014).

Some light and average users had a low intolerance to advertisements or negative WOM. However, heavy and extremely heavy user groups appeared more confident about their appraisals of advertising or negative WOM than less intense SNS users.

As well as the perceived usefulness, like convenience and time saving, associated with searching product information via SNS (Kim, Shim, & Ahn, 2011; Lorenzo-Romero et al., 2011), some respondents appreciated the opportunity for real-time communication between individual users and the company (Kim et al., 2013). Real time communication and readily available contacts within social communities encouraged respondents to become more active in searching product information via SNS. This finding matches that of Chu and Choi (2011), who state that consumers are no longer passive receivers of product-related information. Respondents also liked the multimedia effects such as video and flash (Hong, Thong, & Tam, 2004) which drew their attention to particular items and let them have a better understanding of products. Such added value in using SNS increased the motivation of some Hong Kong respondents to use the sites for product information search.

5.2.2 When and why do users commence to use SNS in their product search

For most participants, regardless of their amount of SNS use, reasons to start searching for product information on SNS included reading reviews or comments and advertisements posted on sites. Apart from the extremely heavy user group, at least 50% of participants were triggered by advertisements to start searching for product information via SNS. However, they were inclined to rely more on what their friends

suggested about a product than on the advertisements posted by the brand owners. This matches previous findings that Facebook users are interested in advertising messages (Yousif, 2012) but that the advertisements on Facebook are not sufficiently effective (Barreto, 2013).

In each group, some users looked for other consumers' reviews on using experience goods such as skin care products, often facing the problem of information overload which made it difficult to pick a product because of the sheer quantity of available information, especially in the number of comments or messages posted in the online environment (Lee & Lee, 2004; Park & Lee, 2008). They tended to glance through all the posts but spend time reading the negative comments instead of the positive ones. This finding confirms the increasing importance of eWOM as discussed by other scholars (Chu & Choi, 2011; Pan & Zhang, 2011).

For heavy and extremely heavy SNS users, the dominant reason to start using SNS was to obtain up-to-date information. Compared with light and average SNS users, they showed high confidence in making use of the functions available on SNS to search for product information prior to a purchase. This is consistent with findings by Loibl et al. (2009).

As explained by Rowley (2002, p. 372), whatever initiates a search "browsing involves exploring what is on offer". In each group except light SNS users, one fourth of the participants claimed to start searching on SNS because they thought they could find the product at a lower price or higher discount.

Two SNS users used SNS to replace old or missing items, and one heavy SNS user started searching on SNS to find ideas for a gift. Although these reasons are regarded as typical motivations for purchasing a product (Kotler, et al., 2011; Rowley, 2002), they are not the dominant reasons why consumers to start searching for product information on SNS but it indicates the breadth of motivations that impel such search.

Most participants found that SNS helped improve search results and enabled discovery of updated information about a product of interest. Those who made great use of SNS exhibited a greater tendency to be confident in evaluating other users' reviews than light

SNS users, who tended to ignore reviews or to selectively expose themselves to information that supported their decisions or beliefs (Fischer et al., 2011).

5.2.3 How do consumers determine they have searched sufficient SNS to cease further search using these sources? (How do they determine they need to move to non-SNS sources or to quit searching?)

All groups of users sought product information from various sources, not just SNS. As one progressed from light to extremely heavy SNS users there was a marked transition in the determination to make a purchase after searching for product information, rising from 37% of respondents in the light user group to 87% in the extremely heavy group. According to Soopramanien (2011), the online shopping experience is positively associated with how consumers perceive the risks and benefits of the internet in buying products: the more the experience of online shoppers, the more likely they are to develop an enthusiastic attitude towards online shopping. Experience increases their intention to use the internet to do their shopping. A similar claim can be made with respect to experience in using SNS and using them for shopping.

Regardless of the type of SNS user, some participants stopped searching when they felt satisfied with the information they found, such as price and product features. This is similar to the satisficing theory of information search (Prabha et al., 2007; Stüttgen et al., 2012) and the theoretical proposition of satisfaction judgements by consumers in their evaluations (Mattila, 1998). On the other hand, some showed their disappointment when no additional useful information could be found, such as where they could purchase the product via SNS. This confirms the finding of Bhatnagar & Ghose (2004) that websites should update their content very frequently, especially for educated consumers.

Each group had participants who stated their disappointment when products searched via SNS were too expensive or unavailable; leaving them with no choice but to give up the search and even the purchase intention. When they stopped searching on SNS, they would either check other sources (such as official websites and discussion forums) or go to a physical store to test and try the product. This behaviour was evidenced in 75% of respondents in the light user group, dropping to 38% of the heavy and extremely heavy groups. These findings echo those of Browne, Pitts and Wetherbe (2007) on cognitive stopping rules. In addition, the amount and complexity of information search by each

consumer varied according to the type of product being searched, as has also been found by Loibl et al. (2009).

With the ubiquity of mobile devices (Bruce & Solomon, 2013), it was 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. Again, this differed between SNS user groups, with mobile use increasing among heavy and extremely heavy SNS users. They would stop searching when occupied by other issues or required to focus on their work or study. None of the stopping rules or economic theories of search can really explain this kind of searching behaviour. It appears to fulfil a hedonic need, like window shopping (Kim & Eastin, 2011). Some respondents, especially among the heavy and extremely heavy SNS users, agreed that they are stimulated to make impulse purchases when brand owners provide short and easy-to-read messages with multimedia effects in special promotional offers.

5.2.4 Summary of findings across different user groups

SNS users were inclined to have a positive attitude towards using SNS. Those with higher usage of SNS had a higher tendency to give positive comments and have positive experiences of using the sites. Heavy and extremely heavy social users apparently have more confidence and understanding in using SNS for search and purchases. While confirming that a physical store presence still remains important to them, a majority of participants considered that it was convenient to use SNS for product information search; a minority said they would rather go to a retail outlet to check a product before making a purchase. Even so, some of them started searching information via SNS out of curiosity when they read posts by their friends or were attracted by advertisement popups. Others noted that SNS was the most useful platform to help them seek the most up-to-date information and special offers about new products. These findings match with Sung et al.'s (2010) report stating that incentives play an important role in encouraging users to participate in search on SNS.

Over one third of respondents said they stopped searching via SNS when no additional or updated information could be found. Some of their information search behaviour can be explained by search and decision-making theories, but some participants ceased using SNS simply because they wanted to make a purchase and found no way of doing

so through the SNS. Compared with light or average SNS users, heavy and extremely heavy users tended to complete their search with a purchase, suggesting that barriers to purchase using SNS may depend on user competency.

In general, the introduction of SNS changed the ways respondents searched for product information. Most participants found SNS an additional or supplementary platform by which to search for product information. They spent time and effort to search or make purchase decisions on various types of product, including both tangible goods and intangible services. As they did when using traditional platforms, participants mainly focused on using SNS for searching information about shopping goods and specialty goods (Kotler et al., 2011) or search goods and experience goods (Nelson, 1970). Only two respondents used SNS exclusively when searching information on products like fashionable items.

Participants did check comments posted by others on SNS, but most expressed reservations about their validity. Some believed that they could determine whether the comments were real or fake (Malbon, 2013): one method of doing this was to check the profile picture and information about members' profile; if it was a cartoon picture or a weird account name, the account would be treated as a fake. Participants had a higher tendency to read and be influenced by product reviews and recommendations from known friends. However, respondents preferred to have more control on what kind of information appeared on their SNS pages. Too many advertisements and posts listed on their "Newsfeed" on Facebook might make them feel annoyed or even close their SNS account.

5.3 Implications and Outcomes

Findings from this research have implications for marketers wanting to make use of SNS for product promotion and interaction with target customers, provided these exploratory findings are confirmed by subsequent, more generalisable studies.

5.3.1 Implications

SNS are powerful platforms for companies to keep in touch with their target markets. Since consumers appreciate prompt replies and buyer-seller interaction (Kotler et al., 2011), marketers should take a more proactive approach to encourage customers to interact with them by answering their SNS queries in a timely fashion, which may motivate users to use SNS more frequently in searching for product information. Marketers should not simply focus on posting information on SNS but need to monitor the product's SNS pages like fan pages closely, and respond to messages or posts their target customers leave there.

As found by Teichmann (2011), eWOM such as friends' comments has a considerable impact on how consumers find product information and make purchase decisions. SNS users tend to focus more on negative comments than on positive ones, with a sceptical attitude to favourable comments which might have been commissioned by the brand owner. Heavy SNS users are more confident in identifying fake comments, checking the profile pictures, tone and content to determine whether the posts or reviews are reliable. It is important to note that negative comments might not be bad for brand owners. If the comments are related to acceptable shortcomings in the product, the consumer may still make the purchase. However, good comments with lengthy content and a formal tone tend to be treated as advertorials, which annoy searchers and act as an incentive to stop searching. As the use of mobile devices to browse SNS was widespread in this sample, especially among heavy and extremely heavy users, messages and ads posted on SNS by marketers should be specific, short, and eye-catching: they should be short enough to allow SNS users to glance, sometimes in very short periods of time available between work and other obligations.

Regardless of their level of use, participants in this study all searched product information from different sources, with heavy and extremely heavy SNS users accessed more sources. If SNS does not provide up-to-date or unique product information or promotional offers, users will look for other platforms to search for product information. While the main reason to use SNS is to keep in contact with friends, searching for product information on social network sites is convenient and can fulfil hedonic motivations. With more complete and up-to-date information like product

price and availability, they would have a higher chance to keep searching product information and make a purchase decision via SNS. When searchers are bombarded with advertisements instead of useful information, they will stop using SNS or will “unlike” the offending Fans Page. To prevent this, marketers should not simply treat SNS as an additional advertising channel but consider it a platform to maintain good relationships with customers.

5.3.2 Outcomes

Many studies have examined the use of SNS, seeking to measure user profiles and to examine how variables such as eWOM might affect consumers’ motivations to use SNS for search purposes. While it is beneficial to use quantitative studies to predict future patterns of use, it is also important to assess how and why people use the SNS in their product information search, given it is but one potential medium. Without an appropriate communication method to listen in depth to users of SNS from different user backgrounds, it would be difficult to determine the feelings, motivations and intentions of SNS users.

Sources of online product information continue to proliferate. The importance of using SNS as a search source will continue to grow. Better understanding by marketers of consumers’ perceived value in using SNS, and how SNS fits into the consumers’ decision processes, will better enable marketers to know how to make use of SNS to influence their target customers and at what point SNS may no longer be useful in the search process.

Because of the rich nature of information that can be posted on the online SNS environment, marketers may tend to post repeated information on different platforms like their official websites and SNS pages. In order to avoid falling into the trap of information overload (Ha, Muthaly, & Akamavi, 2010), marketers should choose unique information to be posted on SNS. With more effective use of multimedia messages, as well as distinctive products with special gifts or discounts to be provided via SNS, consumers will have more motivation to use, and will give more attention to, SNS in their product information search.

This exploratory study provides an understanding of the differences between different types of SNS users and how these link to differences in information search using SNS. The results should give some insights for practitioners to formulate appropriate strategies to attract and retain more target customers via SNS.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This is a small scale, exploratory study intended for completion within a six-month period. The constraints surrounding this research have given rise to various limitations.

5.4.1 Limitations

The limitations of this study include those commonly associated with an unsystematic sampling procedure where representativeness can always be improved (Vinerean et al., 2013). The use of purposive sampling to find participants for this study was determined by the impossibility of obtaining a complete SNS user list in order to conduct random sampling (Tow et al., 2010). Despite this, great effort was made to reach Hong Kong consumers with varying experiences in searching SNS for product information and making purchase decisions.

The study was carried out in Hong Kong, drawing from a fairly homogeneous population. Generalisation of its findings to other countries and cultures, and to other forms of social networks, need to be further investigated (Liang et al., 2011). The mother tongue of Hong Kong people is Cantonese, not English, although English was the preferred choice of the respondents in this study. Whether this language choice prevented participants from fully expressing themselves is unclear; particularly as the researcher, fluent in both languages, was able to facilitate any needed clarifications.

Although participants ranged from 18 to 50 years old, there was no attempt at even distribution by age or gender. Younger consumers tend to spend more time on SNS for social purpose than other age groups (Dunne et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2013; Park & Kim, 2013); but it is not yet clear if gender or generation have a strong relationship between using SNS and the search for product information.

All data was collected via interviews and focus group discussions and coded by the researcher. However, “coding is not a precise science; it’s primarily an interpretive act”

(Saldaña, 2009, p. 4), and both collection and coding involved personal observation, filtering and judgement. When performing coding, reducing responses into summary categories, there is a risk of omitting important information (Brown et al., 2014). While the researcher tried hard to remain impartial, possible bias arising from such omissions should be taken into account.

When a researcher interprets the words of participants, there is likely to be some degree of subjectivity based on the researcher's experiences and perceptions. Although the results analysed by the researcher cannot be claimed to be free of bias, the researcher has been trained to minimise such impacts, and worked in constant awareness of its possibility.

5.4.2 Future Research

This research raises ideas for future study. Qualitative studies of users of SNS grouped by intensity of usage, drawn from Eastern and Western countries, could show how the use of SNS for search differs or remains the same among countries. Hypotheses pertaining to each of the three research questions presented in this study could be established based on the findings given here, and tested using a survey-based methodology.

Marketers will need to conduct further research to understand Hong Kong consumers' search behaviour using SNS. Few studies can be found pertaining to this territory, and it cannot be assumed that the available studies of mainland Chinese SNS users can be applied to the Hong Kong experience because of the different prevailing political and economic conditions (Men & Tsai, 2013; Park & Kim, 2013). Hong Kong consumers appear to have more SNS options and using SNS has become a daily activity; for example, Facebook is very popular in Hong Kong but is not common in mainland China.

Another avenue for research is to consider the nature and involvement required of product information designed to be searched via SNS. Future research could consider how the type of information "content" (such as wording, tone, multimedia effects and hyperlinks) provided by marketers or reviewers could affect the time spent by each member on search via SNS. Longitudinal panel data would assist in understanding the patterns and underlying causes of search behaviour.

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Appendix 1

Focus Group Protocol

Instructions to the Moderator

Arranging the focus group discussions

1. When potential participants indicate their willingness to participate by return email, contact them to arrange a common time that is convenient for the focus group discussion and forward by email a copy of the consent form.
2. Determine their preferences for a location for the focus group interview.
3. Ensure the environment will be safe and comfortable for the participants and that water is available.
4. Ensure that the recording device is functional and has sufficient battery power.

At the focus group interview

1. Thank the participants for agreeing to join the focus group discussion
2. Ensure that the Consent Form has been signed
3. Reiterate the purpose of the discussion which should take about an hour to complete.
4. Explain again that all the answers will remain confidential and no information identifying individual participants will be published in any reports or papers. During the focus group discussion, only first names will be called and no reports will link to their names of what they say. They are asked to respect the confidentiality of everyone in the group and not to repeat who said what when they leave the discussion room.
5. Remind them to feel free to respond to each other and speak directly to others in the group.
6. Ensure again that they are comfortable with the focus group discussion being audio recorded and with note taking. Stress that it is important for them to speak up and only one person to speak at a time.
7. Ensure that they will be informed when to start and stop the recorder.
8. Explain that during the discussion they can ask for the tape to be stopped and edited or erased.
9. Add that if they do not wish to answer a question they are not obliged to do so and if they wish to withdraw from participating at any time they can do so without giving a reason. They also have the option of withdrawing any data which identifies them.
10. Check whether they have any questions before commencing.

Questions

We are interested in understanding when and why you use social network sites (SNS) in a product search and how you determine when to end that search through SNS

1. How long have you been using SNS?
Prompts:
e.g. Facebook or Badoo
2. How many SNS accounts do you have? Which one? Why?
Prompts:
e.g. Facebook or Badoo
3. How often do you normally use SNS?
Prompts:
e.g. Hours per day/week, Times per day/week
4. What is your overall opinion about using SNS for product search?
Prompts:
e.g. perceived usefulness, perceived risks
5. What is your overall opinion about using SNS for making purchase decisions?
Prompts:
e.g. positive or negative view
6. What are the reasons that you commence to use SNS in the product search? What kinds of products?
7. What are the criteria used in determining that you have searched sufficient SNS to proceed to a product decision?
Prompts:
e.g. time, cost, convenience, lack of new information.
8. Do you have anything that you would like to add regarding the use of SNS on product search and purchase?

Thank you very much for your time and participation.

After the focus group interview

1. Thank them and remind them that a report of the research findings will be available on request. If they would like to receive such a report, they can contact the researcher at the contact details printed on the information statement.
2. Inform them that they might be invited to conduct an in-depth interview to further explore their deep feelings and experience on using SNS for product search and purchase.

Appendix 2

Interview Guide

Instructions to the Interviewer

Arranging the interview

1. When a potential participant indicates his or her willingness to participate by return email, contact him or her to arrange a convenient time and place for an interview and forward by email a copy of the consent form.
2. Determine their preferences for a location for the interview.
3. Ensure the environment will be safe and comfortable for the participant and that water is available.
4. Ensure that the recording device has sufficient battery power and is functional.

At the interview

1. Thank the participant for agreeing to attend the interview.
2. Ensure that the Consent Form has been signed.
3. Reiterate the purpose of the interview which should take about an hour to complete.
4. Explain again that all the answers will remain confidential and no information identifying individual participant will be published in any reports or papers.
5. Ensure again that they are comfortable with the interview being audio recorded and with note taking.
6. Ensure that the participant will be informed when the recorder is started and when it is stopped.
7. Explain that during the interview, the participant can ask for the tape to be stopped and edited or erased.
8. Add that the participant is not obliged to answer any questions. If the participant wishes to withdraw from participating at any time, he or she can do so without giving a reason. He or she also has the option of withdrawing any data which identifies him or her.
9. Check whether the participant has any questions before commencing.

Questions

We would like to have a deeper understanding on when and why you use social network sites (SNS) in a product search and how you determine when to end that search through SNS. This semi-structured interview is a follow up on the focus group discussions. Apart from the questions listed below, issues thrown up from the focus group findings might be asked. We also expect other questions to emerge during the course of the interview.

1. Under what circumstances, do you commence to use SNS in the product search?
2. Think of an example where you have used SNS for product search. What kind of product? Why?
Prompts:
e.g. Travelling
3. Based on the mentioned example of using SNS for product search. When and why did you stop searching?
4. How, and to what extent, did you determine you have searched sufficient SNS to proceed to a product decision?
5. Think of an example of using SNS for making purchase decisions. Buy it online or offline?
6. How useful do you think about using SNS on product search and making purchase decision?
7. Do you have anything that you would like to add regarding the use of SNS on product search and making purchase decision?

Thank you very much for your time and participation.

After the interview

1. Thank them and remind them that a report of the research findings will be available on request. If they would like to receive such a report, they can contact the researcher at the contact details printed on the information statement.