An Investigation of the Relevancy of Current Information System Acceptance Theory in the Context of Online Dating APP Use among Gen Z

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Abstract

This study adopted the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT2) to examine factors affecting the use of online dating app among Gen Z, using six constructs and two moderator effects. Gen Z, as digital natives, are key figures to understand their behavioral intentions and the use of online dating for this study; participants in this study are Gen Z, from a university in Taiwan. Online survey was conducted, a total of 196 responses were collected and analysed using SmartPLS. The findings show that hedonic motivation, habit and number of apps used significantly affect Gen Z's intentions to use dating apps. However, the moderators of gender and experience were not found to influence Gen Z's behavioral intentions. The results of this study provide new insights onto the relevancy of UTAUT2 in the context of online dating app and Gen Z.

Keywords: relevancy of IS theory, online dating, number of APP, UTAUT2.

摘要

本研究採用接受和使用技術的統一理論（UTAUT2）來檢驗影響 Z 世代線上約會 APP 應用的因素，具有六個結構和兩個調節效應。作為數位原住民，Z 世代，是本研究了解 線上約會 APP 行為意圖和 使用的關鍵人物；這項研究的參與者是台灣一所大學的 Z 世代。 通過線上調查，本研究共收集了 196 份回復，並使用 SmartPLS 進行了分析。 調查結果表明，享樂動機、習慣和使用的 APP 數量顯著影響 Z 世代使用 線上約會 APP 的意圖。然而，並未發現性別和經驗的調節因素會影響 Z 世代的行為意圖。 這項研究的結果提供了新的見解：UTAUT2 的適用性在線上約會 APP 應用和 Z 世代背景之下被挑戰了。

關鍵字：IS 理論適用性，約會 APP，APP 數量，UTAUT2

1. Introduction

The primary focus of this study is to understand further factors affecting online dating app participation among Gen Z's. According to a report from MarketWatch, online dating applications as platforms that connect users to establish romantic relationships expect to reach $10.378 million U.S. dollars in 2026, with a compound annual growth rate of 4% during the period 2021-2026 [1]. The rapid growth of online dating apps is influenced by technological developments and Web 2.0 emergence that change the way people interact, making people communicate through their smartphones. According to the UNiDAYS, 74% of Gen Z spend their free time online [2], and spend more than eight hours per day online [3]. Gen Z also uses a variety of devices to access social media, messaging apps, and entertainment apps and websites [4]. As devices play an important role in communicating, a survey from Google and Qualtrics on Gen Z about the future of dating shows among respondents, 51% consider video and virtual dating important, while 65% believe online dating apps and websites allow them to meet a wider range of people [5]; Therefore, Gen Z may play an important role in shaping the online dating app market, and thus lead to the reason that Gen Zs are chosen as the primary concern in this study.

The factors that influence users to use dating apps have been studied in several studies, including trust [6] [7], perceived norm [6], and hedonic motivation [6] [7] [8]; however, no comprehensive study has been conducted on user acceptance and participation of online

dating app among Gen Z, and in particular, tested the phenomenon using the well-known unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT2). A better understanding of user participation in online dating app is considered necessary (1) to determine the success of online dating apps, and (2) to benefit online dating app developers and providers to improve their services to attract and provide services to more users.

The unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT2) [9] is an extension of the initial model UTAUT [10]. This study adopts the UTAUT2 model [9], in the context of online dating apps. In this study, (1) six constructs in UTAUT2, i.e., performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, hedonic motivation, price value, and habit, are studied; and (2) the construct of facilitating condition is dropped because it is deemed irrelevant to our Gen Z's sample. Furthermore, this study is empirically conducted based on the online dating app users in Taiwan.

2. Literature Review

Hancock [11] defines the online dating service as "a place where people create profiles and initiate contact with others through online services." The popularity of online dating apps is increasing every year. Statista estimated that the number of online dating users is expected to be 489.9m users by 2025 [12]. Several reasons that make the popularity of online dating app continue to increase are ease of use; online dating app can provide easy access for users wherever and whenever they want to use the app [13]; also, it offers the comfort to interact with others online compared to the traditional face-to-face dating. As online dating apps rise in popularity, this study wants to examine the factors that influence online dating apps from a holistic point of view.

One of the ways to determine or measure the success of a technology (an app in this case) is to examine the willingness of user behavior to use the technology. Several user acceptance theories are often being used to explain this problem; the technology acceptance model (TAM), developed by [14], is a popular theory and is widely used to predict the adoption and use of technology through perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Since the advent of TAM, this model has grown in popularity and is

widely used in various technology deployment situations [15].

Another widely used model to predict the user behaviour is the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology UTAUT, which was developed by [10]. UTAUT is generally an extension of the (TAM), and it is used to predict the user intention and the use of technology. According to the authors, UTAUT is based on eight prominent models, that is, the reasoned action theory (TRA), the technology acceptance model (TAM) [14], the motivational model (MM), planned behavior theory (TPB), combined TAM and TPB (C-TAM-TPB), model of PC utilization (MPCU), diffusion of innovation theory (IDT), and social cognitive theory (SCT). The four main determinants of this model for predicting user behavior intentions and usage behavior are performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions, with four moderators of gender, age, experience, and voluntariness. UTAUT2 [9] is extended to provide a more specific context of consumer use, as a result three new constructs of hedonic motivation, price value, and habit are included in its extension. In comparison to TAM and IS success model, this research specifically adopts UTAUT2 <u>due to its relative relevancy (as perceived by the authors)</u> and examines what factors affect the participation of online dating apps users among Gen Z's.

In brief, UTAUT2 consist of seven determinants in predicting user intention and the use of technology − i.e., performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, facilitating conditions, hedonic motivation, price value, and habit− accompanied by three moderators, namely age, gender, and experience [9].

In the context of this study, as Gen Z's are the subject in this study, the construct of facilitating conditions is dropped. This is because facilitating conditions is referred to "consumers' perceptions of the resources and support available to perform a behavior" [9]. It is considered irrelevant to the subject of this research, namely Gen Z's, who are the first generation to grow up in the internet era, where they are already familiar with the use of smartphones, the Internet, or social media [16]; so, their involvement in online dating the app is no longer affected by resources such as the

Internet or support for the use of dating apps. Therefore, it is not included in this study.

3. Hypothesis Development

Figure 1 is the research model slightly adapted from UTAUT2 model [9]. The adopted model for this study consists of six determinants and two moderators. A total of eleven hypotheses developed for this study are presented as follows.
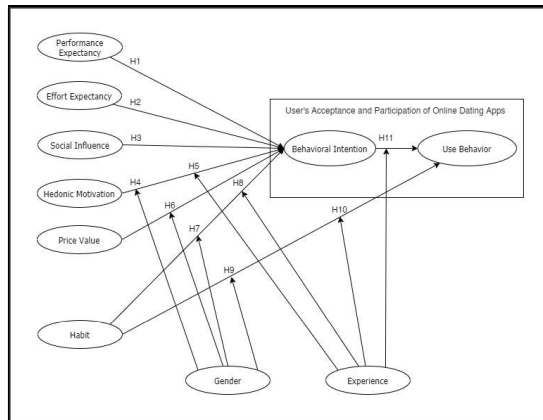

Figure 1: Research model of users' acceptance and participation of online dating apps

3.1 Performance Expectancy

Following the definition given by Venkatesh, et al. [9], performance expectancy is referred to the degree to which using a technology (an online dating app in this case) will benefit consumers in performing certain activities. In a survey by Rakuten Insight on reasons for using mobile dating apps in Taiwan, the respondents mentioned various factors such as meeting new people through apps, convenience, and not having enough time for social events [17]. Due to these reasons, it can be concluded that users believe they can achieve their goals by using an online dating app. Therefore, this study intends to examine the performance expectancy as a determinant factor to user intention to use online dating app. With the assumption, performance expectancy provides benefits for the user to achieve their desired goals; for instance, an online dating app can help users find more potential partners based on their criteria, and it allows users to reach their goal faster than when they are not using it. Hence, the hypothesis proposed is:

H1: Performance expectancy will positively affect behavioral intention to use online dating

app.

3.2 Effort Expectancy

By adopting the definition from Venkatesh, et al. [9], effort expectancy in this study is described as the degree of ease associated with consumers' use of online dating apps. The less effort a user puts into using the application, the greater intention to use the application. Tinder, for instance, is now estimated that there are 75 million active users on Tinder every month [18]; it displays photos of potential partners, users can "swipe right" to like and "swipe left" to reject, and two users can initiate a conversation by matching or swipe right. In light of the discussion, it can be assumed that effort expectations affect users' behavior when utilizing online dating apps. Thus, the hypothesis is:

H2: Effort expectancy will positively affect behavioral intention to use online dating app.

3.3 Social Influence

Social influence is described as "the extent to which consumers perceive that important others (e.g., family and friends) believe they should use a technology" [9]. Studies that have tested social influence and have found that social influence affected behavioral intention include acceptance of online games in mobile devices [19]; and intention to adopt mobile commerce [20]. These studies demonstrate how attitudes and perceptions that people consider important can influence their intention to use technology. Thus, the authors assume that users' intentions to use online dating apps can be influenced by people considered important to them (such as colleagues or society). It is expected that suggestions or opinions from colleagues or societies that are thought to be influential can encourage users to participate in online dating apps. Thus, it is hypothesized:

H3: Social influence will positively affect behavioral intention to use online dating app.

3.4 Hedonic Motivation Moderated by Gender and Experience

The term hedonic motivation is described by [9] as "the fun or pleasure derived from using a technology". Several studies [21-23] have found that people use online dating for various reasons, including having fun or for entertainment is seen as hedonic motivation in this study. Further, Rakuten Insight surveyed

4,039 mobile dating app users and found that 17% of them said they used the apps for entertainment purposes [24]. Therefore, this study intends to examine hedonic motivation as a driving factor to behavioral intention to use online dating app.

The relationship between hedonic motivation and behavioural intention in consumer technology use is found moderated by gender and experience [9]. In the stage of using new technology, Chau and Hui [25] suggest that men exhibit a greater tendency toward seeking novelty, while Venkatesh, et al. [9] claims that this tendency would affect hedonic motivation as a decision to use technology. However, when experienced with the technology increases, consumer tendency that contributes to the influence of hedonic motivation on technology use will decrease, making consumers use the technology for more visible things such as the capabilities or benefits of the technology [9]. Hence, we therefore hypothesize:

H4: Hedonic motivation will positively affect behavioral intention to use an online dating app, moderated by gender, such that the effect will be stronger for men.

H5: Hedonic motivation will positively affect behavioral intention to use an online dating app, moderated by experience, such that the effect will be stronger for the less experienced user.

3.5 Price Value as Moderated by Gender

Price value refers to the consumer's cognitive tradeoff between the perceived benefits and their monetary cost while using online dating apps [9]. If users view online dating apps as having a great price value and benefits, then they are more willing to pay in order to use app service. In other words, high price value will positively impact behavior intentions to use. Several studies have shown that gender influences purchasing decisions [26]. In terms of decision-making, women tend to be more subjective and more cautious when making a purchase decision; in contrast, men are often more objective and make purchase decisions based on facts [27]. Therefore, it is assumed that the effect of price value will be stronger for women. So, the proposed hypothesis is:

H6: Price value will positively affect behavioral intention to use an online dating app, such that the effect will be stronger for women.

3.6 Habit as Moderated by Gender and Experience

In UTAUT2 (2012), habit is defined as a "perceptual construct that reflects the results of prior experiences" [9]. Several studies that examine the acceptance of a mobile-based educational application [28], online games in mobile devices [19], and the use of mobile money services [29] have found that habit significantly influences use behavior directly and indirectly through behavioral intention. When it comes to online dating apps, habit refers to repeated user actions that form a habit. When this habit is formed, the user will intend to use the online dating app.

Furthermore, the strength of the relationship between habit and behavioral intention and use behavior is influenced by gender and experience [9]. In the context of consumer use, gender was found to influence the relationship between habits and behavioral intention or use behavior, and the relationship is stronger among men than women [9]. When it comes to decision-making, men tend to rule out some details and process information schematically, while women tend to process more information [30]. In other words, women will be likely to put more thoughts on their actions or behaviour compared to men, which can hinder the formation of the use the online dating app as a habit. In addition, the more experience the user has with using technology (an online dating app), the greater the impact of habit on intention and use [9]. In light of the previous research and discussion above, we propose the following hypothesis:

H7: Habit will positively affect behavioral intention to use the online dating app moderated by gender.

H8: Habit will positively affect behavioral intention to use the online dating app moderated by experience.

H9: Habit will positively affect use behavior, moderated by gender.

H10: Habit will positively affect use behaviour, moderated by experience.

3.7 Behavioral Intention as Moderated by Experience

According to Ajzen [31], behavioral intention is described as an individual's readiness to perform certain behaviors, and it is considered a direct antecedent of the behavior. In UTAUT

[10], behavioral intention influences the use behavior whereas, in UTAUT2 [9], the behavioral intention influences use behavior moderated by experience in the consumer use context. Venkatesh, et al. [9] explained that with an increase in the user's experience, their tendency to produce a habit would directly affect usage. In the online dating apps context, behavioral intention is seen as user acceptance to use online dating apps, which affects user participation as a form of actual behavior towards online dating apps. Consistent with the finding from Venkatesh, et al. [9], it is expected that user acceptance as a behavioral intention will influence the user participation as use behavior in using online dating apps, moderated by the experience. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H11: Behavioral intention will positively affect the use behavior of online dating app moderated by experience.

4. Research Method

This study adopted the survey research method and all survey items for each construct, studied was taken from prior studies. The questionnaire used in this study was distributed to university-level students, and several public-survey groups on Facebook, with administrator approval, which consist of mostly university-level students. University students were selected because they were commonly used in previous research in the case of online dating apps [32, 33], so they were considered appropriate samples for this study.

The survey items for performance expectancy and effort expectancy were taken from Venkatesh, et al. [10]. On the other hand, the survey items for social influence, facilitating conditions, hedonic motivation, price value, habit, behavioral intention and use were based on Venkatesh, et al. [9]. This survey was distributed to 196 college students online using Google Forms as a survey tool. The Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method is used for this study to analyze the collected data. The PLS-SEM method was chosen in this study because it can confirm a theory and explain whether or not there is a relationship between latent variables [34].

5. Data Analysis and Results

5.1 Demographic Data

A total of 196 university students participated in this study. Of the 196 valid respondents, (55.6%) were female, and (44.4%) were male. Most respondents (87.8%) were in the age range of 20-25 (followed by respondents under 20 years old with (6.1%) and respondents over 25 years old with (6.1%)). Roughly 64% of the respondents have prior experience with online dating app, with 37.8% with more than one month of experience, 25.5% less than one month and 36.7 with no experience. Seventy-five percent (75%) of them use at least one online dating app; 33.2% use at least two online dating apps.

5.2 The Measurement Model

All constructs' reliability and validity are assessed by measuring Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE). All constructs in this study support convergent validity with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70, which means that all constructs are valid. Furthermore, each construct in this study shows composite reliability exceeding 0.70, which indicates that each construct is reliable based on the established rule of thumb [35]. Additionally, each construct's average variance extracted (AVE) value shows a number greater than 0.50, indicating convergent validity [35]. Furthermore, discriminant validity testing is carried out using the Fornell–Larcker criteria, the AVE square root value of each latent construct in our data analysis is greater than its correlation with the other constructs in the model; thus, the discriminant validity test in the study can be declared to be valid [35].

5.3 The Structural Model

The result of the PLS analysis (in Figure 2), without incorporating moderators effect, produced a R-squared value of 0.761 for behavioral intention, and a R-squared value of 0.347 for use behavior. The analysis of the results showed that hedonic motivation and habit had a significant effect on behavioral intention. From the two significant variables, habit was the most influence (path coefficient=0.666, t-value=11,397, p<0.001), followed by hedonic motivation (path coefficient=0.245, t-value=3.746, p<0.001). In

contrast, performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and price value all have a non-significant effect on behavioral intention. The possible explanations are: (1) not all users have the same performance expectancy and purpose of using the app; (2) most user interfaces in most apps are intuitive, thus, effort involved in using them are trivial; (3) unlike social networking site, such as Facebook, where social influence was found to be statistically significant in influencing Millenials participations [36] the use of online dating app is considered as a private choice, so social influence does not play an important role; and (4) the reason the price value was insignificant in this study possibly because most online dating apps are free, especially for the female users, and premium features are only charged after further usage. Besides, this could be due to the nature of our sample (students), users will consider price value less important as an initial intention to use an online dating app. The same result of price value was also found in research conducted by [19].
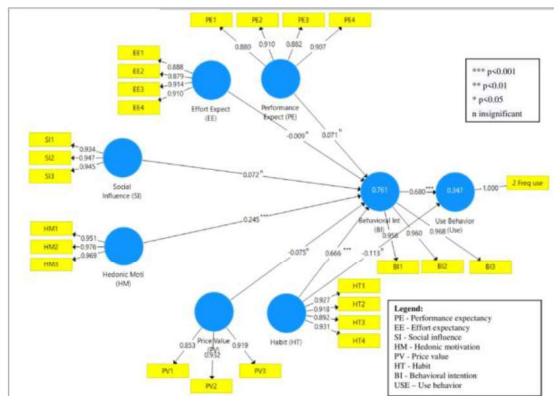

Figure 2: Path analysis results of the entire sample

Additional analysis: The analysis is then run by adding the number of apps used to moderate the relationship between habit and use behavior. Our path analysis results indicate that the number of APP used is found not significant as a moderator or mediator in the relationship between habit (HT) and use behaviour (Use).

To determine whether the moderator variables (of gender and experience) had the potential to influence the relationships in the model, we conducted a multi-group analysis [37]. (1) The result of the multi-group analysis for gender showed that the effect of users' behavior between the male and female groups was not statistically significant for all the relationships investigated in this study. In other words, the two gender groups were the same, so neither group show results that tended to be more dominant in the use of online dating apps. (2) Similarly, the multi-group analysis for experience, between no-experience and highly-experience groups, was not statistically significant for most of the relationships investigated in this study, except the relationship between habit and number of APP used, where the path coefficients difference between these two groups was statistically significant. This indicates that the more dating apps were being used, the more it became a habit to the smartphone's users.

6. Contribution of This Study

This study provides a theoretical contribution by adapting six UTAUT2 variables as a framework applied to the context of an online dating app to measure factors affecting user acceptance among Gen Zs, wherein habit and hedonic motivation are found as significant factors in influencing user participation. No study had examined online dating apps before using UTAUT2, which allowed us to provide insights from a completely new angle, which may also be helpful for future research. Furthermore, the results of this study offer a practical contribution to online dating app providers or developers as well. Based on our findings, online dating app providers or developers can try to build a habit of smartphone users to use online dating apps: (1) firstly, effort can be made by increasing brand awareness by developing attractive and informative advertisements on various platforms, so that smartphone users will consider installing and using online dating apps; and (2) secondly, effort can be focussed on increasing the users' stickiness on the dating app by providing various app functionalities customized to the user's needs, e.g. notification of new members of his/her types, information of how to attract partners, analysis of matching score between two parties, and real-time suggestion for topics of conversation.

Our study also indicates that (1) many of the UTAUT2 constructs are no longer relevant to our Gen Zs sample group, as computer literacy has dramatically improved from generation to generation; and (2) the moderators of gender and experience, in particular – in the context of

IS/IT application, have become less important differing factors, due to equality in gender and access to education (and at work place).

Further, this study has a limitation: a relatively small number of samples only focus on Gen Zs online dating apps. Future research is expected to include a broader range of participants and consider respondents who have never used, are currently using, and have used online dating apps. Finally, it is also expected that future research will examine the content preferences in online dating apps to improve the content of online dating apps.

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