



## Modeling roles of subjective norms and eTrust in customers' acceptance of airline B2C eCommerce websites

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### ABSTRACT

Airline companies have increasingly employed electronic commerce (eCommerce) for strategic purposes, most notably in order to achieve long-term competitive advantage and global competitiveness by enhancing customer satisfaction as well as marketing efficacy and managerial efficiency. eCommerce has now emerged as possibly the most representative distribution channel in the airline industry. In this study, we describe an extended technology acceptance model (TAM), which integrates subjective norms and electronic trust (eTrust) into the model, in order to determine their relevance to the acceptance of airline business-to-customer (B2C) eCommerce websites (AB2CEWS). The proposed research model was tested empirically using data collected from a survey of customers who had utilized B2C eCommerce websites of two representative airline companies in South Korea (i.e., KAL and ASIANA) for the purpose of purchasing air tickets. Path analysis was employed in order to assess the significance and strength of the hypothesized causal relationships between subjective norms, eTrust, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, attitude toward use, and intention to reuse. Our results provide general support for an extended TAM, and also confirmed its robustness in predicting customers' intention to reuse AB2CEWS. Valuable information was found from our results regarding the management of AB2CEWS in the formulation of airlines' Internet marketing strategies.

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### 1. Introduction

Traditionally, travel products have largely been handled in the distribution network activated by travel agencies (Buttle & Bok, 1996). The same customer needs are currently satisfied via a variety of distribution systems, including the computerized reservation system (CRS), the global distribution system (GDS),<sup>3</sup> or videotext and teletex systems utilized in in-house mode for their own operations (Copeland, 1991; Copeland & McKenney, 1988). The emergence of the Internet and the increasing growth of electronic commerce

(eCommerce) in the mid-1990s rendered business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-customer (B2C) relationships more interactive and applicable for travel-related businesses. This facilitated alterations in customer behaviors and attitude regarding travel products via integrative and mutually supportive means for information exchange (O'Connor & Frew, 2000; Werthner & Klein, 1999).

The first appearance of eCommerce between the airline companies and the customers was in the dissemination of frequent flyer programs (FFPs), beginning in the mid-1980s. This performed a crucial function in providing airlines with detailed customer information. The data from FFPs developed from the modification and completion of initial customer records was an important determinant in successful relationship marketing and customer relations management (CRM) for airline companies, which provided a foundation for today's eCommerce (Chen, Gillenson, & Sherrell, 2002).

The development of the Internet, which significantly increased the use of eCommerce by airline companies during the mid-1990s, performed a crucial function in reducing distribution costs, in that it helped lower the ratio of fixed costs in the cost structure. The strategic application of eCommerce became necessary for airline

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<sup>3</sup> GDS refers to the total computerized system covering the worldwide networks such as SABRE, AMADEUS, GALILEO, and WORLDSPAN, which support integrated reservations related to customers' travel arrangements, including airline reservations, airfare determinations, hotel & rent car reservations, and other travel-related services (cf., Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Copeland, 1991; Copeland & McKenney, 1988; WTO, 1995).

companies in order to achieve long-term competitive advantage, global competitiveness, customer satisfaction, and to enhance marketing efficacy and managerial efficiency (Tsai, Huang, & Lin, 2005). Nowadays, eCommerce conducted over the Internet has become not only the most representative distribution channel for airline industries, but it is also one of the most important factors in determining firms' competitive advantage.

eCommerce conducted through websites can be understood in the context of conventional customer behavior theories, as well as a variety of customer behavioral characteristics in utilizing and applying computer hardware and software. Taking into account that customers partake voluntarily in Internet shopping, Davis' (1986) *technology acceptance model* (TAM) can prove to be a useful research model to explain the internal and external motivations that initiate shopping behavior on websites. Although a great deal of research has been conducted concerning Internet marketing in the airline industry (e.g., Jarach, 2002), electronic tickets (eTickets; e.g., Shon, Chen, & Chang, 2003), and the application of new technology (e.g., Buhalis, 2004), only a minimal number of studies have utilized the concept of eCommerce for airline companies on the basis of customers' voluntary involvement.

Another purchasing behavior issue associated with eCommerce websites for the airline industry is online transaction security, which may persuade customers to stay with traditional tour agents, primarily for purchase safety concerns (Shon et al., 2003). This implies that customers may be reluctant to purchase airline B2C eCommerce websites (AB2CEWS) if they are dubious about the security of eCommerce, specifically on the AB2CEWS. That is, a definite belief regarding the security of the websites may significantly affect customer's purchasing behavior, whereas a possible perceived risk may increase a customer's intention to postpone or avoid the decision to purchase. The parent companies of the South Korean airlines are relatively large companies, and therefore the majority of customers may feel safe about their transactions with these companies, as they have modest reputations as big enterprises. This study operationalized customers' security perceptions on the AB2CEWS as a construct of electronic trust (eTrust), in order to determine the manner in which customers' security concerns, and lack thereof, could influence their acceptance of AB2CEWS.

Traditionally, customer behavior theory has suggested that customers may be influenced significantly by their perceived opinions of referents, including family, friends, and colleagues, and the degree of this influence varies among products and brands. In the airline industry, customers are capable of adjusting their purchase intention on the basis of other individuals' negativism or positivism regarding website transactions. In this study, we have employed subjective norms (i.e., others' influence on a person's behavior) of independent individuals in voluntary environments as another construct by which customers' acceptance of AB2CEWS could be assessed.

The principal objective of this study is to assess the causal determinants of customers' acceptance of AB2CEWS, on the basis of the TAM and the corresponding surveys administered to South Korean users of AB2CEWS. Our results demonstrated the acceptance of AB2CEWS from the perspective of eCommerce users through *subjective norms* and *eTrust*, which are the *external variables* in the TAM. In this study, Davis' (1986) TAM was adopted as the underlying theoretical framework, due to its position as one of the most influential extant research models designed to explain user's technology acceptance behavior (Cheng, Lam, & Yeung, 2006; Huh, Kim, & Law, in press; Kim, Lee, & Law, 2008; Lee, Kim, & Lee, 2006). The objectives of this study, in more detail, are as follows:

- (1) to examine the casual relationships of the TAM's variables (i.e., perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, attitude toward use, and intention to reuse) in the customers' acceptance of AB2CEWS;
- (2) to assess the impacts of subjective norms and eTrust as external variables of the TAM on the variables of the TAM in customers' acceptance of AB2CEWS; and
- (3) to provide practical implications for the marketing managers and the practitioners who prepare strategic plans and implement effective tools to enhance the productivity or performance of airline B2C eCommerce through AB2CEWS.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses

### 2.1. The technology acceptance model (TAM)

The TAM, which was proposed initially by Davis (1986), has been extensively utilized by researchers and practitioners in order to predict and explain users' acceptance of information technology (IT) or IT-related applications (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989; Lam, Cho, & Qu, 2007). The TAM adopted Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of reasoned action (TRA) as a basis for specifying its casual sequence: *beliefs* (i.e., *perceived ease of use* and *perceived usefulness*) → *attitude* → *behavioral intention*. Here, *perceived ease of use* and *perceived usefulness* are the two principal constructs believed to predict users' attitude and behavioral intention. Davis (1989, p. 320) defined *perceived ease of use* as "the degree to which a person believes that the use of a particular system would be free of effort," whereas *perceived usefulness* is defined as "the degree to which a person believes that the use of a particular system would enhance his or her job performance." A number of previous studies on the TAM have proposed similar conclusions regarding the positive relationship among the TAM's perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, attitude, and behavioral intention. Behavioral intention was considered to have been determined by an individual's attitude and its perceived usefulness (Davis et al., 1989; Luarn & Lin, 2005), whereas attitude is determined by both the perceived ease of use and the perceived usefulness (Adams, Nelson, & Todd, 1992; Agarwal & Prasad, 1997; Huh et al., in press; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2006; Kim et al., 2008). Perceived ease of use has been suggested in many studies to positively affect the perceived usefulness (Davis, 1989; Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2002; Kim et al., 2008; Morosan & Jeong, 2008; Wöber & Gretzel, 2000).

Customers' buying behavior through AB2CEWS is a variant of transaction behavior in the context of online shopping, which is considered to be a new form of service innovation (Verhoef & Langerak, 2001). In voluntary environments, such as B2C eCommerce, customers' beliefs regarding these transactions are crucial for the gathering of information regarding purchasing behavior, and in this regard, the TAM may prove a useful research model for the prediction of customers' acceptance of AB2CEWS. Perceived ease of use when customers consider an AB2CEWS purchase represents the degree to which AB2CEWS is perceived to be easy to understand, learn, or operate. The development of more user-friendly technologies, and issues associated with transaction security should evidently be of primary concern by airline companies before they take further actions (Alamdari, 2002; Shon et al., 2003). As AB2CEWS are equipped with a well-designed user interface, customers are generally likely to believe that purchases through AB2CEWS are relatively effort-free. With regard to perceived usefulness, Shin (2004) suggested that consumers preferred to evaluate their online shopping performance in terms of the associated benefits and costs, including the maximization of convenience and the minimization of transaction time. In the context of airline product purchases through AB2CEWS, attitude refers to general customers' feelings of favorableness or unfavorableness toward the use of AB2CEWS.

In summary, if airline companies focus on building AB2CEWS that are user-friendly and allow users to learn how to easily use them, by providing conveniences such as highly visible buttons,

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