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Can Positive Online Cues Always Reduce User Avoidance of Sponsored Research Results?

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Abstract

Online social cues that utilize user-generated data, such as user reviews and product ratings, have become one of the key factors influencing online user behavior and decisions. Online users who shared their reviews and ratings about a product (or a seller) become an abstract reference group to a focal user interested in the same product. This study focuses on sponsored search results (SSRs), a type of unsolicited information that matches users' search queries and receives high evaluations from prior consumers. We investigate the effects of positive social cues on alleviating users' avoidance responses toward an encountered SSR when searching for a product in a C2C e-commerce context. We synthesize the avoidance literature and identify three forms of SSR avoidance, namely, cognitive, behavioral, and affective avoidance. We apply users' implicit concerns on SSRs to explain users' avoidance of an encountered SSR. In addition, we extend social influence theory to online settings where abstract reference groups are posited to trigger social influence. We examine how and under what conditions the three forms of SSR avoidance can be reduced by various positive online social cues (i.e., product- and seller-related). We conduct three laboratory experiments. Results attest to users' implicit concerns on SSRs and their avoidance of SSRs and reveal different effects of various social cues on reducing the three forms of SSR avoidance. This study uncovers the theoretical mechanisms of social influence on reducing SSR avoidance in online settings. It also offers practical implications for online search service providers to help online users' decision making in their search process.