



Riding the waves of social commerce: An empirical study of Malaysian entrepreneurs

Noor Azuan Hashim¹, Shifa Mohd Nor¹, Hawati Janor¹

¹Fakulti Ekonomi dan Pengurusan, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Correspondence: Noor Azuan Hashim (email:azuan@ukm.edu.my)

Abstract

The emergence of social media has made it possible for a person with internet connection to communicate with thousands of other people. Because of the heavy usage of social media there is substantial interest in making this medium a commercial site, particularly among entrepreneurs who want to explore the potential of their businesses. Any entrepreneur can experience various benefits and effects from advertising their products and services on social media, including an increase in the number of fans and advertisement views and/or an increase in sales and return on investment as social media channel product and business information to targeted customers at a minimal cost. However, there are limited studies on social media, particularly how it affects business interaction, which formed the focus of this study. Face-to-face surveys were conducted involving 105 Malaysian entrepreneurs who had access to social media. The findings revealed that most entrepreneurs in this study believed that social commerce is the future way of doing their businesses. In fact, they believed that every entrepreneur needs to engage with social media as they would not only allow the entrepreneur to discuss his products and services with other people but also assist him to make vital and critical business decisions.

Keywords: business decision, entrepreneur, innovation, social commerce, social media, social media impact

Introduction

Social media has become an important element in every part of everyone's life nowadays, particularly among students, academics and also practitioners. Part of the reasons is because through social media, people can share their daily activities, tap markets or communities in need, which and who have not been reached by other initiatives (Kirschner and Karpinski, 2010). As social media continues to gain in popularity, marketers are searching for a firm foundation to base their strategic decisions on, regarding how to employ social media in engaging and influencing their customers (Hoffman and Novak, 2012). Rather than hoping for customers to come to them, they are going to where hundreds of millions consumers are not only spending their time but sharing their opinions, recommendations and (in some cases) purchases. Social media enables firms to interact with audience through social channels and help them to use their customers' social habits to increase conversion and ultimately sales. In addition, social media provides an unparalleled platform for consumers to publicize their personal evaluation of purchased products; and thus facilitates word-of-mouth communication (Chen, Fay and Wang, 2011).

It is said that a firm, particularly an entrepreneur, can experience various benefits and effects on business performance from advertising on social media sites, including an increase in its number of fans and advertisement views and/or an increase in sales and return on investment (ROI) (Stephen and Toubia, 2010). It is also said that social media could channel product and business information to targeted customers at a minimal cost. Despite the fact that many companies are expected to be influenced by social media in this social economy due to its growth and popularity among consumers (Zimmerman and Ng,

2012), not many studies are focusing on the commerce side of social medias, i.e. the social commerce(s-commerce), particularly among the entrepreneurs. Thus, this paper intends to explore these issues - i.e. to explore the current situation of s-commerce among entrepreneurs in Malaysia, and to investigate the extent of the utilization of social commerce by these entrepreneurs to do their businesses. More specifically, the objectives of this research are:

- i) To gauge the level of awareness and knowledge of s-commerce among Malaysian entrepreneurs; and
- ii) To explore the effect of s-commerce among them.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 1 presents the introduction of the paper, and followed by the literature review in Section 2. Next section demonstrates the conceptual framework of this study; and subsequently Section 4 is on the methodology of the study. Section 5 presents the findings and discussion of the study. Finally, the last section displays the conclusion and implications of the study.

Literature review

Social media

Social media is the social interaction among people in which they create, share or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks (Ahlqvist *et al.*, 2008). It can be considered as a one-to-many communication method. It is defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). It usually depends on mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content; thereby broadening the appeal of the technology and promoting transitions back and forth from the platform to face-to-face engagement (Moran *et al.*, 2011).

Social media is helping people to follow breaking news, keep-up with friends or colleagues, contribute to online debates or learn from others (Kirschner and Karpinski, 2010). Some experts suggest that social media will become the Internet's new search function - predicting that people will spend less time navigating the Internet independently and instead search for information or make decisions based on "word-of-mouth" recommendations from their friends, the so-called "friend-casting" (ITU, 2010). In the process, social media are changing users' expectations of privacy, acceptable online behaviour and etiquette. Many people, regardless whether they are student, academics or practitioners can now access the social media applications on their smart phones, tabs, or computers.

Social network sites

Social networking is sometimes used interchangeably with social media. However, social networking focuses more on engagement, which is creating relationships, communicating with readers, building followers, and connecting with online audience (Kirschner and Karpinski, 2010). Social networking sites enable users to swap ideas, post updates and comments, or participate in activities and events, while sharing their wider interests (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Davis *et al.*, 2014). Some examples of social networking sites include Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Wikis, Skype, Whatsapp, Instagram, and Pinterest (Marsden, 2011).

Currently, there are billions of people engaging social networking. For example, the Infographic Social Media Stats 2013 (Infographic, 2014) reported that more than 700 million users accessed Facebook from 7000 different devices, more than 500 million users accessed Twitter, and more than 130 million used Instagrams in 2013. People these day do not only access social media, but many of them are also spending more time on these social networking sites on a daily basis. For instance, the report also mentioned that

more 23% of Facebook users check their account 5 times a day; there are 1,000 comments per second in Twitter, and over 5 million pictures and videos being shared in 24 hours over Instagram (Infographic, 2014). Thus, these mediums are not only making people busier, but also revolutionized the way people communicate and maintain relationship (Boyd, 2007; Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Nicholson, 2011). The increased popularity of these mediums has opened opportunities for new business models for electronic commerce (e-commerce) (Turban *et al.*, 2012), or in another word, social commerce (s-commerce). This business online trend is also contributed due to the emergence of high-speed internet connections that made online business convenient at the tip of the finger (Hussain & Bohari, 2012).

E-commerce and S-commerce

E-commerce has existed for nearly a century, however, the term e-commerce has emerged as a significant topic in the literature, particularly in the business and management areas, only since the Internet started to be used commercially in the 1990s (Zwass, 1996). Many studies from various countries have discussed about e-commerce, its adoption, as well as its phenomenon (Hashim and Abdullah, 2014). Nevertheless, findings about e-commerce across the world are indefinite; some firms have built their businesses in e-commerce while others are still in their infancy stage.

S-commerce, on the other hand, is a subset of electronic commerce that involves the use of social media, online media that supports social interaction and user contribution to assist in online buying and selling of products and services (Wang and Zhang, 2012). It is an emerging trend in which sellers are connected to online social networks (Stephen and Toubia, 2010), and sellers can be individuals or firms depending on their businesses. More concisely, s-commerce is the use of social networks in the context of e-commerce transactions. It is the technologies that facilitate interactions between people who like to buy stuff. In some ways online s-commerce is no different than the offline. In offline s-commerce, people gather in some places not only to buy stuff but also as a place for social function, i.e. it is about getting together with other people in a place that facilitates interaction and provides entertainment/ or escape – it is a “retail therapy” (Kacen, 1998). Similar to this, online s-commerce is supposed to serve this social function but in a different context, which is the internet.

S-commerce can be defined very broadly or narrowly. In the broad sense, s-commerce is how marketers leverage social media to influence consumers' shopping behavior, spanning product consideration, purchase intent, the transaction itself, and post-transaction advocacy and retention. In a narrower definition, s-commerce involves tapping social networking sites with the goal of increasing transactions, whether through a marketer's digital presence or other social media properties. Adopting Yadav *et al.* (2013, p.312) definition, in this study s-commerce is “exchange-related activities that occur in, or are influenced by an individual's social network in computer-mediated social environment, where the activities correspond to the need recognition, pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages of a focal exchange”.

S-commerce and its usages

In general, s-commerce does not differ much if it is offline or online. The difference is mostly in their potential scale, reach, and ease of sharing and connecting. For example, getting together with hundreds of friends at a physical mall is unpleasant but getting together with them online is not, especially if it can be done asynchronously and in the comfort of one's home (Kuppuswamy & Narayan, 2010). According to Anderson *et al.* (2011), businesses that are pursuing s-commerce regard it as a distinct channel underpinned by a significant new aspect of consumer behavior. Thus, they are more likely to satisfy consumers since it capitalizes community to gain stickiness of websites, and fast focus on the target through the power of people, thereby reducing time in search, inquiry and comparison of goods for consumers (Weijun & Lin, 2011).

While s-commerce is apparently about selling and buying stuff, it also fills the need for social interaction and entertainment (Rad & Benyoucef, 2010). With social media, the world's great recession had set the stage for this new era of commerce and these emerging technologies accelerate the transformation (Cecere et al., 2010). For example, a study by Wang et al. (2012) with 292 participants who engaged in peer communication about products through social media found that online consumer socialization through peer communication affected purchasing decisions both directly (conformity with peers) and indirectly by reinforcing product involvement. In the same vein, Vries et al. (2012) also found that the share of positive comments on a brand post is positively related to the number of likes which leads to buying decision. They also found that positioning the brand post on top of the brand fan page enhances brand post popularity. The findings also indicated that different drivers influence the number of likes and the number of comments.

In s-commerce, both consumers and sellers benefit. Consumers make decisions based on not only information from the sellers, but also from other consumers. Rad and Benyoucef (2010), for example, studied different stages of purchase decision making in s-commerce and found that the principal driver for s-commerce was user's interaction and involvement. Sellers can make more profits by attracting and fascinating potential buyers via social channels (Curty & Zhang, 2011). In essence, s-commerce unleashes the power of electronic word-of-mouth for consumer to consumer interaction in e-commerce and technology (IBM, 2009). Because of advances in the use of social media by businesses, s-commerce is now attracting the attention of both firms and consumers.

S-commerce and entrepreneurs

Studies about s-commerce and entrepreneurs are still limited in the business and management literature. Part of the reason is because both topics are emerging areas. Entrepreneurship is a very important entity in the business world nowadays because it is considered a key driver of some countries' economies. According to Merriam-Webster (2015) dictionary, entrepreneur is a person who starts a business in order to make money. It is an individual who runs a so-called small business, works as an employee, and assumes all the risks and rewards of a given business venture, idea, or good or service offered for sale (Burns, 2011). An entrepreneur perceives an opportunity and often exhibits biases in taking the decision to exploit the opportunity. This exploitation of entrepreneurial opportunities includes the designing of the actions to develop a business plan, acquiring the human, financial and other required resources, and responsible for the success or failure (Hisrich, 2011).

It is said that entrepreneurs can reap the opportunities that Internet and social media can offer because of the reachness of the medium to many potential customers. Unlike traditional media, which offers a one-way experience, social media offers a two-way interactive experience. Consumers of social media can interact instantly and directly with originators or the authors of the proffered information. The interaction and cross-communication of social media enable the customers and entrepreneurs to exchange views, express opinions, and also negotiate on the products and services offered.

In this study, entrepreneurs were chosen among individuals who have the experience of selling and purchasing through social media and have made money and gained profit using s-commerce, regardless whether they have a registered company or worked individually.

S-commerce and entrepreneurs in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the emergence of s-commerce phenomenon is challenging and not to be ignored. Many Malaysians have started to sell and buy on social media. However, the discussions about s-commerce are mostly done by trade articles, blog posts, industry reports or publications by practitioners. There are limited studies that focused on s-commerce as a phenomenon. Nevertheless, these studies have provided bits and bytes of forecasts, speculations, experiences, and status reports about s-commerce in Malaysia.

The Edge Malaysia (2012), for example, reported that the Malaysian social and mobile commerce market registered an increase of 370% from RM101 million in 2010 to RM476 million worth of transactions in 2011 (a study by Pay Pal Online and Mobile Shopping Insights 2011). This, according to them, was fuelled by the rise in the number of mobile shoppers and substantial increase in spending per head. The social and mobile commercials are forecasted to grow more than seven times to reach RM 3.43 billion in 2015, which translates to 60% of the online shopping market. This promising number shows that the phenomenon of s-commerce in Malaysia is impressive, thus there is a need to understand this situation, particularly among the entrepreneurs.

Conceptual framework

S-commerce is considered as an innovation of technological advancement (Shamare, 2014). In order to find a suitable framework for this study, a list of technological diffusion literature was reviewed. Among them are Roger's (1995) diffusion of innovation theory (DOI), Davis's (1989) technology acceptance model (TAM), Tornatzky and Fleischer's (1990) technological-organisational-environmental model (TOE), and Azjen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour (TPB). Both DOI and TOE are mostly used in study of innovation diffusion in organisational. TAM and TPB models focus mainly on user acceptance to analyze automation processes in the early phases of IT diffusion (Ordanini, 2006; Salman, Mohamed Salleh, Abdullah, Mustaffa, Ahmad, Chang & Saad, 2014), which is the most appropriate model for this study.

TAM model has been used by many researchers to study user acceptance and it is an extension of TPB model. The model suggests that when users are presented with a new technology, a number of factors influence their decision about how and when they will use it, notably: 1) perceived usefulness - "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance"; and 2) perceived ease-of-use - "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free from effort" (Davis, 1989). These two variables will be considered in this study to understand students' perception toward s-commerce.

Figure 1 shows the graphical representation of the conceptual framework of the study.

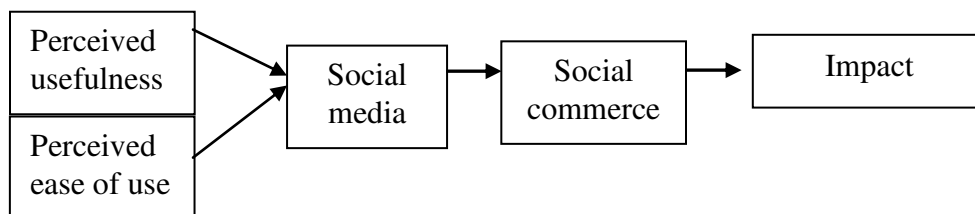


Figure 1. *Conceptual framework of the study*

The framework in Figure 1 is used in this study to investigate the usage of s-commerce through social media: 1) what is the current s-commerce usage among individuals on the social media; 2) what factors influence s-commerce; and 3) what are the consequences of the usage.

Methodology

The data for this paper have been gathered by means of a survey. A face-to-face survey was administered among entrepreneurs in Klang Valley. A face-to-face survey can be considered as a telephone survey without the telephone (Gratton & Jones, 2004). The interviewer physically traveled to the respondent's

location to conduct a personal interview. In some circumstances, the interviewer gathered the respondents in a small group, read them the questions, and ensure that they answer the questions. The interviewer entertained any question raised by the respondents. A total of 105 respondents participated in the study. The respondents were chosen using snow-balling technique, a method used to obtain research and knowledge, from extended associations through previous acquaintances (Leedy & Omrod, 2005). "Snowball sampling uses recommendations to find people with the specific range of skills that has been determined as being useful" (Leedy & Omrod, 2005). An individual or a group receives information from different places through a mutual intermediary (Patton & Appelbaum, 2011). The chosen respondents were among those who already have the access to some social media applications, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and have started to sell or purchase through social media.

Once the respondents submitted their questionnaires, short face-to-face interviews were conducted with respondents who are available. During this session, respondents and interviewer were free to ask and to response to any questions. This method creates more fruitful information for the interviewer. Any response from the interviews was jotted down on a notebook for further information and future used. Most of the time, the session with the respondents took around 40 – 60 minutes.

Findings and discussions

Respondents' profiles

As mentioned earlier, all respondents have at least used one of the social media applications and have accessed this media through either computers or mobile phones. All of the respondents used smart phones and most of them were using iPhone, Samsung or Blackberry. Some of the respondents have more than one phone and some of them have a dedicated phone for social networking such as for their activities on Facebook and Twitter. Many respondents were between 26 to 35 years old (80%), and half of them were at least a Bachelor degree holder. There were more female respondents compared to male. Table 1 displays the respondent characteristics.

Table 1. Respondents' characteristics (n=105)

Age		Marital Status	
21-25	-	Single	20%
26-35	80%	Married	70%
36-45	10%	Widow/Divorce	10%
Above 45	10%		
Gender		Education	
Male	29%	Secondary	2%
Female	71%	Diploma	48%
Ethnicity		Bachelor	41%
Chinese	14%	Postgraduate	9%
Malay	75%		
Indian and others	11%		

There are at least two important distributions in this respondent profile – gender and marital status. It is found that most respondents were women, which could explain the fact that women love window shopping as 'retail therapy' (Kacen, 1998). In terms of marital status, 70% of the respondents were married, while 20% were still single and the remaining 10% were widows. This means that those married used s-commerce the most, which could lead to the speculation that this is driven by the fact that married people found it easier to shop online as it saves a lot of time; thus, they could spend more time doing other tasks.

Level of awareness

Since the all respondents have at least bought or sold online through social media, it can be speculated that their level awareness of s-commerce is considerably high. However, all the respondents either bought through their friends' sites or from sites that they trust. The trusted sites are those that are frequently visited by people and have the most number of 'likes'. They are reluctant to buy from sites which are hardly updated.

In terms of resource of information about s-commerce, most respondents said that they knew about social media and s-commerce through the Internet and social networking. The results gathered are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Sources of information (n-105)

Newspaper/magazine	Billboards	Radio/ television	Internet	Social network	Family and friends
43	22	32	105	83	73

All respondents said they found information about s-commerce from the internet itself and by social networking. They said internet and social network are very useful and these are natural way of spreading the information about s-commerce nowadays. Nevertheless, they also found that advertisement of the social network sites on radio or television help them to know new social networking sites or to know the sites better.

Most respondents agreed that s-commerce has largely emerged from social media. Part of the reason is because they saw a lot of advertisements on the social networking platform while browsing their social networking site, which is similar to the findings of Hensel and Deis (2010). For example, Facebook allows advertisement and even has an advertisement section. Indeed, other platforms have also started to have some advertisements put on their sites either from the provider itself or from the users. Interestingly, majority of the respondents somewhat agreed that s-commerce is a common phenomenon in Malaysia nowadays. This could be caused by the fact that there are Malaysians who had experienced e-commerce and mobile commerce way ahead of s-commerce. Nonetheless, the respondents felt that s-commerce is easy to use once they start selling and purchasing through social media. Figure 2 displays the s-commerce and social media linkages.

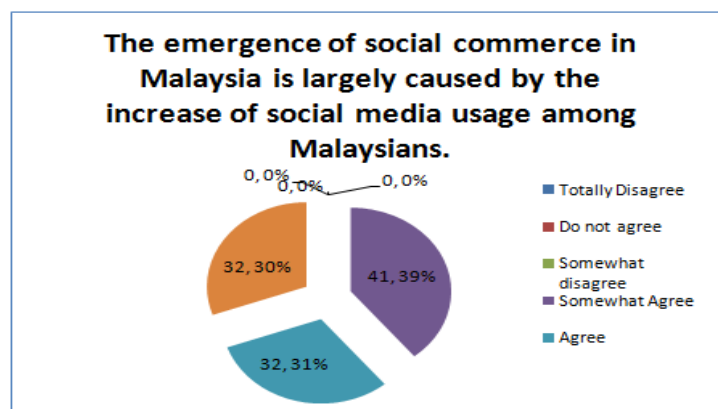


Figure 2. *S-commerce and social media linkage*

It was found that more than 70% respondents agreed that there is a link between s-commerce and social media. This shows that the level of awareness of respondents on s-commerce is apparent because of the usage of the social media.

S-commerce usages

Out of 105 respondents, 94 or 89.5% said they used s-commerce in their daily lives, which indicate that s-commerce transactions are definitely not something new among these groups of respondents. Majority (almost 100%) of the respondents have Facebook account, 80% have accessed to Whatsapp, 55% have Twitter, and only 30% have Instagram. Most of the respondents (65%) checked their social networking site, for example Facebook, more than 10 times in a day and the duration accumulated up to 7 hours a day. Surprisingly, 21% of the respondents said that they accessed their social networking sites' group more than 100 times a day. Table 3 reports the number of hours respondents spent using social networking sites per day.

Table 3. Time spent for social networking Sites (n=105)

Time/ social network sites	Facebook	Whatsapp	Twitter	Instagram
1-2 hours	13	4	32	22
3-5 hours	45	17	25	10
6-7 hours	27	31	1	-
More than 7 hours	15	32	-	-

In terms of s-commerce transaction, 45% of the respondents have transacted through s-commerce between two to five times over the last one year. Interestingly, more than 50% respondents claimed that they have been actively buying and selling online for more than 10 times over the last one year. This again indicates that s-commerce is indeed popular among Malaysian entrepreneurs.

Majority of the respondents stated that they found many of their customers are interested to buy items that hardly available offline or something that is cheaper offline. These include photography services, apparels, and vacation packages. Table 4 displays the items that the respondents found to interest their customers the most.

Table 4. Frequently purchased items or services by customers

Apparels	Accessories	Gadgets	Food	Entertainment	Vacation packages	Photography Services	Beauty & Health Services	Repair works
74	63	20	41	22	72	105	0	0
25.34%	21.58%	6.85%	14.04%	7.53%	24.66%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%

According to the respondents, most popular item on s-commerce is photography services, followed by apparels and vacation packages.

Respondents' perception on S-commerce

Many respondents said that having s-commerce through social media is appealing because the social network sites are very user friendly, easy to access, and can be blended with images and videos and allow users to comments. Majority of the respondents also perceived s-commerce as a useful tool for buying and selling. Indeed some of them claimed that they were so tempted with some of the items posted which lead

to unplanned purchase. Despite this appeal, half of the respondents said the use of s-commerce also negatively affect their daily tasks and productivity. From the positive point of views, respondents said when they are bored or stressed out (particularly the female respondents during the interviews), to browse through s-commerce sites is relaxing and comforting. To view the items, get comments, and discussion on the sites seem to be very fascinating and remarkable. In addition, some respondents claimed that s-commerce has given them the chance to know items/products that are not available locally and also buy items at a cheaper price.

On the other hand, those who said that s-commerce affect them negatively is because they become unaware with the time they spend on social network sites. Respondents said that they can be hooked to their computers or phones for hours browsing and chatting without realizing the number of hours spent. Most of the time they tended to look for other things. Very little time is left for daily tasks since much of their precious time is put on the sites, which made them less equipped and less productive. Some other negative effects include the uncontrolled spread of fake items, unless other people discover them first. Some respondents also claimed that they have to subscribe to a more expensive connection so that they can access the Internet faster and quicker.

In addition to these negative effects, there are some procrastination-related problems. For example, some respondents claimed that having to connect to the social media has created a social problem of digital divide - the disparity between those who have use of and access to information and communications technologies (ICT) and those who do not. Respondents claimed that some of their colleagues are still being deprived of internet access, social media in particular. There is a complicated patchwork of varying levels of internet access, basic ICT usage, and ICT applications among socio-economic groups, which is similar to other findings (Quay, 2011). Indeed, more than 70% of the respondents said that the technology currently available in Malaysia to enable entrepreneurs to embark on s-commerce is still at the infancy stage. Thus, in this sense, the government and responsible bodies related to the technological advancement in Malaysia must take the initiative to improve technological infrastructure in Malaysia that will allow further expansion of s-commerce.

Conclusions

Based on the findings above, we could actually draw a few conclusions in regard to s-commerce among Malaysian entrepreneurs. Malaysian entrepreneurs are currently experiencing the emergence of s-commerce in the retail market. Many have embarked on social media and have even started to sell and buy online. As s-commerce continues to evolve, many things will rapidly change – products, services as well as people's lives and behaviors. It is quite clear that s-commerce brings good and bad effect to the society. However, this depends on the users themselves. If s-commerce is put to the best use, it can enhance the way people do business in the way that it makes communication easier and faster; thereby enhancing effective flow of information and idea sharing among users.

To take the advantage of s-commerce, businesses, particularly the entrepreneurs in Malaysia should be prepared to engage and experience s-commerce. They should use new s-commerce platforms and tools to monitor usage, test new strategies, create campaigns, and market their products quicker. Firms which utilize s-commerce can be ahead of their competitors through integrated approach, reap the benefits of first-mover advantage, and apply knowledge across the channels. Firms should also use the power of social media to drive consumers' purchases by using the tools of social recommendation and product suggestion.

Similar to most researches, this paper has limitations that point to further opportunities. The author only focused 105 entrepreneurs who lived in Klang Valley and have started to sell and purchase on social media; and the method used is snowballing. Thus, the reason why these entrepreneurs did not use s-commerce is not found in this study. Building on this research, there are opportunities for further work. The present research could serve as a starting point for more detailed studies. Additional studies on other

location or bigger sample should provide further insights into the impact of s-commerce on Malaysian society. This research can be utilized to investigate the use of s-commerce not only at individual level, but also among firms, organizations, and various other settings, and for a variety of different audiences such as teenagers, young adults, the elderly, or families. For future research, it may be more helpful to examine the adoption of s-commerce among firms in Malaysia.

Recommendations

S-commerce is indeed an emerging trend in Malaysia. In order to improve s-commerce experience in Malaysia, the government or the agencies responsible on ICT should increase the prospect of s-commerce growth in Malaysia such as:

- i) It is essential for the government to provide widespread infrastructure as to allow more Malaysians the opportunity to access s-commerce facilities.
- ii) More retailers must be invited to provide their goods and services via s-commerce platforms to increase its usage and utilization.
- iii) Awareness and education on s-commerce existence and its application, functions and purpose must be further spread to the society to increase its usage. Only when the members of society know and understand the functions, availability and safety of s-commerce platform will they able to trust spending their money online via s-commerce platforms.
- iv) Tools and gadgets that allow s-commerce usage must be made affordable and available to the society in order to promote social media services. Without tools and gadgets such as PCs, tablets and smart phones, s-commerce is unlikely to expand. Thus, it would be great for the government to play its role and influence in bringing down the price of these tools and gadgets.
- v) The government must play its role in ensuring technologies needed for s-commerce development are made available and aligned to its rapid advancement. Technologies are the backbones of s-commerce development, and only stable, reliable and effective technologies are capable of ensuring how s-commerce could be further expanded in Malaysia.

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