



The Influence of Social Power in Online Purchase Decision

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to clarify the influence of hard and soft power in online purchase decisions. A fundamental property of online social networks is that people tend to have attributes similar to those of their friends. To understand the effects of social power on the influence of opinion leaders from the social power perspective, this study examined the relationships among social power, personal influence attempts, and influences on purchase decisions. The research data were collected from members of various online communities via the Internet. In order to target online users, a web-based survey was employed. A partial least squares (PLS) analysis was used to perform the data analysis. By integrating two types of social power, this study selects several important constructs which are closely related to hard and soft power to enhance the influence attempts in the online community. This paper confirms the importance of social power from the perspectives of influence attempts and recommends a conceptual framework for illustrating personal influence behaviour in the electronic commerce environment.

Keywords: Social power; hard power; soft power; influence attempts; purchase decision.

1. INTRODUCTION

The online community has become a huge, interactive society in the virtual world. It cannot be denied that social power exists in online communities. Due to the increased social interaction within the online community, there is now more social power and influence among the community members. When the online community members have an intention to purchase, they likely look for opinion help. Several studies have identified that individuals are more likely to obey powerful authority figures [1] and accept the persuasive attempts of powerful individuals [2].

As people become more involved in the online community, there is an increased social relationship between the community members. Social power is a basic force in social relationships [3,4], the ability of one person [5], and the dynamics and structure of personality [6,7], and these relationships all occur in the online community [2]. Social power is also defined as the potentiality for inducing forces in other persons towards acting or changing in a given direction [8]. Therefore, this study argued that social power will play an important role in influencing purchase decisions in the field of electronic commerce.

In cyber space, the relationship between social power and influence is an interesting research issue. Similarly to traditional society, the online community has various group dynamics. Group dynamics include social pressure, influence, coercion, power, cohesion, and the attraction dynamic aspects of groups, and play an important role in the theories of group development [9]. However, in the context of traditional organizations, an online community is very different, and the material and social rewards and punishments are limited.

In 2001, Koslowsky, Schwarzwald, and Ashuri proposed a two-factor model of social power and influence where French and Raven's dimensions were divided into soft power and hard power dimensions [10,11]. By integrating two types of social power, this study selects several important constructs which are closely related to hard and soft power to enhance the influence attempts in the online community. This study confirms the importance of social power from the perspectives of influence attempts and recommends a conceptual framework for illustrating personal influence behaviour in the electronic commerce environment.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Influence Attempts

According to French and Raven (2001), the research on social power must be distinguished from influence as the former refers to that state of affairs which holds in a given relationship between one person and another, while the latter refers to the use of power to achieve an outcome [12]. Influence may only be achieved as a result of a reciprocal exchange process between itself and an individual [13]. The influence attempts by leaders over the members makes the leaders' desired change in the members' decision more likely [10]. The degree of influence depends on the specific understanding that leaders and members each apply to their relationship and, interestingly, requires the members' recognition of a quality in the leaders which would motivate the members to change in the way that the leaders intend.

Olson, Cromwell, and Klein (1975) concluded that power is multidimensional, reflecting a circular causal process. They defined power as the actual ability to change the behaviour of others and suggested that it occurs within the context of an interaction process [14,15]. Social power is a function of the perspectives of all of the parties involved in the decision making process [16]. Opinion leadership (more properly termed Informal Opinion Leadership in this study) is the degree to which a community member is able to influence other members' attitudes or overt behaviour informally, in a desired way with relative frequency [17,18]. Therefore, the influence attempts of opinion leaders are an important motivation for and factor in the purchase decision. Opinion leaders must draw on the social power or a combination of the bases of power appropriate to the relationship, to affect the desired outcome. Influence attempts will even change the purchase decisions or shopping strategies of the community members. Given the reciprocal nature of influence, it is necessary to measure influence from the perspectives of all of the significant members in the decision making process [15].

Previous researches have indicated that shopping strategies represent sets of activities that reflect the motives and decision-making processes governing shopping behaviour. Several studies have discovered that different types of shopper use different sources of information, trust sources of information

differently, and have different preferences with regard to information [19]. As the individual holds the information and trust sources, one might have social power instead. Individuals, however, were most satisfied with their family and friends as sources of information. It proved worthwhile to investigate the roles of social power and personal influence attempts in electronic commerce activities.

Previous studies divided opinion leaders' influence into three types: information, utilitarian, and value-expressive influence [20,21]. Informational influence happens when consumers want to make an informative decision. In an uncertain situation, consumers will search for more knowledge from the available sources of information [22]. The information source will be more easily accepted if it comes together with credibility and expertise or can enhance consumers' capabilities and knowledge about the surroundings [23,24]. However, these studies indicated that there are some limitations to informational influence, as it only functions when an individual regards the behaviour and values of the opinion leaders as potentially useful information and takes them into consideration.

Influence attempts refer to the amount of recommendations, information exchanges, and efforts exerted in order to influence a purchase decision [25,26]. Previous studies suggest that individuals who make stronger influence attempts tend to have greater manifest influence. The individuals' stake in the decisions is related to their influence and there is a correlation between individuals' specific self-confidence and their influence [27,28]. These social influence attempts can involve a number of strategies including the use of promises, threats, warnings and recommendations [29]. High risk and reward are likely to motivate an individual to make stronger influence attempts [30] which will lead to greater manifest influence. In general, therefore, the stronger the influence attempts, the greater the manifest influence. This study thus formally proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Stronger influence attempts will positively enhance the manifest influence of purchase decisions in the online community.

2.2 Soft and Hard Power

Social influence occurs when an individual's thoughts, feelings or actions are affected by

others [31,32]. The influence of individuals usually comes from two types of social power: hard and soft power. There are four ways in which social power can influence human behaviour: ideological, economic, political, and military [33-35]. First, hard power is a theory that describes using military and economic means to influence the behaviour or interests of other political bodies. Hard power is a coercive term used in interpersonal relations. Second, soft power refers to power that comes from diplomacy, culture and history. This is more likely to be formed among the participants in an online community.

In recent years, considerable concern has arisen over the social power issues related to online communities [36-38]. When people participate in a community on the Internet, they enter another kind of society. The civil reaction to the structure and organization of an online community will bring about social power issues. In the political field, the definition of power is something that forces people to do what they do not want to do. In the previous research, most definitions of power include an element indicating that power is the capability of one social actor to overcome resistance to achieving a desired object or result [39,40]. The types of power included authority, influence, and coercion. Power is the concept of trying to influence others and implement one's will [41]. However, the difference between the online community and the real world community is that people gain more autonomy in cyberspace and gain more hard power in the real world.

Social power comes from interactions between the participants and makes people change their will and actions. In addition, other researches divide social power into soft and hard power [42]. In the online community, the rules make the leaders have hard power, and the other members have soft power. Hard power includes rewards, coercion and legitimate power, while soft power refers to referent power and expert power [43]. Previous studies indicated that more active social power used will enhance the influence attempts [16]. In the next section, this study proposes hypotheses to explain the phenomenon of the relationship between social power and influence attempts.

2.3 Legitimate Power

Legitimate power is the authority granted from the formal position in an organization and the power of an accepted authority [44,45]. It refers

to the ability to induce in others feelings of task-related responsibility and obligation [46]. For example, once a person has been selected as a supervisor, most employees accept that they are obligated to follow his/her direction with respect to work activities. Followers accept the legitimate rights of formal leaders to set goals, make decisions, and direct activities. Certain rights, responsibilities, and prerogatives accrue to anyone holding a formal leadership position. Legitimate power is formal authority delegated to the holder of the position. Therefore, legitimate power is also called positional power. Legitimate power is the power of an individual because of the relative position and duties of the holder of the position within an organization. It is usually accompanied by various attributes of power, such as uniforms, offices, etc. This is the most obvious and also most important kind of power. Legitimate power increases compliance because social norms endow uniformed leaders with the authority to constrain members' behavioural options; therefore, the leader will be more motivated to influence others [47]. This study thus formally proposes the following hypothesis:

H2a: Stronger legitimate power will positively enhance influence attempts in the online community.

2.4 Reward Power

Power that comes from the authority to give rewards to others is called reward power. Reward power refers to the leader's perception that the members can administer positive rewards for desired behaviours [48], such as salary increases, performance ratings, promotion, developmental funds, and interesting work assignments [49]. These leaders may have access to grant rewards, directly or formally. Sometimes, organizations allocate huge amounts of resources downward from the top leaders. Leaders control the resources and their distribution. Community members and followers depend on the leaders for the financial and physical resources to perform their tasks. Therefore, leaders with reward power can use rewards to influence other members' behaviour. The strength of the reward power depends on the influenced one's perception of the actual ability of the powerful one to provide the reward and it is modified by the perception of the legitimacy of the reward [50]. As the reward power increases, the attraction of members to the relation increases, as does the cohesiveness to it; in turn the leader will have a greater

motivation to influence [51]. This study thus formally proposes the following hypothesis:

H2b: Stronger reward power will positively enhance influence attempts in the online community.

2.5 Coercive Power

The opposite of reward power is coercive power, which refers to the members' perceptions of the leader's ability to punish them or recommend punishment if they fail to comply with his or her requests [52]. Community leaders have coercive power as they have the right to fire or demote subordinates, criticize them, or withdraw their pay increases. For example, if a community member fails to perform as well as expected, the leader has the coercive power to criticize him, reprimand him, put a negative letter in his file, and damage his chances of a raise. Coercive power is also the negative side of legitimate and reward power. Coercive power is based on fear. A leader high in coercive power is seen as inducing compliance because a failure to comply will lead to punishment, such as undesirable work assignments and reprimands [53]. As a leader's coercive power increases, the likelihood that other members will tend toward target compliance also increases [47], so the leader will have more motivation to influence. This study thus formally proposes the following hypothesis:

H2c: Stronger coercive power will positively enhance influence attempts in the online community.

2.6 Expert Power

Expert power refers to one's influence over another because one possesses superior skills, or special knowledge or skills regarding the tasks performed by followers [54]. As a leader is a true expert, subordinates go along with his/her recommendations because of his/her superior knowledge. Expert power is limited to the area in which the leader has special knowledge or skills [5]. Expert power comes from the belief that the leaders know what is best, and therefore others follow their opinions because they are viewed as likely to be correct. People throughout the organization with expertise and knowledge can use this to influence or place limits on the decisions made by those above them in the organization. Self-perceived expert power increases as position level increases while, in

the participative situation, the leader will enhance the motivation to influence others [55]. This study thus formally proposes the following hypothesis:

H3a: Stronger expert power will positively enhance influence attempts in the online community.

2.7 Referent Power

Referent power is the power or ability of individuals to attract others and build loyalty. It is based on the charisma and interpersonal skills of the power holder. Referent power refers to other members and participants meeting a leader's request because they are, for some reason or other, personally attracted to him/her and value both their relationship with him/her and his/her opinion of them [56]. Referent power comes from the leader's personality characteristics. Referent power influences the identification, respect, and admiration of the community member so they want to emulate the leader. When members admire a leader because of the way he/she deals with them, the influence is based on referent power. Referent power depends on the leader's personal characteristics rather than on a formal title or position and is especially visible in the area of charismatic leadership. A person may be admired because of a specific personal trait, and this admiration creates the opportunity for influence attempts. Here the person under power desires to identify with these personal qualities, and gains satisfaction from being an accepted follower. As referent power increases to a high level, the leaders' normative influence may extend well beyond this sphere to encompass other aspects of lifestyle, and therefore they will have a higher motivation to influence others [57]. This study thus formally proposes the following hypothesis:

H3b: Stronger referent power will positively enhance influence attempts in the online community.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Model

The present study is based on an analysis of a random sample of online community members who experience the social power exercised by opinion leaders which will have further effects on the purchase decision of other members.

Instead of opinion leaders, the respondents are normal members in the community were asked if they affected by the social power. The research model proposed aims to understand the different characteristics of hard and soft power (Fig. 1). The research model, composed of two social power dimensions, soft (referent power and expert power) and hard power (reward, coercive and legitimate powers), could effectively explain the causes of influence attempts which, in turn, have a great influence on purchase decisions.

3.2 Measurement Development and Data Collection

Decision influence and influence attempts were measured with items adapted from Kohli [25] to fit the context of online communities. The measurement scales of social power, including referent power, expert power, reward power, coercive power, and legitimate power, were adapted from Venkatesh et al. [64]. The respondents were asked to assess the extent of their agreement with each item by using a seven-point Likert scale with anchors from strongly disagree/low (1) to strongly agree/high (7). The research data were collected from members of various online communities via the Internet in December 2012. In order to target online users, a web-based survey was employed. Among the 196 valid respondents, about 51.5% were male. Most of them were aged from 21 to 30 (71.9%) and have received a college or university education (65.8%). Almost half of our respondents had been contacted with an opinion leader. Most online communities have one to five opinion leaders. Table 1 shows the profiles of the respondents.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

A partial least squares (PLS) analysis was used to perform the data analysis. Our data analysis consisted of the following steps. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied to assess the validity and reliability of the research instrument. Then, the structural model was performed to examine the relationships among the research constructs. Third, a further mediation analysis was conducted to examine the mediation role of influence attempts.

4.1 Measurement Model

CFA was conducted to assess the construct validity of six constructs at the individual-level. The following criteria, suggested by

Hair et al. [58], were applied to assess the construct validity: (1) the standardized indicator loading for certain constructs should exceed .50; (2) the average variance extracted (AVE) should exceed .50; (3) the square root of the AVE should be greater than the correlation between the construct and other constructs; and (4) the construct reliability should exceed .70 [58]. All of the loadings were above the threshold. The AVE values were above .50, ranging from .60 to .80. All of the square roots of the AVE were greater than the correlations among the constructs, which revealed good convergent validity and discriminant validity. The composite reliability (CR) of the research constructs ranged from .88 to .94, while their Cronbach's α ranged from .85 to .92. The results indicate that our research scales have sufficient reliability. Tables 2 and 3 present the results of the measurement validation.

In addition, the multicollinearity was further checked by calculating the variance inflation factor (VIF). The VIF values are below the cut-off threshold of ten suggested by Hair et al. [58] and range from 1.38 to 3.39. Then, we followed the suggestion of Podsakoff et al. [59] and conducted a Harman's one-factor test to assess the severity of the common method bias. No general factor emerged and six factors were produced after performing an unrotated factor analysis. The first factor accounted for 40.56% of the variance. The results indicated that collinearity does not seem to pose a serious problem and that all of the constructs used in this study are acceptable and reliable.

4.2 Structural Model

In order to test the research model, the bootstrap re-sampling procedure was conducted to examine the statistical significance of the research hypotheses. The model explains a substantial amount of the variance in influence attempts ($R^2 = 0.30$) and decision influence ($R^2 = 0.13$). The results provide support for the significance of three research hypotheses. Influence attempts ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$) is significantly related to decision influence, providing support for H1. In contrast to our assumption, all three hard power constructs are not significant. Expert power ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.05$) and referent power ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$) positively contribute to influence attempts. Thus, H3a and H3b are supported. Fig. 2 presents the results of the analysis.

4.3 Mediation Analysis

The research model shows that influence attempts were assumed to mediate the relationship between social power constructs and decision influence. In order to examine the mediating role of influence attempts, this research followed the two steps [60]. In the first step, the research model with a direct effect was compared with the original research model. For instance, to test the mediation among legitimate power, influence attempts, and decision influence, a new model was tested by adding a direct relationship between legitimate power and decision influence. The effect size f^2 can be used to assess the difference:

$$f^2 = \frac{R_{\text{included}}^2 - R_{\text{excluded}}^2}{1 - R_{\text{included}}^2} \quad (1)$$

where R_{included}^2 and R_{excluded}^2 are the reported R-squares when more predictors are included or excludes [61]. Then, a pseudo-F statistic can be calculated for assessing the significant difference between the two models:

$$\text{Pseudo } F_{(1, n-k)} = f^2 * (n - k - 1) \quad (2)$$

where n is the sample size and k the number of constructs in the model.

As can be seen in Table 4, the results indicate that both hard and soft power can have direct effects on decision influence.

The second step is to evaluate the significance and magnitude of the mediator. Since only expert power and referent power significantly contribute to influence attempts, therefore, we only further evaluated the magnitude and significance of the mediation between expert power, referent power, influence attempts, and decision influence. The Aroian version of the Sobel test was suggested by Baron and Kenny [62]:

$$Z = \frac{b_1 * b_2}{\sqrt{b_1^2 * S_2^2 + b_2^2 * S_1^2 + S_1^2 * S_2^2}} \quad (3)$$

where b_1 and b_2 refers to the path coefficients and S_1 and S_2 are the standard deviations of b_1 and b_2 . The magnitude of the mediation is the product of the path coefficients between the independent variable and the mediator and between the mediator and the dependent variable. The results indicate that influence attempts mediates two relationships, including

expert power to decision influence ($Z = 2.324$, $p < 0.05$) and referent power to decision influence ($Z = -2.869$, $p < 0.01$). The results reveal that soft power can directly exert an influence on the

members' purchase decision and indirectly affect their decision through influence attempts. In contrast, hard power only directly influences the purchase decision.

Table 1. Profiles of respondents

Demographic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	101	51.5
Female	95	49.5
Age		
Below 20	20	10.2
21 - 30	141	71.9
31 - 40	29	14.8
Over 40	6	3.1
Education		
High school	20	10.2
College & University	129	65.8
Advanced degree	47	24.0
Have you ever contacted an opinion leader?		
Yes	98	50.0
No	98	50.0
Number of opinion leaders in the online community		
1 – 5	95	48.5
6 – 10	65	33.2
10 – 15	14	7.1
15 – 20	2	1.0
Over 20	20	10.2

Table 2. Summary of measurement

Construct	Item	Loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach's α	References
Decision Influence (DI)	DI1	0.70	0.74	0.93	0.92	Kohli [25]
	DI2	0.90				
	DI3	0.92				
	DI4	0.90				
	DI5	0.93				
Influence Attempts (IA)	IA1	0.86	0.76	0.93	0.89	Kohli [25]
	IA2	0.90				
	IA3	0.94				
	IA4	0.88				
Legitimate Power (LP)	LP1	0.75	0.80	0.94	0.91	Venkatesh et al. [76]
	LP2	0.80				
	LP3	0.86				
	LP4	0.73				
	LP5	0.74				
Reward Power (WP)	WP1	0.76	0.60	0.88	0.85	Venkatesh et al. [76]
	WP2	0.85				
	WP3	0.91				
	WP4	0.90				
	WP5	0.89				
Coercive Power (CP)	CP1	0.90	0.76	0.94	0.92	Venkatesh et al. [76]
	CP2	0.83				
	CP3	0.88				
	CP4	0.85				
	CP5	0.83				
Expert Power (EP)	EP1	0.85	0.66	0.91	0.87	Venkatesh et al. [76]
	EP2	0.88				

Construct	Item	Loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach's α	References
	EP3	0.88				
	EP4	0.88				
Referent Power (RP)	RP1	0.80	0.75	0.94	0.92	Venkatesh et al. [76]
	RP2	0.81				
	RP3	0.75				
	RP4	0.82				
	RP5	0.87				

Note: AVE = Average variance extracted; CR = Composite reliability

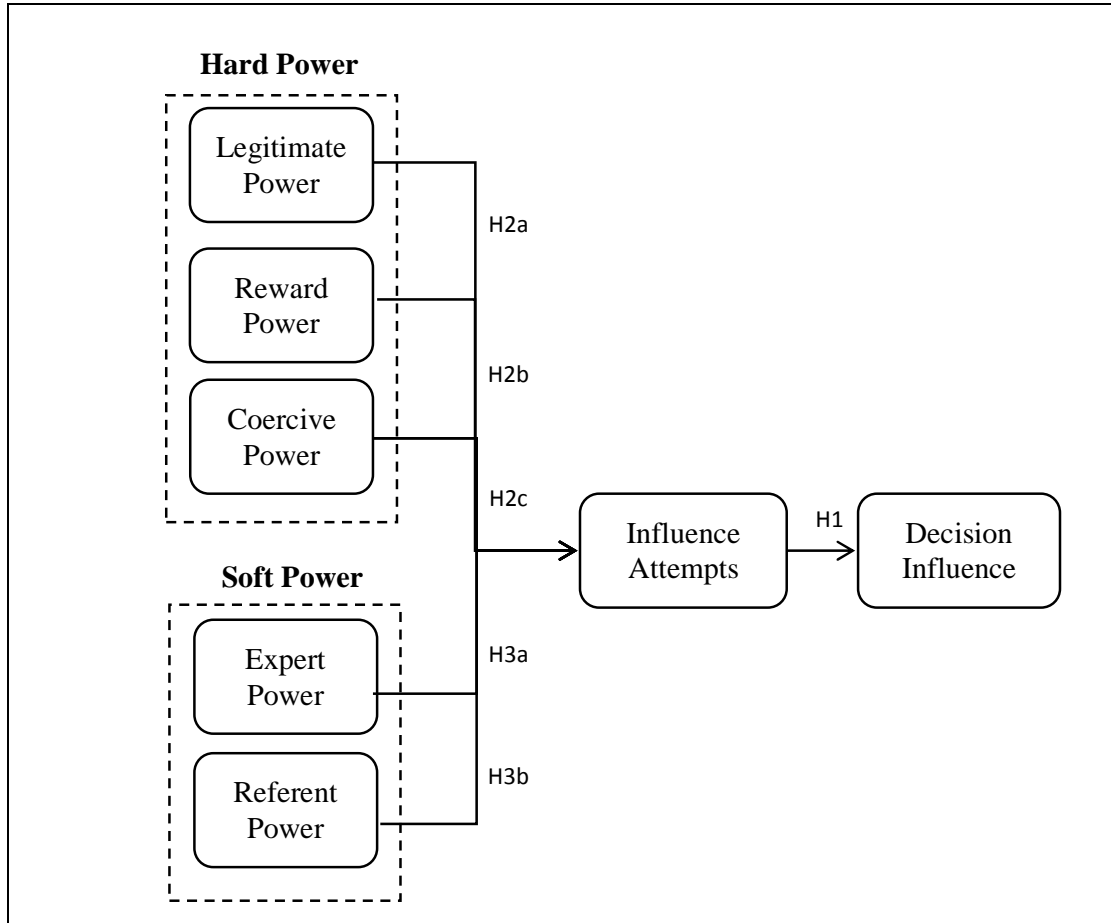


Fig. 1. Research model

Table 3. Composite reliability, AVE and correlations

	Mean	S.D.	DI	IA	LP	WP	CP	EP	RP
DI	4.26	1.20	0.86						
IA	5.22	1.00	0.36	0.87					
LP	4.07	1.18	0.55	0.28	0.89				
WP	4.10	1.25	0.63	0.29	0.68	0.77			
CP	3.36	1.21	0.21	0.07	0.31	0.43	0.87		
EP	4.85	1.02	0.59	0.45	0.57	0.67	0.12	0.81	
RP	4.68	0.89	0.69	0.51	0.56	0.65	0.15	0.69	0.87
VIF			-	1.41	2.28	3.39	1.38	2.48	2.59

Note: VIF = Variance inflation factor; the shaded numbers in the diagonal row are the square root of the average variance extracted

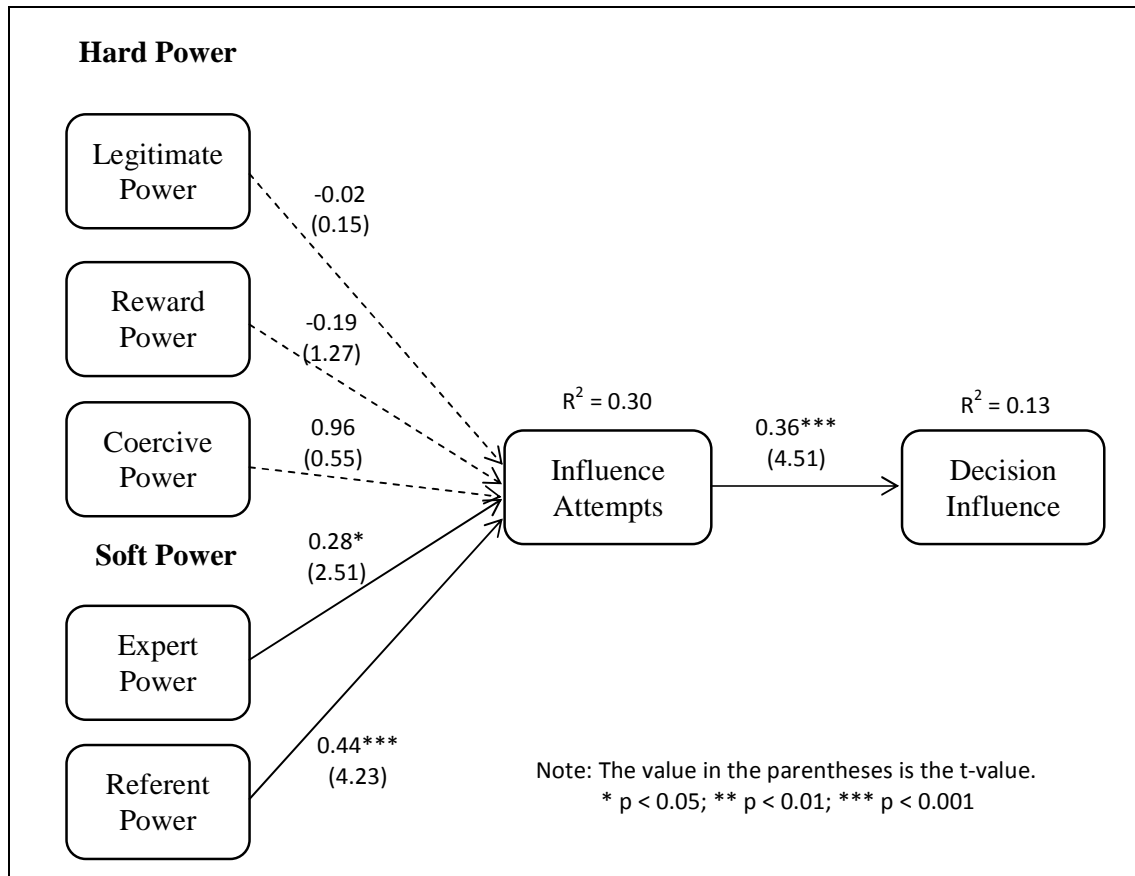


Fig. 2. Research results

Table 4. Test for mediation

Direct path	R ² indirect model	R ² direct model	f ² value	Pseudo F _(1, 189)	Magnitude	Z
LP → DI	0.126	0.396	0.447	84.040***	-	-
WP → DI	0.126	0.434	0.544	102.304***	-	-
CP → DI	0.126	0.163	0.044	8.311**	-	-
EP → DI	0.126	0.361	0.368	69.139***	0.099	2.324*
RP → DI	0.126	0.497	0.738	138.664***	0.158	2.869**

Note: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary

Several studies indicate that social influence plays an important role in electronic commerce [63-66]. This study provided evidence to help marketing managers to improve the intention to purchase and to connect customers more effectively. The purpose of this study is to understand the effects of social power on the influence of opinion leaders from the social power perspective. This study discusses the development or disappearance of social power

in the online community. This study also investigated the reasons for increasing individual influence among the community members. Finally, the findings of the study, by establishing a link between influence attempts and purchase decision, has given support to communities through hard and soft power for electronic commerce. The results provide support for the significance of three of the research hypotheses. In online community, stronger influence attempts will positively enhance the manifest influence of purchase decisions in the online community. Soft power included expert power and referent power will positively enhance influence attempts

in the online community. In contrast to our assumption, all three hard power constructs are not significant. Expert power and referent power positively contribute to influence attempts. Previous study indicated helpfulness was significantly correlated with ratings of referent power (i.e., influence based on sense of identification) and expert power (i.e., influence based on knowledge and expertise) [67].

This study develops a full understanding of hard and soft power in the online community with regard to personal influence behaviour.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

With the growth in the number of internet users, the internet has already become one of the most influential types of media in our daily life. Online users become familiar with other people through online social networks. The online social networks interact with different levels of knowledge sharing and exchange. The online community is undergoing extraordinary changes that present both exceptional opportunities to and major challenges for the members of cyberspace [68]. A fundamental property of online social networks is that people tend to have attributes similar to those of their friends [69]. The process of social influence leads members to adopt the behaviour exhibited by opinion leaders with whom they interact. The effect of social influence occurs in the community where new ideas are discussed by word-of-mouth or imitation through a network of people [70,71].

First, the process of social influence leads people to adopt behaviours exhibited by those they interact with. This effect works in many settings, where new ideas diffuse by word-of-mouth or imitation through a network of people [71,72]. According to previous studies, negative social power has aroused resistance and resulted in negative social influence on their beliefs (i.e., set up a force in the direction opposite to the influence attempt), so that there was little change in the subjects' opinions [10]. Social power is a measure of a person's ability to control a situation, including the behaviour of other people. The nature and sources of the power possessed by an opinion leader may affect the presence of community members [73], perceived as legitimate by the social structure. Social power can be seen as positive or unjust, but the exercise of power is accepted as reasonable by humans as social beings [74]. In

the online environment, power is often expressed as upward or downward. With downward power, opinion leaders will influence other members. When opinion leaders exert upward power, it is the other members who influence the decisions of the opinion leader [75]. The power of individuals has been to sway or change the purchasing decisions of others. Personal influence can be either external or internal. External personal influence involves social interaction between two or more people, such as a community member. Internal personal influence occurs when decisions are influenced by mental processes that are connected with other people or groups. For example, a teenager may purchase a music CD because he wants to be perceived as being 'with it' by his friends. In these cases, identifying personal influences in a target market and turning these influences into a positive force is important to advertisers because face-to-face communication frequently has more impact than non-personal advertising in determining brand choice. This study integrated the critical constructs, included hard and soft power to understand the effect of the influence on the purchase decision regarding electronic commerce and the online community.

This research makes several contributions. First, it extends the concept of social power from the traditional group to the online community. This study emphasizes that soft power will determine the shopping strategy and influence of purchase decision. Soft power is more than just persuasion or the ability to move people by argument. Second, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to apply influence attempts to the study of the purchase decision in electronic commerce. Third, while previous research has predominately focused on trust, risk and uncertainty with regard to the purchase decision, this study focuses on social power and influence attempts to explore new ways of achieving greater efficiency and profitability for the online community and electronic commerce. In sum, by explicating the unique role of social influence, this paper aims to contribute to the continued development and success of the online community and electronic commerce in general.

5.3 Practical Implications

The results have several implications for practice. Opinion leaders in an online community can exert both their hard and soft social power on their members' purchase decision.

Consumers tend to surf online to find the required information, such as reviews or comparisons of functionality. Therefore, marketing managers can utilize the influence of opinion leaders to increase the effectiveness of the product promotion. As to website managers, how to stimulate the opinion leaders to share their experience and knowledge is crucial for sustaining a sufficient quality and quantity of sharing content. Our findings suggest that expert and referent power contribute to the cultivation of influence attempts. That is, opinion leaders with specific expertise and a good reputation will tend to share their thinking and experience with others. Therefore, website managers can invite experts to increase the participation of the members. On the other hand, websites provide a platform for these opinion leaders to share their comments and reviews.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study suffers from several limitations. The data were collected from members of different online communities. This limits the generalizability of the results. Therefore, future research should take the characteristics of the online community into consideration. Furthermore, this study utilizes members' perceptions as the assessment of the opinion leaders' influence. Although the findings provide us with a preliminary understanding of the opinion leaders' social power effects, future research needs to have a more delicate research design. Moreover, while this research focuses on the effects of social power, there are some omitted variables that might be considered in further research. Finally, the authors have sought to understand a qualitative subject by conducting a purely quantitative research. This has resulted in a set of conclusions which are both overstated and not fully justified. Therefore, qualitative research is also needed to gain a fuller understanding of the role of hard and soft power in the online community with regard to personal influence behaviour.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

Constructs	Measurement Items	References
Decision Influence (DI)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How much weight did the community members give to my suggestions? 2. How much impact did I have on the thinking of the other members? 3. To what extent did I influence the criteria used for making the final purchase decision? 4. To what extent did my participation influence the purchase decision eventually reached? 5. To what extent did the final purchase decision reflect my views? 	[25]
Influence Attempts (IA)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I spent more time to impress my views on the community members. 2. I tried harder to shape the thinking of others. 3. I spent more energy to make sure my opinions were taken into account. 4. I made weaker attempts to influence the evaluation process. 5. I exerted more effort to make sure the final decision reflected my views. 	[25]
Referent Power (RP)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The community members liked me as a person. 2. The community members thought highly of my personality. 3. The community members shared my personal values. 4. The community members identified with me as a person. 5. The community members had high regard for my personal qualities. 	[76]
Expert Power (EP)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The community members felt I am knowledgeable about the company's needs with respect to the product to be procured. 2. The community members felt I am competent to make an assessment of the various options. 3. The community members felt I knew exactly how the product would be used. 4. The community members felt I had the expertise to make the best decision. 	[76]
Reward Power (WP)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The community members believed I am capable of getting them pay raises. 2. The community members felt I could help them improve their standing in the organization. 3. The community members felt it was desirable to be approved of by me. 4. The community members valued receiving recognition from me. 5. The community members felt I could arrange desirable assignments for them. 	[76]
Coercive Power (CP)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The community members believed I am capable of interfering with their promotions. 2. The community members felt I could take them to task. 3. The community members felt I could make life difficult for them. 4. The community members thought I could block their salary increases. 5. The community members believed I could arrange for them to be assigned to unpleasant tasks. 	[76]

Legitimate Power (LP)	1. The community members felt I had the authority to ask for their compliance." [76]
	2. The community members felt someone in my position had a legitimate right to influence the purchase decision.
	3. The community members felt obligated to comply with me because of his or her formal position in the organization.
	4. The community members felt the purchase decision should reflect my preferences because I had more at stake than others.
	5. The community members felt them ought to comply with me because the purchase decision would affect me more than others.

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