



Social support and social commerce purchase intention: The mediating role of social trust

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Social commerce (s-commerce) has risen in popularity primarily owing to social media development. We investigated social support as a predictor of s-commerce purchase intention, and the mediating role of social trust in this relationship. Participants comprised 356 undergraduate students at five Chinese public universities. Structural equation modeling results indicate that social support had a direct positive effect on s-commerce purchase intention, and that social trust partially mediated this relationship. Our findings shed light on the relationship of social support and s-commerce purchase intention, and the practical contribution of the findings is that they can assist practitioners to develop better s-commerce strategies.

Keywords

social support; social trust; purchase intention; social commerce; social media

With the development of Web 2.0 and social media technologies in marketing contexts, social commerce, as a new mode of e-commerce, has risen in popularity (Mikalef et al., 2017). In the *social commerce* (s-commerce) environment, commercial activities are conducted on social media sites, such as WeChat and Weibo. This empowers consumers to share product information and purchase experiences (Chen et al., 2016). In China, for example, by June 2020, the number of Internet users had reached 940 million, including 749 million users of online shopping sites (China Internet Network Information Center, 2020). The growth in s-commerce indicates that e-commerce is evolving from traditional business exchange to relationship-based exchange (Kozlenkova et al., 2017). Researchers have explored antecedents of s-commerce consumer behavior from various perspectives, such as social interaction (Zhou, 2019), social presence (Lu et al., 2016), and trust (Hajli et al., 2017). However, it is important for scholars to understand the determinants of s-commerce *purchase intention*, which represents the likelihood that a consumer will purchase a product or service, and which is an effective predictor of actual purchase behavior (Richardson et al., 1996).

Researchers have also paid attention to social support in the s-commerce context (Liang et al., 2011). *Social support* refers to an individual's experience of being cared for, responded to, and helped by others in a social group (Liang et al., 2011). In s-commerce, it consists of two dimensions: informational and emotional (Hajli, 2014). *Informational support* provides consumers with information needed for purchasing and helps them solve problems, and *emotional support* brings feelings of warmth to consumers, which can promote a relationship between consumers and sellers (Tajvidi et al., 2017), and enhance consumers' purchase intention. Hajli (2014) examined the effect of social support on relationship quality in the s-commerce setting by conducting a survey on Facebook, and found that social support had a positive effect on relationship quality. Wang et al. (2020) found that both social support subdimensions were positively

related to consumer involvement, together promoting consumers' engagement in the s-commerce community. However, few researchers (see, e.g., Sheikh et al., 2019) have examined the influence mechanism of social support on s-commerce purchase intention, particularly in China, which has a large s-commerce market and where *guanxi* plays an important role in the context of the country's collectivistic culture. Therefore, we explored this topic along with the mediating role of social trust in this relationship, to fill a gap in the literature.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Social support is critical to consumers' purchase intention (Liu et al., 2019). For consumers, social interaction can create social support, provide information, and give a sense of closeness (J. Lin et al., 2018). Feeling close to other members of the s-commerce community can enhance friendship and trust among members, which may further increase their intention to purchase and assist in their buying decisions through the informational and emotional support from peers (Sheikh et al., 2019). This will encourage them to also share their information and give emotional support to others on s-commerce platforms. Exchange of support encourages consumers to continue using social media; thus, it affects their s-commerce purchase intention (Liang et al., 2011). Hajli (2014) found that social support had a positive effect on relationship quality, which can enhance s-commerce purchase intention. Fan et al. (2019) showed that, in the context of China's collectivistic culture, social support and presence had a positive influence on the swift formation of an online interpersonal relationship based on mutual understanding, which then facilitated successful transactions in both e-commerce and s-commerce (*swift guanxi*) and enhanced trust, leading to increased repurchase intention and intention to share one's experiences and make suggestions on social networking sites. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Social support will be positively related to social commerce purchase intention.

Social trust plays an important role in reducing consumers' perception of risk and uncertainty toward sellers, and increases their tendency to purchase on s-commerce sites (Ha et al., 2016). X. Lin et al. (2019) proposed that social support was positively related to consumers' trust in s-commerce. When they have strong social support, consumers can obtain information about products or services, thus improving their social trust in s-commerce (X. Lin et al., 2019), and when they receive care and help from others, this valuable emotional support will promote friendship and trust among them (Fan et al., 2019). Thus, social support plays an important role in building social trust, as it assists consumers to evaluate products or services by observing others' purchase experiences and knowledge of products or services, and helps them to overcome risk perception and uncertainty in the purchasing process (McKnight et al., 2002).

Social trust plays an important role in social networks, and interpersonal trust affects individual intention (Sullivan & Kim, 2018). Shin (2013) found that trust had a positive effect on purchase intention in the s-commerce context. For example, when consumers make purchase decisions, they tend to rely on experienced consumers' recommendations or suggestions on s-commerce platforms. Thus, if consumers trust others on the platforms, they may be more likely to make purchases according to these others' reviews and comments (Leung et al., 2019). According to Alalwan et al. (2019) and Kim and Park (2013), social trust mediates the relationship between s-commerce dimensions and consumers' value cocreation, and between the characteristics of s-commerce and purchase intention. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Social support will have an indirect positive relationship with social commerce purchase intention via the mediation of social trust.

The conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.

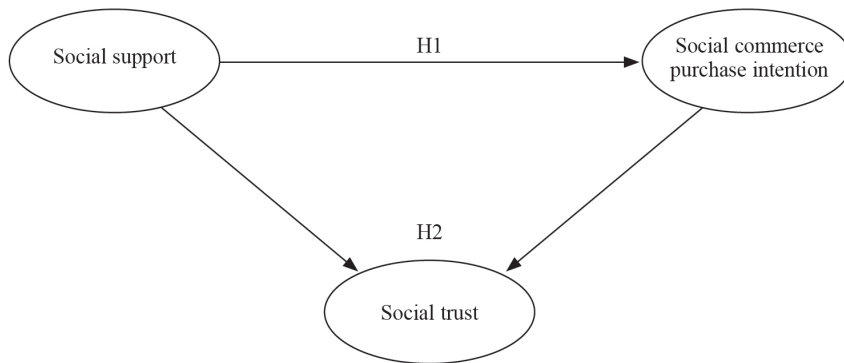


Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework*

Method

Participants and Procedure

As students comprise 23.7% of Chinese netizens (China Internet Network Information Center, 2020), we chose undergraduate students at five Chinese public universities as participants. We obtained approval for the study from the Ethics Committee of each university. With the help of faculty members at each university, we distributed 382 paper-based surveys to participants. We explained the purpose of the study to the students and they each gave their written consent for participation. We received 356 valid surveys for analysis (response rate = 93.2%). Participants comprised 165 (46.3%) men and 191 (53.7%) women ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.38$ years, $SD = 1.35$, range = 18–23). Regarding year of study, 17.1% were freshmen, 29.5% were sophomores, 34.6% were juniors, and 18.8% were seniors. The students were each compensated for their participation with a small gift worth approximately USD 1.00–2.00.

Measures

Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. We translated all the items into Chinese, after which two bilingual researchers back-translated them into English. The wording and meaning of some items in this version were revised for ease of understanding in the Chinese language after a review by two professors working in the field of consumer psychology.

Social Support

Social support was assessed with three items adapted from Rashid et al. (2020). Sample items are “My friends on the social commerce platform offer suggestions when I am in need of assistance” and “When I encounter difficulties, my friends on the social commerce platform give me comfort and encouragement.” Cronbach’s alpha for these items was .88.

Social Trust

Social trust was measured with five items from Kim and Park (2013). Sample items are “The social commerce platform is trustworthy” and “The social commerce platform takes my best interests into consideration.” Cronbach’s alpha for these items was .89.

Social Commerce Purchase Intention

We measured social commerce purchase intention with three items from Lu et al. (2016). A sample item is “I am very likely to buy the product from the social commerce platform.” Cronbach’s alpha for these items was .85.

Results

Measurement Model

We used confirmatory factor analysis via Amos 21.0 to validate the measures. The proposed model (social support, social trust, and s-commerce purchase intention) had a good fit to the data (see Table 1). Moreover, each average variance extracted value exceeded .60, and each composite reliability value was greater than .80. These results indicate that the reliability and validity of this study met the recommended requirements.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics, Average Variance Extracted, Composite Reliability, and Fit Indices for Study Variables*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	AVE	CR
1. Social support	3.51	0.92	1			.72	.89
2. Social trust	3.42	0.84	.45**	1		.62	.89
3. Social commerce purchase intention	3.41	0.89	.47**	.46**	1	.68	.86
Fit indices	$\chi^2/df = 3.06$, RMSEA = .08, CFI = .96, IFI = .96						

Note. AVE = average variance extracted; CR = composite reliability; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; CFI = comparative fit index; IFI = incremental fit index.

** $p < .01$.

Hypothesis Testing

We used structural equation modeling to test the hypotheses. The results, calculated with 95% confidence intervals (CIs), indicate that the path from social support to s-commerce purchase intention was significant and positive, .36, $p < .01$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.50]. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Further, the paths from social support to social trust, .50, $p < .01$, 95% CI [0.39, 0.61], and from social trust to s-commerce purchase intention, .34, $p < .01$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.48], were also significantly positive. In addition, a bootstrapping analysis with 5,000 replications was used to examine the mediating role of social trust, and we obtained the following results: indirect effect = .17, 95% CI [0.10, 0.27]. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Discussion

We examined the influence of social support on s-commerce purchase intention in the Chinese context via the mediator of social trust. Our results show that social support was positively related to s-commerce purchase intention, and that social trust mediated this relationship.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our results make two main theoretical contributions to the literature on the social support–s-commerce purchase intention relationship. First, in line with previous studies showing that social support can affect consumers' decisions (Hajli, 2014; Sheikh et al., 2019), we have provided empirical support for the positive effect of social support on s-commerce purchase intention. Our results enrich correlational research on the positive influence of social support on consumers' purchasing in the s-commerce environment.

Second, we have demonstrated that social trust mediates the relationship between social support and consumers' s-commerce purchase intention. Social trust is more important in s-commerce than it is in the offline shopping environment, as uncertainty is higher because of the virtual environment and contradictory user-generated content, in regard to review of products (Fan et al., 2019). As s-commerce consumers build social trust through the social support they receive from others on the s-commerce platforms, this reduces their risk perception (Kim & Park, 2013), which enhances purchase intention. Therefore, to enhance s-commerce purchase intention, it is important to cultivate social trust.

From a practical perspective, we have provided an analysis of how social support facilitates s-commerce purchase intention partially through the enhancement of social trust. Thus, it is critical for s-commerce sellers to implement social support to promote consumers' perceived social trust and purchase intention. For example, s-commerce sellers can motivate consumers to answer others' queries and to encourage them, which will facilitate their perception of social support. This can be achieved by rewarding consumers who provide useful support to others via s-commerce platforms, for example, by giving coupons to those who post relevant, timely, and comprehensive product reviews. Another reward could be to establish a points system according to the interaction, by which consumers with more points could use privileges, such as posting video information.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are some limitations in this study. First, our cross-sectional design does not allow for interpretation of the causality of the relationships. Future researchers could conduct a longitudinal study to confirm causality. Second, as the research data were obtained solely from student samples, this may influence the generalizability of our findings. Future studies could sample other populations. Third, mediators other than social trust may influence the relationship between social support and s-commerce purchase intention. For example, Fan et al. (2019) found that swift guanxi mediated the effect of social support on social-sharing intention. Therefore, future researchers could introduce other potential mediators, such as swift guanxi, into the model to verify our findings.

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